STRAWBERRY FIELDS

A Spike/Buffy Romance

HOLLY DENISE

I

Spike huffed and wedged a cigarette between his lips. This was bloody interesting. Like one of those bad horror flicks, only a lot fucking funnier. Granted, seeing something supernatural wasn't exactly novel—he just wasn't used to seeing buildings literally swarmed with a wall of wasps.

Nor was he used to watching the Slayer walk around looking as bloody dazed as she did. Perhaps if he'd had more time, he would have taken a second to appreciate the glossy, almost drugged look behind her eyes. She walked right by him, after all, without as much as a blink. Mite rude considering this was supposed to be his big reveal—dangerous predator, walking around on two legs when he had, so recently, been confined to the wheelchair in which she had put him, and she didn't even glance in his direction.

If nothing else, though, this should be interesting. He didn't reckon Angelus would leave the mansion for a while, even if his grandsire *did* seem interested in sniffing out the so-called possession going down at Sunnydale High.

Considering the Slayer looked to be experiencing a bit of the possession herself, Spike figured he had the upper hand. She couldn't go into stake-first-ask-questions-later mode if she wasn't all there

upstairs. If he was lucky, he might get a word before she shook off the ghosties and introduced him to the business end of her stake.

Then again, knowing this particular slayer, he was better off not pushing his luck.

A sigh rolled off his shoulders. If he went on like this, he'd just end up talking himself in circles. The fact remained that he had no other option. Like it or not, Buffy was it. He might be out of his chair, but that didn't mean he had the strength to take on Angelus plus minions, not to mention the woman to whom he'd formerly devoted the whole of his unlife. He wouldn't become careless on account of his wounded pride.

With a little luck, the Slayer wasn't so thick she wouldn't be able to see his logic. Spike sighed again, tossed his half-smoked fag to the pavement and stomped on it once for good measure. Then again, the bloody chit was nearly as stubborn as he was. She didn't like admitting weakness, even if acknowledging one's shortcomings cleared the path to success. He'd heard it all—fuck, he'd lived it—and his life was hardly a living example of learning from his mistakes.

But in the matter of Angelus and Dru, there was no other option. Spike would dust and his deranged family would end the world. Bad for him. Bad for Buffy.

He figured he had the selling points lined up properly. The Slayer would have to be a complete nutter not to jump at the first offer he put on the table.

Then again, judging by the glazed look in her eyes as she'd walked into the school, perhaps they weren't too far from the alternative.

Spike laughed shortly and shook his head. "Right, here it goes," he said. The words fell bland against the cold night air, coaxing another laugh.

There was every chance he'd completely lost his head. Bloody figured. The century with Drusilla hadn't cost his sanity a dime. It took coming to the Hellmouth to the Slayer and her wanker of a honey to make him officially go carrot-top. He could only hope that Buffy's human penchant for guilt and do-gooder work had played enough on her conscience to make her as loopy as he.

A smirk tugged on his lips, and he again conjured the image of

Buffy walking through a wall of wasps. Something told him that he was on the right track.

Sunnydale High had an entirely different atmosphere when the lights were on and he wasn't tossing around tables and jabbing things into the ceiling. Spike prowled the halls leisurely, following Buffy's scent as his eyes roamed the bulletin boards and darted into empty classrooms. This was the sort of place that made him grateful for the torturous upbringing he'd suffered through lifetimes prior. Youth seemed to grow crueler with every generation.

He sucked in a breath when he finally caught up with her. She was moving sluggishly down the main hall, the air thick with the scent of her tears. And he didn't know why, but that knowledge was humbling. It served as a cold reminder that she had lost things as well. She had lost almost everything.

Granted, Spike didn't much care for what the Slayer suffered. Way he figured it, she deserved that pain...and then some. It was her formerly virgin pussy that had caused all this, wasn't it? Had she been able to keep her legs shut, none of this would have happened. Dru would still be at his side. Angelus would be shoved inside that drastically unfunny soul. And Spike wouldn't be doing the unthinkable—wouldn't be approaching the Slayer for *help,* of all things ridiculous.

Bloody bint.

God, he'd be happy when things were back as they belonged. Then he could off the chit good and proper.

"Look," he said loudly, sucking in a deep breath when Buffy's listless trek down the hall came to an abrupt halt. Great. She was going to launch into battle before he could get a word in. and then he'd be too dusty or she'd be too dead to do either of them any bit of good. "First things first, I didn't come here to kill you."

He paused and waited. And waited. And waited.

And nothing. Spike blinked.

Well, that was rude. The least she could do was acknowledge his thoughtfulness. Any self-respecting slayer's knees would be knocking together at the prospect of facing him—an assuredly pissed off slayer-killer. Hell, because of her, he'd just spent months of his unlife that he'd never get back rotting away in a bloody wheelchair, forced to

watch Angelus fuck Dru into the bloody ground. If he hadn't already committed to this throwing-it-in-with-the-enemy rot, he'd be drinking from the Slayer's throat.

"Slayer?"

Buffy just stood there in the middle of the hall, her back to him.

A frown fell over his face and the surge of irritation fell to confusion. Perhaps he'd underestimated the rumors of a ghostly invasion. His own experience with the spirit-world notwithstanding, he'd never given hauntings too much credit. "You *can* hear me, right?"

There was another long silence. And nothing.

Spike expelled a deep breath and hazarded a cautious step forward. "Buffy?" he asked softly. "Slayer, are you—"

"You're the only one."

He froze. That made bugger-all sense.

"The only one?" he repeated, befuddled. "The only one who can help you bring them down, you mean? Point of fact, love, that's the reason I'm here to begin with. I've got a proposition for you. And before you turn me down, just take into consideration that I'm here and not trying to kill you. That means—"

"You're the only one," she said again.

Again, Spike blinked. "Yeah, pet, we just covered this."

"The only person I can talk to."

Whatever sense he'd tried to decipher flew completely out the window. His brow furrowed in confusion. "Uhhh, Slayer, you sure you're all rested from that fever? Gotta say, injecting yourself with a nasty bug, as bloody funny as it was, had to have worn away at what little sense you have trapped in that thick skull of yours."

Or maybe she meant that he was the only one to whom she could talk to since they were in the same boat. They'd both lost their lovers to Angelus.

But then Buffy turned, and the second her eyes met his, his insides quivered. There was something there. Something monumental. Something earth-shattering. "You can't make me disappear just because you say it's over."

There was no way to spin that. No way at all.

It's not the Slayer.

Not the Slayer. Someone else is driving.

"What?"

It was the last intelligible word that escaped his lips. The next second, fog settled around his head, and the physical world simply fell away.

2

At seventeen, Buffy had experienced a fair share of kisses. While she wasn't as experienced in the realm of tonsil hockey as, oh say, Cordelia, she was a girl of former popularity and one or two slapdash pre-Angel boyfriends who had enjoyed sticking their tongues down her throat.

Yes, as far as first-date kisses went, she was quite the Guru.

Then Angel had come along, and her past of sloppy, slobbery kisses had been erased with lips made of sin. He'd kiss her and her world spiraled out of control. Her skin hummed, her pulse raced, her heart about exploded. He made her feel like dying.

The lips that were now caressing hers were most certainly *not* Angel's. If Angel's lips were made of sin, these were made of redemption.

She felt like she'd stepped into a dream or a painting—something perfect yet intangible. Something for which she'd spent her life reaching. Something she could only touch when her eyes were closed. Cool hands cupped her face as a foreign tongue explored her mouth. He was whimpering against her, murmuring sweet little nothings, stroking her skin with his fingertips. It was the most sensual moment of her life and she didn't even know his name.

Pretty much because she had yet to open her eyes. She was too afraid of ruining the illusion. Undoubtedly, she was at home in bed, enjoying a nice, naughty wet-dream. Or she'd blacked out while dancing at the Bronze...and ew. Some guy just randomly comes by and makes with the kissage? That was just wigsome.

Only not so, because she was buttery goo and that was always a good thing. So if she had blacked out at the Bronze and was being taken advantage of by Creepy Guy, she'd let it slide. Anyone connected to these lips couldn't be *that* bad. These lips were lips of good. Good, good lips. She'd happily marry the body attached to these lips, if only to stake her earthbound ownership on their magic touch.

"Mmm..."

Then she opened her eyes. The world crashed.

She knew Spike sensed it the second that she did. His eyes flew open and she found herself suddenly drowning in a crystaline ocean. No man's eyes should ever be *that* blue. Especially if said man was the proprietor of the Lips of Good.

Okay, Buffy, prioritize.

"SPIKE?!"

Those totally illegal eyes of his flashed with an intoxicating mixture of arousal and confusion. Then he stepped back, shoving her away from him as his face contorted in disgust. The same disgust that she was surely mirroring back at him...that was, if she'd managed to pick her jaw up off the floor and roll her tongue back inside her mouth.

Spike? Spike owned the Lips of Good?

And why the hell had he been kissing her?

It didn't take long to remember. Thankfully, the fog lifted before she could open her mouth and level some humiliating accusation his way. Something along the lines of, *"How dare you sneak in here and kiss me?"* when he was obviously as bewildered and shaken as she was.

The disgust, though, was a bit much. Her ego was fragile enough as it was. She didn't need to know that kissing her equaled gross for men, even if he was her mortal enemy. Come on. *Some* allowances ought to be made.

"Ghosts," she blurted, suddenly desperate to cover her tracks. Maybe Spike didn't know about the school being possessed. Maybe he

just thought she wanted him really badly. And maybe she should stop shaking and staring at his Lips of Good and get back to what she'd come here to do. "The school is possessed by ghosts...and hey, why are you out of your chair?"

Spike blinked at her, his mouth somewhat agape, his chest heaving deep, needless gasps.

And then it came back to her. Everything. The pained conversation between Grace and James. Shooting Spike in the chest. Watching him fall over the railing. Watching him fall, and being swallowed in despair. Going back to the music room and turning on the record. And then she'd put the gun to her head, and she would have fired if Spike hadn't been there to stop her.

No. That wasn't quite right.

Grace. It was Grace.

"We heal," he said suddenly.

Buffy shook her head and met his eyes reluctantly, ashamed to discover that she'd been staring at his mouth again. It was really unfair. It was *completely* unfair. Why, out of all the men in the world—all the living, breathing, non-vampire men—did *he* get *those* lips?

Furthermore, she'd been so transfixed on that beautiful mouth of his that she'd completely missed out on what he'd said. And knowing her luck, it was probably important. "What?"

"Vamps. We heal. Bloody lot faster than humans, too."

"Oh." *Oh.* Right. The chair—or rather, the lack of the chair. Spike was standing in front of her on two healed legs, and he'd just saved her life. He'd saved her from blowing her brains out and given her a kiss to end all kisses on top of that.

Or maybe the kiss had been Grace, too. Maybe Spike kissed like a girl.

The thought inspired a nervous, high-pitched titter.

"Slayer?"

"You kissed me."

Ugh. *Verbal diarrhea much?*

Why oh why did the floor not open up and swallow her? Why? It was the Hellmouth—one would think that the floor would be more

with the random opening and swallowing of red-faced slayers during seconds of blind stupidity.

Spike stared at her. "No, you kissed me," he retorted, perfecting an impression of a three-year-old.

"You were all with the lunging and the grabby!"

"Oh, don't bloody flatter yourself!"

"Flatter? You think I *want* vamp slobber all over my shirt?" She forced a grimace and began wiping at her top with forced vehemence. Truth be told, she couldn't stop shaking. She flexed her hands into fists, her eyes taking a quick survey of the room, searching for something to hold onto to prevent herself from lunging into his arms. It had been so long since anyone had held her like he had just seconds ago. Since she'd been kissed like that—since she'd felt alive.

And it had been fake. Every second. Every blissful touch had been pure fabrication.

"Well," Spike snapped, "of the two of us, *you* are bloody more likely to snog the enemy. Why don't you tell me?"

He *would* throw that in her face.

Buffy waited for the perfect retort to come to her, and her shoulders slumped when it missed its cue. "This is pointless," she decided.

"You're telling me," he snarled. "Gonna take a biblical flood of alcohol to get the slayer taste outta my mouth. Don't know how your precious *Angel* could stomach it." He made a face and wiped his mouth with the back of his duster sleeve, and though Buffy was convinced that much was designed only to add insult to injury, his barb hit its mark with a vengeance. "Look, you daft bint, I was only coming here to see if you would..."

The air between them fell eerily silent. She waited. His face contorted into a scowl, and he did not continue.

"You're out of your chair," she repeated, flexing her hands again. Her lips were still tingling—even the intrusion of Spike's snide remarks and all the reality they bore with them couldn't stop her insane want to leap back into what the spirits had started. The past few weeks had taken a disastrous toll on her heart. She hadn't known how starved she was for contact. How much she missed the simple pleasure of a loving embrace. And while Spike would sooner saw off his foot than play the

part of the strong male arms to rock her to sleep at night, right now, with the taste of him in her mouth, she could think of no one else.

Not that Buffy needed those strong male arms—it was just comforting. It made her feel less alone. It provided a sweet lie. And even so, Angel had never really offered to play the role of her male lead. The implication was always there, sure, but he'd turn around and vanish just when things became interesting. Until the end. Until the one time he *had* held her in his arms. Until he bolted from bed and left her to his soulless counterpart.

Buffy blinked. Spike was staring at her.

"What?"

"You were off," he said slowly, his tone belittling. She suddenly felt like an unruly child that had just broken the same rule fifteen times in a row.

"Off?"

"You mentioned the chair again and then you went off."

"You're not in your chair."

Spike nodded, the incredulous look on his face never waning. "A fact, I believe, we've more than established."

"Why haven't you tried to kill me?"

At that, he balked, and it pleased her that she'd finally caught him off guard. "Well," he replied, blinking, "why haven't *you* tried to kill *me?*"

Because my lips are still numb from kissage and it's gone to my brain.

"I asked you first."

He sneered and rocked on his heels. "I asked you second."

Buffy frowned. "You can't do that. It's cheating."

The look on his face fell from disbelieving to amused, and the change enchanted her. She'd never seen Spike amused—not genuinely amused, anyway. There had been that sadistic smirk when he'd thought she and Angel were about to burn at the hand of the Judge, and the proud little grin when he'd first stepped out of the shadows at the Bronze. But nothing that suggested that he was honest-to-god humored.

It was disconcerting. Seeing Spike look at her like a person rather than a meal-ticket, particularly after he'd kissed her lips off, threw her

for a loop. She wanted him evil and threatening. She wanted some of her own back.

She wanted to stop shaking, dammit. It was just Spike. Spike, whose ass should have been well and truly handed to him by now.

Damn that mouth of his.

"I didn't come here to fight. I came here because...I wanted..." He paused again, his brow furrowing. Then, before she could blink, he pivoted on his heel, shaking his head as though to free himself of a wayward thought. "You know what, Slayer? Forget it. Call it a fleeting bout of insanity, yeah? It was bound to happen sometime with the company I keep."

She was tempted to agree, but curiosity—and a strange want to keep things civil, if not tense and awkward—stopped her. "But you—"

"Forget it."

"You came here to—"

"And now I'm leaving."

Without even trying to kill me?

That was so...not Spike.

"Just bloody forget it," he yelled over his shoulder. "And don't get too cozy, Slayer. Next time I see you, it'll be my fangs in your throat."

The haunted tone in his voice remained with her the rest of the night.

3

He had a hand braced against the shower wall, cool water cascading over his head and running down his body. He had a mouthful of her taste and his lips hadn't stopped tingling. In the many years he'd spent wandering the earth, he'd never thought a simple kiss could make his insides melt.

God. He was such a wanker, and as tonight had so painfully exploited, he'd been without sex too long. Dru's illness hadn't allowed them to enjoy any play in the bedroom even before Angelus, and unlike many others of his kind, Spike was a one-woman-vamp. If he couldn't have Dru, he didn't want anyone. She was his reason for living after all. She was his salvation. She was his everything.

That didn't explain why he currently had his left hand wrapped around his cock, or why the Slayer's name was on his lips. It didn't explain why his mind conjured the image of her on her knees before him, that perfect mouth of hers sucking him into oblivion.

A long whimper tore through his throat. He was sick. He was bloody certifiable.

He was coming hard.

"Fuck," he gasped, banging his head against the wall, his hips jerking forward violently. "Buffy."

Buffy. *Buffy.* When had she become *Buffy* to him?

It wasn't right. None of what had happened tonight was right. He'd gone to her in protest. He'd gone to her as a last bloody resort. He hadn't gone to her to have her press her succulent little body against his and kiss him in ways that made him realize his lips had been neglected for the past century.

Tonight was about getting his life back on track. About bringing Angelus down. About getting the wanker out of the picture so Dru would come to her senses and remember who had been there for her without fault.

Spike trembled and shut off the shower.

Buffy.

Buffy had gotten in the way. Buffy and her luscious little mouth. He'd never considered himself the sort of bloke who got so bloody turned on because of a simple kiss. Then again, nothing about that kiss had been simple. That kiss had been the sort that would inspire men to storm kingdoms just to win a second taste.

That didn't change things. A kiss, in the end, was still *just* a kiss. Buffy's lips might be delicious, but he'd never know how the rest of her tasted. Never. Tonight had been a mistake. A *faux pas*. A pathetic stunt played by two miserable excuses for spooks. It changed nothing. Had he been in his right mind, his mouth would never have gotten so close.

Spike frowned. Well, no, that wasn't right. He still intended to rip her throat out, and that required mouth-on-Buffy action. But in an entirely different context. That was a step necessary to ensure that he got to lick her blood off his fingers. It didn't mean he wanted to pound his cock into her tight little pussy.

He groaned as his disobedient cock hardened again.

Serves you right for thinking of slayer pussy.

"Spike?"

His head shot up, Drusilla's scent flooding his nostrils. He was standing starkers in the middle of the room.

Standing, as in not in his wheelchair.

Bleeding fuck. He should have thought before he jumped in the shower. He'd just needed to wash Buffy off his skin as soon as possible.

Pity it didn't work.

It took only a second to sprint across the room. Spike snatched his jeans from where he'd tossed them on the bed, wrestled with his T-shirt, and threw his duster over his shoulders, only to crash haphazardly into the wheelchair with a gasp as Dru's head poked into the room.

Spike blinked at her, panting. His hair was wet. His skin smelled like soap. Had Drusilla possessed any of her faculties, she would have immediately known something was up.

He was fortunate, then, that the love of his unlife was uninhibitedly insane.

"Spike, my sweet," she cooed, twirling as she entered the room. "Daddy has a surprise for you."

His stomach lurched and his heart sank. So tonight was going to be one of the few nights that Angelus paid attention to him. There was no way this could be good—it merely meant that he'd grown bored with fucking Drusilla in front of the help and wanted to up Spike's torment by making him watch as another bloke tasted his girl's cunt.

"Is that right?" he drawled, wincing as his hands gripped the wheels of the chair. After this was over, he was going to burn the sodding thing. "What's that, pet?"

"He says you've been a bad doggie."

At that, Spike froze.

"Have you, my sweet prince? Have you been a bad doggie?" Drusilla smirked and sauntered forward, her hands running a tantalizing trail down her hips and up again until she was pulling at her own nipples through the thin fabric of her top. "Waiting till it burns. The fiddle won't be played until the city's on fire. You want it. Daddy says so."

He swallowed hard and forced a smile. "I always want it, ducks," he murmured, his eyes falling to her breasts. He knew how they tasted. He knew how every inch of Drusilla tasted. And he loved her taste.

But looking at her, watching her, he couldn't help but yearn for something hot to offset the cold. She was cold. She'd been cold from the beginning. He'd never known any touch that wasn't cold.

From where Buffy had held his face earlier tonight, he was still sizzling with warmth. His lips had yet to stop burning.

And the burn was so *fucking* good, he could barely stand it.

"You want to play in sunshine."

Spike's eyes jerked upward and his throat ran dry. "Dru—"

His protest died the second before Angelus's intrusive scent hit the air. It was over then. Everything was over. The plan he'd carefully stitched together had been betrayed, likely by the aroma of slayer musk. Or perhaps Angelus had spied him in his dazed and hasty retreat of the Sunnydale campus. Perhaps. In the state he'd been in, Spike wouldn't have noticed a ticker tape parade, much less a giant vampire with more forehead than face. Even if said giant vampire just happened to be his least favorite relative.

"Spike," Angelus said quietly.

That much told him everything. Angelus knew.

Well bollocks.

Spike met his grandsire's dark eyes and nodded stoically. "We gonna dance around this, mate?" he asked, arching a brow. "'Cause, truth be told, there are only so many clichés I can handle at a time."

"There is nothing to dance around, as far as I'm concerned," Angelus replied, offering little more than an apathetic shrug. "You can walk."

"Yes. I can also talk," Spike agreed. "I've been told that I have a lovely singing voice."

"And yet you're still in that chair."

"Well, we've gotten to know each other so well over the past few months." He rolled his eyes, going for casual while his mind raced. "Can't blame me if you've been distracted, mate. What with playing practical jokes on the Slayer's friends and tattlin' to her mum about popping her cherry, it's a bloody wonder that you've noticed anything else." His tossed a meaningful, however wasted glance to Dru. "Much as I can recall, it's none of your bloody business what I can do. I don't ask for progress reports on *your* numerous injuries. As it is, the Slayer has landed you quite a few."

"Sarcasm will get you nowhere, William."

He shook his head. "That's such a shame."

"What I can't understand is...what were you trying to pull? Kill Buffy and *show me* for sticking it to your woman? Hmm?" Angelus

stalked forward, a dangerous shadow crossing his face. "Have I truly underestimated your ego that much?"

He snickered. "There are a great many things you've underestimated," he drawled. *"Mate."*

A beat. Angelus simply stared at him.

Then the wanker's leg shot out and the wheelchair vanished, throwing Spike to the ground and smashing noisily into the wall behind him. "No need for dramatics, then," the elder vampire sneered. "I never figured you the security-blanket type. And yeah, I might be a little off my game, but time hasn't changed you much. I know you."

Spike pressed his palms to the floor and shoved himself to his feet. Know him? Angelus knew him? What a bloody joke. Angelus had never known him. Never. The great git had attempted to mold him into something he wasn't. He had an idea of what Spike was. He knew his habits, perhaps, and that he treasured Dru above all others. But that wasn't knowing him. That was knowing *about* him and there was a bloody big difference.

"You didn't plan to kill her, then," Angelus mused, crossing his arms, his brows perking. "And I say that only because you're here and not dust."

Spike snorted ineloquently. His grandsire's lack of confidence in people other than himself was not so much surprising as it was annoying. The fact remained that Angelus had not once been able to corner a slayer and snap her neck properly. Not once. Not even when he was snogging the stupid chit. And the great sod hated it that a vampire he considered as fumbling and incompetent as Spike had not once, but twice faced a slayer and walked away with another notch on his belt.

"Ye of little faith," he said neutrally, enjoying the way Angelus's face twisted. The wanker just hated it when his audience refused to react.

"Well, she's still alive, too," the elder continued, "but I figured that was a given."

"My prince wants to play in sunshine," Dru observed. "He's tasted honey and he wants more. More of the pretty little drops of honey."

Angelus perked a brow. "So *that's* what that smell is."

"Sod off."

"You tried to get into her *pants?* What? Are you *that* desperate?"

Spike's eyes darkened. "You're the one who said I had to bloody love her to kill her, right? Though you haven't been quite so eager to demonstrate that little pearl of wisdom, have you? After all, you had the bint's grubby paws all over you for months and you *still* haven't managed to do her in good and proper."

Angelus was predictably unbothered by his criticism. "I have plans for the Slayer," he replied, shrugging.

"Yeah. Sing me another one."

"You doubt."

"You've given me little reason to do anything else." He nodded to Dru, ignoring the pang that struck his heart at the harsh apathy that danced behind her cold eyes. It wasn't like he was used to seeing warmth when she looked at him. Even when she appeared touched at the things he did for her—the small and the very big—the spark of gratitude was always overshadowed by indifference. She didn't care for him. Not like a lover, at least. More like a favored pet. And while he'd known it for a while—for years, though he'd never wanted to admit it—there was something about seeing it now. Now that he'd tasted true warmth and purity. "'Sides," he continued, "since you've taken mine, I figured I'd sneak a taste of yours. See if her pussy really is tight enough to chase a soul away."

Just once he'd like to strike a nerve. He'd like Angelus's cool countenance to fail him. He'd like to send the bastard into a jealous rage the likes of which made the ground tremble and the skies quiver. However, even knowing how possessive his grandsire was over what he considered to be his property, there was nothing but cruel humor in his elder's eyes.

Spike knew that it was obvious to every vamp in proximity that his dick hadn't gotten any action aside from his left hand all evening. Showers couldn't wash off the scent of sex. Not for vamps. And perhaps that was why Angelus didn't give a shit about what had happened with Buffy tonight. Or why Angelus wasn't worried that he might have gotten close enough to know what the girl's silken lips tasted like.

Buffy.

He'd left her confused, her eyes wide and expectant, her cheeks

flushed and her lips swollen from his kisses. He'd left Buffy and he'd returned to his self-made hell. Where Dru looked at him with cold, uncaring eyes. Where he was consigned to the role of the family punch-line. Where there was nothing to do but waste away as the woman he'd devoted eternity sold herself over and over to another man in the time between planning the apocalypse.

He'd left Buffy standing in that classroom because of what she'd done to him.

What *had* she done to him?

"Trust me, William," Angelus said softly, snapping him back to the present. "Nothing there worth tasting."

Spike blinked stupidly and fought the impulse to laugh. Nothing there worth tasting? Hadn't this prat ever snogged the Slayer?

Hadn't his world turned over when he had?

Spike turned his eyes to the ground. Buffy. He'd left her and returned home. And why? Because finding her tongue down his throat was more than a little surprising, and his reaction to her even more so. In those precious few seconds, he'd experienced more, felt more, from a girl possessed by a couple of spooks than he ever had from Dru.

A ghost had given him more warmth than the woman he loved. And his skin was still burning.

No more. No sodding more. He would go back. He would go back to Buffy. He would try get her to listen to him.

He just hoped her lips didn't get in the way.

And, knowing how sweet she tasted, that he could keep his hands to himself.

4

No matter how many times she repeated herself, that glossy, confused look refused to vacate her watcher's eyes. It was annoying. There were certainly more important things about which to worry than her bizarre liaison with a recently un-crippled vampire. Things like her ex-boyfriend who had—among other things—developed a penchant for making her friends' lives a living hell.

For whatever reason, attempting to convey this to Giles was not as simple as it should have been. He wanted to mull over every detail—every millisecond she'd spent in Spike's presence. He wanted to know why they hadn't fought. Why Spike had come to her in the first place. And he especially wanted to know how James and Grace's haunting had influenced their behavior.

Buffy snorted inwardly. Yeah. She was really going to share sordid stories of Spike's lips. And Xander was going to be the next President of the United States.

"No," she said, rolling her eyes. "For the millionth time, no. Spike didn't tell me why he was following me. And seeing as I'm standing here bored and annoyed and very much alive, I don't think it really matters."

Giles narrowed his eyes disapprovingly. "Your views on what is and

isn't important notwithstanding, the fact remains that a dangerous slayer-killer sought you out and then proceeded *not* to engage you in battle."

"I know. I was right there."

"It had to be something extraordinary," he pressed with undisguised interest, "don't you think?"

"No," Buffy retorted dryly. "I think he wanted to exchange banana-nut-muffin recipes."

Willow glanced up from where she was hunched over a pile of books. What she was researching, Buffy didn't know. For the past few days, when they weren't fending off whatever Angel or the PTB sent their way, the redhead was usually buried nose-deep in a book. Not that it was doing anyone any good. Sunnydale citizens were still showing up dead with not-so-mysterious neck wounds, no blood, and twisted messages from Buffy's once one-and-only.

The chances that the antidote for Angel's killing spree rested on some aged page in Giles's library were obsolete.

"You make banana-nut muffins?" Willow asked. Then she paused, shifted uncomfortably, and glanced down. "Okay, so I only caught the end of that. Did I mention I'm really hungry?"

Buffy snickered. "I was just explaining to Giles for the umpteenth time that I have no earthly idea what Spike wanted with me. He didn't stay long enough. I think he was a little shook up."

"Presumably because of what happened while the two of you were possessed," Giles agreed, staring at her intently.

"I don't see what that has to do with anything."

"Well, he came to you for a reason and then backtracked after the possession was over. Sounds to me, Buffy, that it has quite a bit to do with what occurred."

She waved a hand, trying her best to change the subject. The memory of Spike's melt-worthy kisses had fueled fantasies about the gorgeous vampire that she'd thought long dead. Fantasies that had haunted her longer than she wanted to admit. From the second he stepped out of the shadows at the Bronze, locked eyes with her, and called her by that stupid pet name. And then on Parent Teacher Night, she'd returned home, tense and excited from their first fight. Her body

tingled at the thought of how he felt against her. Hard. Masculine. Aroused. Even when he had the upper hand, there was a part of him that remained infinitely *male* and separated from the larger part of him that was demon.

At first, she'd felt like she was cheating on Angel when she thought of Spike. After all, until Angel had barreled into her life, she'd never had an inappropriate thought about a vampire. They were all the same. All game-face, snarly, and quick with the dustage. Spike was definitely *not* the same. He certainly wasn't like Angel or the Master, but he was also immeasurably different from the fledglings she was accustomed to slaying. There was a part of him that remained alive. There was a part of him that could not be bogged down by *what* he was. Instead, he was defined by *who* he was.

Buffy wasn't blind. She'd seen from the start that Spike was different. He was different, and they were enemies.

Until last night, remembering that hadn't been too difficult. In the days following the ruined St. Vigeous festival, her relationship with Angel had taken off, and her appreciation of Spike's fineness—not to mention his sexy accent—had taken a backseat to her souled boyfriend. Sure, she'd make a quick appraisal of the blond Brit's abs or whatever body part was most prominently displayed through all that tight clothing, but it only lasted until she threw a punch his way, or hit him in the head with something heavy and quipped uselessly to herself as a large organ crushed him. Angel, until the very end, had been the center of her universe when it came to men.

Since Angel had rejoined the Unsouled and Proud Club for Vamps, however, Buffy hadn't felt like noticing the opposite sex at all. Not until last night.

Not until she found herself kissing Spike.

Not until all her naughty, forgotten fantasies were suddenly substantiated. In the midst of her heartache—of the guilt-crushing knowledge that she had, time and time again, let Angel slip through her fingers—she'd reawakened. She'd opened her eyes, and for a blink, the part of her that was consumed with guilt quieted, and she could forget about her failure. That people were dying because she couldn't bring herself to do the inevitable. That Giles had lost the woman he

loved because of her. For a sliver of a second, Buffy had ceased being the Slayer and had simply been a girl. Any girl. Any girl kissing any guy. She'd had her coveted *normal* and the taste had been so sweet, it was a miracle she hadn't collapsed in tears.

It was fleeting, of course. She *wasn't* just any girl. She was the Slayer, and Spike was a vampire. Spike was a vampire who very much wanted her dead. Angel was still out there—still killing people. And it was still her fault.

However, Spike had given her something back. Something that reality *couldn't* take away. And even if his gift was an accident—even if he couldn't care less about what their stolen kiss had given her—to Buffy, it meant the world.

"Buffy?"

She started and shook her head, forcing her thoughts to the back of her mind. If Giles knew Spike's lips had restored her faith in men and her own femininity, he'd accuse her of having some sick vamp fetish. This was just one of those things that he could never understand.

"Hmm?"

Her watcher's eyes were saturated in concern. "Are you sure you don't want to tell us what happened?"

Buffy pasted on a grin and shrugged. "As I've said, nothing much happened. Spike came in after James had a hold of me. I think it took a few minutes before Grace nabbed him, 'cause he sounded...I dunno, confused for one thing. Confused and almost...resigned."

"Resigned?"

Oh crap. She was talking about it. How had that happened? "Like I was his last resort, I guess. Like it was the last place in the world he wanted to be. I dunno...I might be imagining things. I was kind of possessed at the time."

Giles cleared his throat and offered a jerky nod. "Go on," he encouraged.

Willow placed down her book. "Yeah, this might be helpful."

Helpful for what? For non-research? Buffy groaned inwardly, her will encouraging her mouth to shut up and keep the rest for herself, but her mouth had a way of running without giving her will or her

mind much consideration. She really needed to get that checked out. "We did the whole sordid song-and-dance," she continued. "I shot him. He fell over the railing. I walked to the music room and put on the Flamingos. And I would've shot myself had Spike not rushed in and taken the gun from me."

Willow frowned. "He was still possessed, right?"

"Umm. Yeah." Buffy's eyes narrowed. Where had she been all night? "He was still possessed. It was Grace all the way. Grace didn't want James to kill himself...and since Grace's...I dunno...*essence* was trapped in a body that couldn't be killed with a gunshot, she got to reach me—*James*—in time to let him know." She paused. "It was a mistake. The shooting. I don't...I don't know what James was thinking with, you know, bringing the gun in the first place...but what I felt when I shot Spike..." She shivered and her stomach turned. There had never been a more frightening moment than the widening of Spike's eyes as he grasped his wound and the love-drenched betrayal that he'd washed her in before toppling over the railing. There was nothing about shooting him—or Grace—that had been intentional. "What I felt...it wasn't on purpose. He didn't kill Grace on purpose."

The library fell quiet. Buffy glanced up and shifted awkwardly. "Not that it...matters. To us. I mean, the ghosts are gone and everything is back to its normal, Hellmouthy state. Spike didn't kill me, I didn't kill him—"

Giles heaved an exasperated sigh. "Yes, yes, we know that. You simply haven't been very forthcoming in what happened between the two of you to lead to your pacifism."

"Not forthcoming? I just told you—"

"What happened between James and Grace, yes. That much was rather obvious."

Buffy slumped, pouting. "I didn't notice you stopping me from *stat-ing* the obvious."

"There is something you're keeping from us."

Willow looked confused at that, but that didn't stop her from shooting a mildly accusatory glance in her friend's direction. "You're keeping stuff from us?"

"No."

"You honestly can't expect me to believe that Spike had you alone and did *nothing* about it. You put him in a wheelchair, Buffy...and he's a vampire. They are not creatures capable of forgiveness or change. If he didn't attack you, then—"

It angered her to hear her watcher so carelessly clumping Spike together in the overall generalization of vampires. He was different. Spike was different. He was evil, yes, but he was hardly a mindless bloodsucking machine. He had amazing capacity for feelings of compassion and empathy. Hell, Buffy knew that just from watching him with Drusilla.

"Well, we were both a little startled from the having-been-possessed thing," she retorted sharply. "Why are you harping on this?"

"Because—"

"You wanna know what happened?" a deep, familiar voice interrupted from the head of the library, followed by the metallic clink of a lighter striking to life. "Simple. We snogged. We fondled. We woke up. The end."

Giles froze. Willow gaped. And cigarette smoke filled the air.

Nerves shaking, mind racing, Buffy turned slowly—very slowly—until her gaze clashed with his.

Those eyes.

Spike only smiled. It wasn't a kind smile, but that didn't stop her legs from turning to butter or keep her clit from throbbing, especially when his eyes glossed over and dropped to her mouth before raking down the length of her.

When their eyes met again, his were alive with heat.

"Hello, cutie," he said.

And Buffy inhaled sharply.

Oh God. She was in *so much* trouble.

5

BUFFY ALL BUT GROWLED AS SHE SHOVED SPIKE OVER THE threshold of the first empty classroom she saw. She did her best to ignore the way her fingers tingled from where she'd touched him, just as she did her best to ignore the amused leer on his face—the one that informed her that he was enjoying the manhandling way too much. Noticing the parts of Spike that were less-than-grotesque, especially since he'd literally caught her in the middle of her Spike-made-me-feel-like-a-woman musings, was a definite no-no.

The spark in his eyes told her he wouldn't mind making her feel like a woman right now. Against the wall. Or maybe bent over the teacher's desk. And while the idea had her shivering in all the right places—had her mouth aching for another sinful taste of his—she forcibly clamped down and glared at him.

"Well?" she demanded, crossing her arms.

Spike's brows flickered and a smile itched at his lips. "Well?" he echoed impetuously, indulging in a long puff on his cigarette.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"Nice to see you, too, kitten."

"You can't do this!"

He blinked innocently. "Do what?"

"Just...come in here and be all in the...here and...dammit, why the hell are you here?"

Spike wasn't paying attention to her. He was staring at her lips.

"Hello?" Buffy waved and rocked on her heels. "Earth to mortal enemy?"

"You have the most gorgeous mouth I've ever seen."

"Well, that..." She frowned, blushed, and shook her head. Her insides flooded with heat. Suddenly her legs weren't as sturdy as they should be. "That is...very nice, but really not the point. The point..." Did she have a point? She was certain that she'd had a point. "That's nice."

Spike domed a brow and grinned at her, tossing his cigarette to the ground and stomping it out with his boot. "You said that already."

"Did I?"

"Yeah." He inhaled and took a step forward, and oh *god,* did he smell good or what? It wasn't fair. Spike was a vampire. He was of the dead. How was it that he smelled like a walking dish of man candy? "I told myself I wasn't gonna touch you."

Buffy blinked and realized that she was slowly walking backward. Her back soon collided with the wall. "Oh? Well...it's not like I have... slayer cooties or something," she said petulantly. "I'm actually quite clean."

Oh. My. God. Was there any way she could be a little more pathetic, because that wasn't quite pathetic enough. What the hell was wrong with her? One little possession of star-crossed ghosts and she's all with the schoolgirl crush on *Spike?* There weren't enough ways to spell *disaster* for this. He was *Spike.* Spike as in the guy who tried to kill Angel to save Dru...which, in retrospect, would have saved a lot of lives and some heartache. But then she would have killed Spike for killing Angel and that would have rendered it impossible for him to be here right now. Looking at her like a man fresh off a failed vow of celibacy.

"I shouldn't touch you," he said softly. "You're the Slayer."

"I'm the Slayer," she repeated, nodding, her eyes wide.

He nodded as well, though it was more than obvious that the words

hadn't served as the bucket of cold water they'd intended. "I just gotta wonder..."

"What?"

"If you'd taste as good now as you did last night."

He was on her in a blink, his hard, lean body pressing her against the wall. Her breasts flattened against his chest, her raised arms somehow wrapped around his neck. The second that his lips touched hers, the floor beneath her feet vanished, as did the wall at her back, and she was lost to an endless sea of pure heavenly delights. The world blinked away. Everything blinked away. Reality stepped aside. Nothing was left except Spike. Just Spike. Just Spike and those lips that could thaw any frozen heart.

He tasted dangerous, and the more her mind willed her to pull away, the more her body and her lips clawed at him, refusing to let him go. His tongue belonged in her mouth, wrestling with *her* tongue. His arms belonged around her waist, holding her against his all-too-male body to which her very female body responded in ways that would surely see her locked up in Rehab for Slayers before this was over. But that didn't matter. None of it mattered. Spike was holding her, exploring her mouth with that sinful tongue of his. His lips formed lyrics as he kissed her, giving her wordless poetry. Filling her veins with more of that delicious femininity the past few weeks had been sorely lacking.

He kissed her and she ceased being a girl. He kissed her and she was a woman.

A woman pressed very intimately against a dangerous, soulless vampire. A woman who was so *not* rubbing herself wantonly against his denim-clad erection.

Spike sighed into her, his teeth lightly scraping against her lips. "You taste divine," he murmured. "Like a slow drink of whiskey."

Buffy trembled. "Whiskey?"

"Oh yeah."

"I taste like alcohol. That's not good."

Spike chuckled. "Would bloody explain why I'm suddenly drunk on you," he mused thoughtfully, then nipped at her lips again. "I was wrong, then. Definitely not the ghosts."

Not the ghosts. Buffy didn't know whether to be relieved or disappointed. Ghosts meant that her reaction to him was on a purely supernatural level. It meant that Spike-when-possessed-by-dead-teacher-woman kissed like a god. That would have made things a whole lot simpler.

Spike as Spike, though, didn't kiss like a god.

He kissed like the devil.

He made sinning so delicious it was a wonder *anyone* wanted to be good.

Spike's eyes twinkled in a way she'd never seen. Granted, the past twenty-four hours had shown her many sides of Spike that she'd never seen. Particularly the side that was all with the not-killing-her and more with the kissing-her-boneless.

"Oh trespass sweetly urged," he murmured, those lady-killer lips brushing hers once more. "Give me my sin again..."

Buffy frowned and pulled back before the Lips of Good could tempt her into further distraction. "No. We can't."

He pouted. God, the man had the audacity to pout. "Why not?"

"Why? Why? Need I really go through the laundry list of reasons *why* this is a bad idea?"

"There's a laundry list?"

"Spike!" Buffy flattened her hands against his chest—*ohh, sturdy*—and shoved him away. "Giles is gonna come in here with a hack-saw in like two minutes if we don't get back before then. You show up on *my* turf after the weirdness that was last night to, what, play tonsil hockey?"

He offered a lazy shrug. "Seemed like the thing to do."

"Why are you here?"

"I woke up with the desire to snog you."

"To *what* me?!"

The smile on his face ought to be illegal. No one should ever look *that* self-confident. "Snog you. See if your mouth was as delicious as I remembered." He licked his lips. "Mmm. You're better when you're not under the influence, love."

Buffy snickered. "Thanks."

There was a long pause.

"So?" Spike asked expectantly.

"So?"

"Back to snogging, then?"

The idea of losing herself in another one of his silken kisses had her eyes a little glossy and her heart doing somersaults. Gah—it wasn't fair that he had such influence over her. For crying out loud, before the stupid school had gotten possessed by equally stupid ghosts, Spike was barely a blip on her radar. An admittedly devastatingly sexy blip, but a blip nonetheless. What right did he have to stroll in here like he owned the town, kiss her to the point where she could barely remember her name, and then casually ask if they could please continue making out when she had a murderous ex-boyfriend to slay?

A soulless, murderous ex-boyfriend. Angel would never come in here, sans soul, and kiss her like Spike had. He'd rip her throat out.

They were equally soulless, right?

Buffy groaned inwardly. She'd already had this debate. It was easier to think about when the object of her musings wasn't staring her down with the bluest eyes she'd ever seen. Or licking his lips and making her envy his tongue.

A few kisses and she'd reverted completely from slayer to schoolgirl. No happy medium. Spike wasn't fighting her, which was weird, but she wasn't fighting him, which was weirder.

"You said that you'd told yourself you wouldn't touch me," she reminded him, attempting to step backward as he stepped forward, but going nowhere due to the wall pressed at her back. Walking through walls was not a slayer ability, although at the way Spike was looking at her—hungrily, and not in a blood-lusty way—she was beginning to wish it were.

Namely because the woman in her hadn't felt so excited in weeks.

"I tell myself all kinds of rubbish. None of it ever pans out."

"Why are you here?"

"You gonna keep asking that?"

"Well, until I get an actual answer that doesn't involve your tongue down my throat."

Spike smirked. "Didn't hear you complaining."

"It's *insane*."

"Yeah. That's what makes it so much fun."

Right. Insanity. Fun. Thus described his fascination with screws-for-brains. Buffy rolled her eyes. "Look, I don't have time for this. I have to, you know, stop you and yours from the big evil thing you're planning. And I don't wanna have to stake you here, especially because your lips have this numbing effect on my brain...that I probably should've kept to myself because I've just given you an unfair advantage and now it's out there and I just realized that I'm still talking, which is never good. So I'll stop now, and you'll start." She paused, focused on a spot on the floor while trying desperately to ignore how hot her cheeks were. "Okay...so, talking isn't my strong point."

"No, you're doing just fine."

"Shut up."

"Make me."

Buffy scowled, raising her eyes to meet his once more. "You're here. And you're non-fighty, *yet again*. And I thought last night you said that you'd try to kill me next time we met."

"Yeah, well, that was last night."

"Ugh..."

"What? A bloke can't change his mind?" Spike held her gaze for another long minute, then sighed and combed his fingers through his hair. "Look, it's not easy for me to be here, all right? When I came to see you last night, it threw me for a bloody loop."

She frowned. "What did?"

"You did. I had a plan and you had to go bugger it up with your sodding ghosties. And now I can't get you outta my head, which makes fuck-all in sense, but it's the truth." He sighed again. "I want to stop it."

"Then *stop it*. I mean, don't get me wrong...I like kissing you, but it's really beginning to wig me out."

A ghost of a shadow crossed his face at that. "No, love, you're not hearing me. I want to stop Angel."

Everything fell deathly still. Even the dust particles froze. She couldn't have heard him right.

"What?"

"I want to stop Angel." An ironic smile tickled Spike's lips, and just

like that, she knew it wasn't a joke. God, it wasn't a joke. He was completely serious.

Only he couldn't be, because the words didn't make sense.

And if those words didn't make sense, then what Spike said next surely meant that doomsday was near.

"I want to save the world."

6

Her lips needed to stop tingling. Really. It was getting annoying.

As were the looks Spike kept shooting her. He was supposed to be talking, dammit. Which, okay, he was doing. He was talking. But he was looking at her. And her lips, being lame and uncooperative, were making with the tinglies and aching for his.

It was not fair that he could kiss like that. Not fair in the slightest.

"Allow me to...interject..." Giles said. His glasses were in a perpetual polishing session in the hem of his dress-shirt. Perhaps he hoped Spike would disappear if he couldn't see him clearly. "You're... you're serious?"

Well, that was certainly profound. Her shoulders slumped and she breathed a relieved sigh that Willow had skipped out while she had discussed things with her vampire in the spare classroom. The redhead's affinity for after-school activities had drawn her away, thankfully leaving them with only one pair of disbelieving eyes. One pair of eyes was proving to be difficult enough.

And Spike wasn't making things any easier. Asshole.

"Serious?" repeated the vampire in question, arching a brow in a

way that made her tingle for all the wrong reasons. "As a bleeding heart attack, mate."

"You really wish to..."

Spike's brows perked. "Save the world? Yeah."

"Oh."

"I could write it down for you if that'd help clear it up." He huffed and shook his head, his eyes meeting hers again. An electric shock shot down her spine. "He always like this?"

Buffy forced a dry smile to her still-tingling lips. It was hard to make with the talking when all she wanted to do was suck his face until he forgot his name. "He's just not used to bad guys waving white flags."

He grinned and it was too sexy for words. "I'm not one for rules, love."

The look on his face spoke for that and then some. No, Spike was many things and none of them had anything to do with abiding by the rules. The rules definitely said—underlined, italicized, the full-nine-yards—that fraternization between vampires and slayers was strictly forbidden.

It didn't matter if the vampire in question was the sexiest creature on two legs. It didn't matter if he made her feel female after so many weeks of being hollow inside. Perhaps her reaction to him was a side-effect of being lonely. And perhaps his reaction to her was a side-effect of being abandoned. Buffy didn't harbor any delusions that things between her former boyfriend and Spike's insane lover were chaste. The way the two acted together—the way Angelus spoke when she saw him—she knew that they were making it, and often.

That would certainly explain Spike's reaction to *her*. He'd been deserted just as sure as she had. He was starved for touch as well.

In the end, it likely had little to do with *her*. She was just the owner of the lips he enjoyed kissing in the absence of Drusilla.

"D-do you know what they're plotting?" Giles asked, glasses still in full-polish mode. "If the end of the world is Angel's intention—"

"Not Angel," Spike corrected, his eyes narrowing. "The git's name is Angelus."

Giles frowned. "I...I beg your pardon?"

There was a long, quiet moment. The vampire shrugged. "Suppose

it doesn't matter in the end, right?" he replied. "The wanker has the same face. Same walk. Same talk. Just minus one soul, yeah? Just got his confidence back." He broke off then, laughing without humor. "Angelus is the prat who got a soul shoved up his self-righteous arse a good century ago. The beast that your slayer awakened by parting her dimpled knees."

Buffy's innards flushed with cold, a well-aimed barb striking her chest. She found herself swallowed in confusion and didn't know whether to be angry or hurt.

Thankfully, Giles took care of her dilemma for her. In a blink, he'd paraded across the library floor and punched Spike in the eye. The move was so thoroughly uncharacteristic on part of her watcher that Buffy could do little more than stand numbly to the side, watching in disbelief as Spike sailed ineloquently to the ground.

"You filthy little berk!" Giles spat. "How *dare* you speak to her that way?"

Spike recovered quickly enough, rolling to his feet, his eyes flashing. "Speak what way? The truth, maybe? It's what brought Angelus back, innit? It's why that prat's fucking Dru sideways while I'm here in the sodding belly of the *sodding* beast, chattin' up the Slayer and her mates like we're old chums. You think I want to be here? You think I want to be..." He paused, his gaze flickering to hers. It was likely her imagination, but she thought she saw some of the fire die.

No, check that. It *had* to be her imagination. As were the shaking of her legs and the ache in her heart.

"You're the one who came to me," she said softly, rubbing her arms. "Remember?"

"Pet—"

"You came *here*. No one forced you. No one held a stake to your heart." Her brows perked and she surged with a forced sense of confidence. "You came to *me* for help."

Spike nodded somberly. "That's right."

"And then..." *Now's not the time to cry, dammit.* "And then—"

"Look—"

"I'm just saying, if you don't wanna be here, then there's the door."

"I *don't* wanna be here," he retorted. "No more than you want me

here. Can't say I fancy keeping company with a lot that would just as soon see me dust as anything else. And you'd trade me over for a kiss from your boy in a blink, so don't bloody look at me like I've squashed your dainty feelings, Slayer. You want Angel back, I want Dru. Simple as all that."

Buffy froze, rubbing her arms again. A short twenty-four hours ago, she would have agreed with him. She would have given anything to see her boyfriend's face. To feel his hands on her skin and his whispers in her hair. To hear him tell her that everything would be all right—that the dark was over and he was with her now.

But a day had passed. The night had come, and the sun had risen.

Spike had walked into the library. Spike had come to her. Spike had done what no vampire would ever do.

"Angel's a killer," she said softly.

"Yeah," Spike agreed, arching that perfect brow again. "And he was before, too."

She knew that. She'd known that the second that he'd flashed his fangs in her bedroom after they'd shared their first kiss. She'd known when they tentatively started dating, just as she'd known it the night she'd foolishly agreed to share his bed. He'd taken her virginity as a killer and he'd awoken as one as well.

Only now he'd killed people that she knew. The deaths were no longer a part of the past. They were no longer names in a history book. They were people like Jenny Calendar. People like her classmates. Girls and boys and teachers. He was eating away at her reality now, and the book had come to life. The names had become faces. The faces were people she knew. People she had once seen every day. People she'd cared for.

A long sigh whispered through her lips. "He's a killer," she reiterated, stronger now. "And I...look, you say they're going to end the world?"

Spike shrugged lazily, though there was something in his eyes that hadn't been there a minute ago. "They're planning on it," he replied flippantly. "Angelus has gotten some bloody large aspirations. Seems being shoved inside a soul tends to make one lose his marbles."

"Imagine that," Giles said dryly.

"He's plotting something on the world-ending stage. I'd stake my smokes on it."

"Yes," the watcher replied. "And your word's as good as grit."

Spike shot him a narrow glance. "Did you miss the 'stake my smokes' part?"

"You insolent little—"

Buffy grumbled and held up a hand, quickly putting herself between her watcher and the supercilious vampire in question. One thing was certain—they weren't getting anywhere like this. Despite Spike's rather abrasive manner of getting his point across, he was right.

Angel—or Angelus—was crazy enough to end the world. Spike wouldn't be here if he didn't think so.

He wasn't here for her after all.

It's better this way, she told herself, swallowing hard. *Vampires and slayers? Very nonmixy. I could write the book on how nonmixy they are.*

"Giles," she said softly. "If...if Angel's planning something, we need to be ready. And we're going to need all the help we can get." She slowly turned to Spike, braving herself to meet his eyes. His too-blue eyes and the devastating way he could see into her without even trying. No one had ever looked at her like that. *"All* the help we can get."

"We don't need *him.* For God's sake, Buffy, for all we know, he's been sent to throw you off."

Spike frowned at that. "I am *not* a sodding lackey."

"Like we can believe one damned word you say!"

"If you knew anything about Angelus, you'd know he doesn't send anyone to do what he couldn't do himself."

"Angel likes to torture psychologically. How can we know that gaining Buffy's trust isn't a part of some greater plan?"

Spike sputtered at that, wide-eyed. "Buffy's *trust?"* he repeated. "Does the Slayer *look* like she trusts me? She doesn't trust me any further than she could..." He paused. "Well, okay, so she could toss me quite a ways, but you get my meaning. And I say since the girl's the one with the superpowers, she's the one you oughta listen to."

He met her eyes again, and another electric shock raced down her spine.

It was nothing. They had nothing. A few kisses didn't mean loyalty.

He wanted Dru back. And until then, she was his substitute.

The idea left her cold for reasons she couldn't explain, and try as she might, she couldn't shake the feeling aside.

She wanted Spike to want *her*.

God, how screwed up was *that?*

7

It didn't take a century of informal people studies to know that he was in the doghouse. Well, as far in the doghouse as he could be with his mortal enemy. And in the end, he supposed it was for the best. This business with the Slayer—snogging her, for instance—had already gone as far as it could. She'd opened his eyes, sure, but there was nothing more to it than that. And while he certainly wouldn't object to sampling what exactly had been sweet enough to provide a moment of perfect bliss, his truce with Buffy and her chums was going to be short-lived. The second the world was secure again, he was gone.

Without Drusilla.

That thought was going to take some getting used to, especially since he kept insisting that getting her back at all was the reason he was doing this. But he'd come to a realization between showing up and kissing the daylights out of the Slayer. And that realization was that there *was* no getting Dru back. After this was over, he'd be alone for the first time. The very first time since he was turned. It was for the best—no matter how nerve-wracking the prospect, he knew it was for the best. He'd been far too dependent on a woman who couldn't care two pisses for him for too long. When his mortal enemy poured more feeling into kissing him than the woman he'd been with

for over a century, it compromised all hope of fooling himself any longer.

But he couldn't quite let Buffy and pals in on that, could he? Then they'd wonder why he was sticking around at all.

Not that he hadn't wondered that himself.

Still, he was beginning to think saying he wanted Dru back might have been a mistake since it had done little more than get the Slayer all pissy. Granted, it wasn't like he couldn't understand why. The poor little twit had had her heart stomped on by her wanker of an ex, then Spike had come along and snogged her into the next century. He'd done that and then all but screamed that she wasn't good enough. That abuse from his emotionally detached sire was better than the Slayer's silken kisses.

Didn't matter that nothing could be further from the truth.

Spike snickered, shaking his head with an ironic grin. *A lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on,* he thought, wishing for a cigarette.

It wasn't Buffy's fault that he was a glutton for abuse. That there was a part of him that, no matter what, wanted exactly what he'd said. In the end, though, that was only because he didn't know better. The years hadn't shown him any love—Dru wasn't going to provide that. And he deserved more.

He deserved so much more.

Hell, Buffy had given him more in a few simple kisses than he'd ever gotten from his dark princess. Buffy had opened his eyes. Eventually, he'd have to decide if he loved or hated her for the favor.

Right now, all he wanted to do was touch her. Forget what he'd said in the library and chalk it up to cowardly backpedaling at the emotions the Slayer—of all people—had awakened within him. Self-examination could wait. He wanted was her lips on his lips and her body against his body. He wanted her breasts in his hands and her pussy cradling his cock. He wanted all that without worry of what tomorrow would bring.

He wanted *Buffy*.

I'm sick.

That might be, but it didn't change a thing. He wanted her like he'd

never wanted another woman in his life. The knowledge was terrifying but relentless.

"Slayer—"

"You really don't need to follow me home," she said, not once breaking stride or even bothering to toss him a glance over her shoulder. Her blonde ponytail flopped enthusiastically against her back with every strident step, enchanting him to the point of pure absurdity. He needed a shag and bad. "I know the way, Spike. It's why it's called *home*."

"Buffy, I didn't mean—"

"I don't care what you meant."

Her tone told him otherwise, and colorfully. Women who truly didn't care never sounded so hurt. He knew. He'd spent a century with a woman who *didn't care*.

He'd also spent a century not listening when people told him to shut up.

"I didn't mean it," he said again.

Buffy grumbled and batted a hand. "Hello? Were you not here two seconds ago? I said I *don't care*. I don't give an honest crap about *anything* you say, much less what you mean by it."

"Slayer—"

"I don't *care* if you want your crazy hoe-bag back. It's none of my business."

Spike arched a brow. "Thought you didn't know what I was talking about."

"Shut up."

"The subject's a little touchy for me, all right? It's not like I enjoy advertising that the woman I've been with ever since I crawled from the grave couldn't give two pisses about me." Her paces slowed then, and Spike exhaled softly, running a hand through his hair. "She used to pretend, at least," he continued. "And I could fool myself then. She doesn't pretend anymore."

Buffy stopped completely and waited until he caught up with her, her eyes bright and vulnerable. The shattered confusion across her face was enough to make any bloke fall to his knees, thus Spike was pleased when he managed to meet her gaze with somber dignity.

She was as lost as he was. And he could appreciate that.

"Look," she said after a long minute. "I don't...I don't know. Yesterday—before the ghostly possession made with the smoochies and the touchies and...everything made sense."

"I know what you mean."

A dry laugh scratched at her throat. "Good, 'cause I don't. Everything made sense in a way that was *completely* senseless, but at least I knew where it was going." She licked her lips. "Now you're all here with the distracty and the Lips of Good, I can admit some things. Like when you said that I'd run back to Angel. God, I'm so afraid that that's true. That if he came back, I'd just forgive and forget, even after all he's done." A shiver ran through her, and she crossed her arms. "Throw in the monkey-wrench—that being you—and I'm so confused right now that...well, I can't come up with a good analogy, but I'm just *that* confused."

Spike had wandered off at some point. Probably around *Lips of Good*.

"This is crazy," she said, shaking her head. "We're crazy."

"I've been around crazy most of my unlife," he retorted, smiling softly. "Never felt like this before."

"You hate me."

"I'm willing to overlook that for now." It was another half-truth. Something about tasting the girl's succulent mouth had gone to his head. The whole *feeling* thing was a little intoxicating. Buffy had him under her spell whether she liked it or not. "I like snogging you."

She made a face. "Snog just sounds wrong."

"You're the ones who butchered the bloody language. Criticizing our slang's not a door you wanna open."

"Spike—"

"I know I was a jerk, all right? I'm evil. That's how the game is played."

Buffy rolled her eyes, her face hardening once more. And before he could even consider recanting whatever offense he'd laid out, she'd pivoted sharply on her heel and resumed her brisk pace down the sidewalk. "How many times do I have to say it to get it through your thick head?" she snapped. "I. Don't. Care. I don't care."

Spike sighed. *One step forward...*

"You trying to convince yourself or me, Slayer?" he retorted, arching a cool brow. "You change your tune so often, it's no bloody wonder your chums have a hard go of keeping track."

"Shut up."

Another long sigh peeled off his lips. "Buffy, we should talk—"

"I've already discussed the impending and oh-so-ambiguous apocalypse as much as I care to, thanks."

It took all he had to bite back a growl. She had to be the most stubborn bint he'd ever laid eyes on. "That's not what I meant and you bloody well know it, you frustrating cock-tease."

She stopped walking so abruptly, he nearly plowed into her back. Not that he would have minded that, per se. Feeling any part of the Slayer's taut, scrumptious little body against him would be the closest thing to bliss he'd felt in a long while. But he didn't plow into her back —Buffy whirled around the next second, and again, he felt himself drowning in the liquid heat of her eyes.

"What the *hell* did you just call me?"

He didn't bother repeating it. His nose was unblemished for the moment and from the way her right hand was twitching, he figured it was wise to not press his luck. "Got you to turn around, didn't it?"

The fire in her eyes was about the sexiest thing he'd ever seen. She was trembling with a mixture of anger and arousal, and the way her lips moved made the urge to cover every inch of her with his mouth harder and harder to ignore.

God, the thought alone nearly undid him.

"You—"

"You're making excuses," he snapped, giving himself a good mental shake. "Deny it all you want, love, but there's something happening between us, and ignoring it's not gonna make it go away."

"What happened between us was ghostly possession."

"Yeah," Spike agreed slowly. "Last night. What happened in the classroom was you and me, baby."

"You were the one who made with the lunge-y!"

"And I suppose all that panting and moaning was your version of protecting your virtue?"

"There was *no* panting and moaning, you twisted perv!"

"If I hadn't brought up Dru back there, you'd be putty in my hands." Spike's hungry eyes swallowed her as her nostrils flared with anger and her body tightened in that delicious way that only a slayer's could. "And as it is, I didn't mean it. Not all of it, anyway. So just accept my apology so we can get back to snogging, yeah?"

Buffy blinked at him incredulously. Then she huffed and shook her head. "You're a pig," she said, turning quickly to give him yet another scrumptious view of her biteable arse. "And I'm going home."

"Buffy—"

"Just go home, Spike. There's nothing to discuss."

He rolled his eyes. *Women.* "I don't *have* a sodding home to go to. If Dru hasn't gone batty with another vision that spills all the glorious details of my turning traitor on Angelus's massive waste of forehead, I'm *still* gonna have to watch your ex fuck her into the ground. And between the two of us, I'd rather skip that show and get back to exploring how good you taste when you're less of a bitch."

She scoffed. "Yeah. That's happening."

"Slayer—"

"We had two flukes. That's it. No more. No less. There's nothing between us, Spike. Nothing but a bizarre-o pact to save the world and seething hatred. Nothing."

The bint had submerged so far into denial that she was beginning to sound like she'd convinced herself of that. Why oh *why* had he gone off his rocker and mentioned Dru? His mind was swimming in Buffy, and thanks to his big mouth, he wasn't going to be welcomed to that dive he'd so looked forward to all day.

Except Spike wasn't one to take defeat easily, especially over something so stupid. It was hard to admit he wanted something different after a century of having his eyes set on one thing, but he was determined to show her that saving the world was just a perk to tasting her sweet mouth. That, when all was said and done, *Buffy* was the one who had changed his tune. Kissing *Buffy* had changed everything. *Everything.*

She would know it, dammit. If he had to beat it into her thick skull, she would know it tonight.

Right now.

With a growl, Spike seized her arm and whirled her around so fast she didn't have time to protest before his mouth came crashing down on hers. And as before, he immediately found himself lost in her rich taste. His audacity was rewarded with a sensual, cock-stirring moan rather than a slap. God, she could drive a sane man mad with the noises she made. And just like that, whatever hint of a fight Buffy had pretended to put up instantly dissolved. Her arms wound around his neck, her lips parting to welcome his tongue, her own pushing into his mouth and near licking a soul *into* his willing body. The warm heat of her pussy cradled his cock and her scent teased his nostrils. She was magnificent. She was divine. She was perfection. She was *effulgent*.

And he was lost in her.

"Tell me now," he growled and nipped at her lips, tugging at her ponytail until her hair was free and cascading over his fingers like water. "Tell me *now* that there's nothing between us."

The fight abandoned her eyes. "Guh," she replied drunkenly.

Spike grinned, dipping his head to nibble on her earlobe. "That's what I thought," he purred, his mouth skating slowly to tease the creamy skin of her throat. "You taste like raspberries."

"Ohhh..." Buffy wove a hand through his hair, gasping and bucking her hips against him with wild abandon that did little more than drive him crazy. "It's...my body-wash."

"I love it."

He lapped eagerly at the pulse-point of her throat, a low moan rumbling through his chest. Slayer blood pumped through her glorious body. She was an elixir, and as one of the only vamps who could brag as to having spilled slayer blood, he knew that her taste would redefine *delectable*.

"I'll buy more," she promised, then sucked at his earlobe.

Spike's eyes rolled up. It wasn't too difficult to imagine her sucking on something else. Something hard and aching for her touch.

"You smell like honey," he growled. His fangs itched. He wanted to sink his teeth into her so badly.

But not for the kill. No. This was different. This was so different. And that knowledge shook him to the core.

He didn't want to kill her. He didn't want his fangs stained with red and her body crumpled at his feet. No—he wanted to bite her in pleasure. He wanted to bite her when he was balls-deep in her pussy with her tight, velvet warmth strangling his cock. He wanted to see euphoria wash across her face. He wanted her hand coaxing him to her neck. He wanted her permission—her encouragement—her *pleading* before he sank his fangs into her milky flesh.

"I smell like honey?" she repeated, her voice light. She gripped his shoulders, her mouth releasing his ear just long enough to nip at his throat. And *Christ,* if she hadn't been walking a fine line before, she was practically sprinting down one now. "And I taste like raspberries. Do I look like a turkey drumstick?"

Spike chuckled. "Hardly, love."

"You and your food analogies."

"It's not my fault if everything about you is *delicious."* To accentuate his point, he nipped at her throat, then kicked himself immediately when she tensed in his arms. "Not gonna bite you," he promised hurriedly before seizing her lips again. "Not gonna bite you. Want you *alive* and wiggling. You have my word on that."

Buffy just looked at him. He could practically see the wheels in her head pulling on the emergency brake and heading for the ever-dreaded backtrack in a way that would put most politicians to shame.

"Sweetheart—"

"No. No, it's okay." She sighed heavily and shook her head. Her words didn't inspire much encouragement, especially when she robbed him of her warmth by slipping out of his arms the next second. "It's...I know you wouldn't. Well, no, I don't. I *think* you wouldn't, and I know that *you* think you wouldn't. Right now."

Spike's shoulders slumped.

Wanker.

"But we shouldn't—it's..." Buffy licked her lips and shivered. He knew she could taste him there, and despite his best efforts, that hint of how much they mutually enjoyed snogging each other wasn't incentive enough to send her leaping back into his all-too-willing embrace. "I'd love to get caught up in this," she said at last, sighing again and

running a hand through her newly-tussled hair. "In you...and the goodness of kissing you."

Spike's plans went far beyond kissing, but he didn't dare say that now. "I don't really see the problem, pet," he replied softly. "It's not like we owe it to anyone."

"I know."

"Point of fact—"

"I can't. We can't." Buffy stopped short, her eyes falling shut in frustration. "I mean we shouldn't. Look, something happened...yeah... with the ghosts. But that doesn't mean—"

"So you're making excuses *now?*"

"You said back there that you want Dru back."

If Spike could go back in time, he'd be sure to stake himself before those infernal words could breathe life. "Sod what I said back there!" he snarled, gesturing emphatically at the empty road behind them. "I want *you,* love. I want you so bad I'm gonna bloody burst if I can't touch you. Is it crazy? Yes. I know it. I know it as well as you, but knowing it doesn't make my wanting you go away."

Buffy's eyes darkened as the fight returned to her. Better, then. He much preferred her fighting rather than calm and rational. Made him feel less like a ranting, sex-crazed lunatic.

"You want me 'cause you can't have Dru," she said slowly, her tone dangerous. "You want me 'cause I'm...I don't know. But you wouldn't be here with me if Dru wasn't playing cowgirl with Angel."

He bit back a flinch. "You can't know that."

"Yes, I can. And hey—what's more, I do." Buffy glared at him for a few well-deserved seconds, her luscious breasts heaving as she panted with exertion. Then, slowly, the fire in her gaze softened again, and the calm was back. "Look...there's nothing...we're both very lonely right now. I can't imagine how...how hard it must be for you. I mean, I had the wiggins just seeing Cordy *flirt* with Angel before he went all soul-crazy. I know how long you and...I know. And having to watch it can't be a whole lot of fun. But I'm too broken right now to be used because you're lonely. Or to use anyone else because *I'm* lonely. It's not gonna help matters, Spike. Not in the end."

A cool silence settled between them. A cool, haunted silence.

Buffy didn't want to be used. And she didn't want to use him.

A woman, for the first time in his life, didn't want to use him.

And that golden knowledge tossed him over the proverbial edge. Standing there, on the street corner, looking into her gorgeous emerald eyes, he wanted her more than ever.

But more than that, he wanted her to want him as well. Beyond the pain and the hurt. Beyond Dru and Angelus, and their sodding mind games. Beyond the impending apocalypse. He wanted Buffy to want *him*. *Him* as in Spike. *Him* as in a vampire. *Him* as in her self-proclaimed executioner.

He wanted Buffy to want *him*.

God, how buggered was *that?*

8

It was by the virtue of a gabby lackey that Spike discovered Angelus had decided to end the world by means of some demon from the stone-age. A demon that had met the business end of a knight's sword. Ever since his post-Buffy-snogging encounter with the great sod and the former light of his evil life, Angelus and Dru had done little to include him in their plans. That much didn't unravel him—he knew he didn't have their trust. Hell, he was surprised he hadn't been tossed out on his arse yet, though he knew the day was coming. He'd *never* had Angelus's trust. Granted, trust wasn't something that Angelus handed out by the barrel. Not even Darla had earned that privilege, but after so much time, Spike would expect at *least* a smidgeon of respect.

And Dru? Well, Dru had made her feelings about him perfectly clear.

The only thing Spike couldn't fully explain was the lightness in his heart. All things considered, he should be absolutely miserable. The woman he loved had betrayed him—physically, emotionally, and all of the above. Furthermore, Drusilla's betrayal had forced him into a corner—one that he knew he should resent with every fiber of his being. He was walking through the darkened halls of Sunnydale High,

running slightly late for the Scooby meeting Buffy had asked him to attend the night before.

Buffy.

She was *Buffy* to him.

That thought was rather frightening, but it did little to dampen his good mood.

Buffy had him in a good mood. The same scrawny little chit who had done nothing but muck up his plans from the second he barreled over the Welcome to Sunnydale sign. The bloody thorn in his side. The bane of his existence. The one that he'd sworn to kill. He'd come here to drink her blood. To mark her as his third all the while restoring his black princess to her former dark glory.

And the thought of seeing her now had him inexplicably happy. It made bugger all sense to him, but happiness was something that had been sorely lacking in his life in recent months. He knew basking in happiness provided by his mortal enemy couldn't lead to anything good, and while there was a very large part of him that was thoroughly disgusted with himself, he similarly knew not to sneeze on whatever good fortune came his way. He'd admitted his attraction to Buffy seconds after first setting eyes on her, just as he'd vowed to have her throat torn open and her blood in his mouth. Now that they had a tentative understanding, the male in him couldn't help but soak her up for the warm, luscious female that she was.

The fact that she was the owner of the pussy his cock desperately wanted to sink into didn't hurt, either. And while she'd put a cap on his intentions to cart her to the nearest bed, the way she reacted to him had him confident she wouldn't be able to ignore his advances for long.

Her scent flooded his nostrils. He hadn't wanted to wash her arousal off his skin, so he'd parked in one of Sunnydale's motels and tended to his aching cock.

Buffy had certainly done her share to fuel his fantasies for the night. Every time he closed his eyes he saw her face. Every time he inhaled, he drowned in her flavor. He felt her breasts in his hands and the hum of her pulse against his mouth. At times, the fantasy became so intense—so *real*—that he was surprised when he opened his eyes

and found he was still alone. That there wasn't a warm and achingly female human beside him.

It was going to be hard maintaining composure when all he wanted to do was escort her to the nearest private area and shag her until she was no longer interesting. Until he was bored enough with her that he could off her good and proper. And bugger all if the thought of her dead didn't make him ache. That needed fixing, the sodding soft-spot for the Slayer. It was one thing to crave her cunt—caring for *her* was something completely different.

All in all, Spike knew what he needed to do. He needed to fuck her so he could get back to the place where the idea of her broken, bleeding body inspired joy rather than outrage. He comforted his torn psyche by asserting that he'd be able to kill the chit and move on once his lusting after slayer-pussy came to an end, no matter how unappealing the notion was currently. For whatever reason, his heart and hands were tied behind his back. He wouldn't be ready to kill her until he'd fucked her.

And until then, he'd have to accept that he wasn't ready to kill her. He didn't *want* to kill her, and he could only hope that fucking her would rekindle the oath he made to himself—that he would be able to spill her blood without regret, then move on.

It was what he told himself, anyway. Didn't matter that every time his eyes landed on the sorry chit, his gut clenched and his heart warmed.

That would go away with time.

He hoped.

Trouble was, he'd never felt anything like it before, so he honestly couldn't say whether the feeling would go away or not.

And if he was *really* honest with himself, he wasn't sure he wanted it to.

Wasn't *that* a kick in the balls?

Spike shook his head hard. If he started down this road, there was no way he was going to be able to focus long enough to tell the Slayer and her chums what he'd discovered. He sighed, stuffed his hands inside his duster pockets, and barreled through the library doors before he could talk himself out of it.

Buffy was sitting cross-legged on the front table with a book settled in her lap and her chin resting in her palm, tendrils of fallen hair hiding her eyes from him. And even though she was a good seven yards away, he could feel the exhilarated rush in her pulse. She was thriving on adrenaline and judging by the sweet smell she exuded, she'd just gotten through a hefty training session.

The idea of Buffy in her element killed his resolve to remain professional. His cock stirred and his fangs itched. She was glorious when she fought.

Even if all she had to fight was a padded-up watcher or a worn-down punching bag.

It was a decidedly juvenile, male voice that interrupted his exceedingly distracting thoughts. And from the distinctly *unmanly* shrill, he couldn't tell whether or not the distraction was a godsend.

"Spike!"

Spike blinked and turned. Oh. Right. The Slayer's friends. Seemed the whole merry lot was present. The redhead. The over-bearing boy and his cheerleader girlfriend. The werewolf. And, of course, the watcher. The bloke responsible for nearly giving him a black-eye. They were all staring at him dumbly, as though he hadn't popped by the previous day and already gone through this time-wasting mess of explaining his motives.

Granted, only the watcher and the redhead had been there to see it, but a bloke would think that news would travel...especially since this lot fancied themselves a crime-fighting force to be reckoned with. Demons of Sunnydale beware, and all that.

"'Lo all," he said, waving dismissively before turning back to the Slayer. She looked like something had bitten her; she was pale and wide-eyed, and too gorgeous for words. Were it not for their rather attentive audience, he'd be seeing about bringing that rosy blush he loved so much out to play.

"Spike," she said. "I...oh..."

"Forget I was coming, love?

"No. I just..."

It took very little to pull the breaks on his good mood. Something wasn't right. Buffy was *too* pale. Too dazed. And while he'd love to

entertain thoughts that she was shaken by the very sight of him, he was too jaded to allow his ego the stroke, however needed.

"Got news," he said, eyes narrowing. "'Bout Angelus."

"So do we!" the redhead chimed in, raising her hand like an attentive student. "We found the curse!"

"The curse..." Spike froze, his world crashing. "The curse. The sodding *curse.* You found it?"

"Buffy found it."

Buffy couldn't look at him. She was suddenly very much interested in the book in her lap.

"In Ms. Calendar's desk," the overgrown boy with the girl-voice tossed in. "You know? The teacher you murdered?"

Spike bit back a snarl. "Don't go pinning that one on me."

"Like it matters. Point is, we have a plan, and you're not needed anymore."

That much was enough to snap the Slayer out of whatever inner pity-party she was attending. Buffy's head shot up so fast it'd be a sodding miracle if she didn't have whiplash come morning. And in an instant, she'd bounded to her feet. "Wait," she said shortly. "We never decided that we couldn't use Spike."

The word hit him like holy water.

Use.

"Use me?" he repeated, disgusted. With her. With himself. With the notion that he could ever be anything more to her—that the night's promise could actually be kept. God, he was such a git. Such a bloody *useful* git. "Well, Slayer...fancy that."

She burned him with a look. "Don't start."

"Don't start? I walk in here with news about what your lover-boy is plannin' and get the bloody third degree from some wanker who's still trying to grow outta his Pampers." Spike shook his head in disgust. "And you—"

"I haven't decided anything!" Buffy snapped. "So don't *start,* Spike! Not you, too. I swear, I can't..." She wandered off, chopping the sentence short with an abrupt jerk of the head, wiping her eyes before anyone could get another glimpse of slayer vulnerability.

It was enough. It gave him enough. She was reeling, and it was the

fire in her eyes that lent him pause. Something was off. Very off. She looked, on closer inspection, like a woman at the edge of a very steep cliff, waiting for the slightest sign to send her over. And it occurred to him that he'd just walked blind into something very personal.

Something that had nothing to do with Angelus at all, and everything to do with Buffy and her relationship with vampires. Any vampire.

And right now, Spike was the perfect target.

It didn't take much to put that together. As it was, Angelus had delighted in telling stories about the large git—Xander, his name was—and how the boy lusted after the Slayer with no thought to discretion or tact. And despite the arm-candy at his side, Spike would bet his smokes against the odds that Boy Wonder had thought to sneak his way into the Slayer's knickers in the fallout. After all, he'd been proven right about vampires, and the Slayer would need some comfort in the difficult days following her first great love's death.

What a sodding waste. As though a fumbling teenage human would ever be enough for Buffy.

"Y-yes, quite," Giles concluded, his glasses falling into a waiting handkerchief. Spike briefly entertained the idea that the old man had been spurned into the world with a bloody square of cotton sewed to his palm. The watcher was well engaged in a polish session before he continued his thought. "What news do you bring us?" he asked.

Spike paused, his eyes drifting back to Buffy. She'd reinstated her campaign to avoid eye-contact, standing now with her arms crossed, her weight shifting from one leg to the other. "Acathla," he said shortly.

Giles paled. "Acathla?"

"A-what-a?" Buffy echoed, her head darting upward briefly. Electricity flared between them when their eyes met, but the contact was so brief he barely had time to enjoy it before she was again paying attention to every nook and cranny in the library except for him. Which made it interesting, seeing as she intended to continue the conversation. "What's an...whatever you said?"

"Nasty bugger, pet."

"Acathla is a demon from ancient antiquity. The Watcher's Council actually thought him to be a fabrication until sixty years or so ago,

when more modern records of his existence were uncovered with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls." Giles shook his head incredulously. "Oh dear."

Spike nodded. "Now some museum has hold of it. Here in ole Sunnyhell. It was all over the morning paper."

Xander blinked, not even bothering to mask his surprise. "You read the paper?"

The question wasn't deserving of an answer. "But if your lot thinks reensouling the fat git is the way to go, best of luck to you." His eyes landed on Buffy again, agitation swelling in his chest. He didn't want to feel for the chit, but the lost look on her face was enough to melt the hardest of facades. It had to be hard for her. The tennis game the Powers were playing with her heart would eventually cause her to completely crash. Right now, she didn't need him around making things even more confusing for her.

Granted, why he should give a bloody damn was beyond him. The girl had had her tongue down his throat just last night, and with a little coaxing, he knew that he could have convinced her to part her legs and take his cock into her small, perfect body. If she was now tossed up because her beloved *one and only* had another undeserved shot at redemption, he had every reason to be brassed. She hadn't fought his advances. Fuck, turning away from her last night had been the hardest thing he'd ever done—forcing his ears to listen to her whispers of *no* all the while her skin hummed and the throb of her pulse told him *yes*.

"I saw Acathla this morning," Giles said softly. "The curator of the museum in question wanted my opinion."

"And what did you tell him?" the redhead demanded, her voice an octave away from summoning every dog in town. It was a wonder her mutt of a boyfriend could tolerate anything that piercing.

"'Oh dear, oh dear,' were my exact words, I believe."

The cheerleader's brown eyes widened. "Did anyone order a mass panic?"

"Acathla's missing now," the watcher concluded.

Xander wasted no time in pointing an accusatory finger at the vampire, his body trembling with disdain. "You!"

Spike's hands came up. "Oi!"

"Y-you came here to lure her into a trap!"

"How you figure? By the way I've compromised Angelus's master plan?" He rolled his eyes. "Bugger this. I'm out."

His back was already on Buffy by the time she snapped out of whatever inner debate she was entertaining. And though lead filled his boots, he refused to stop walking. Even when she called out after him. Even when she begged him to stop.

The world had already robbed him of too many things. If she thought she could have his pride on top of it all, she was in for a rude awakening.

THE ONE THING Spike didn't count on was Buffy running after him. That took moxie he hadn't thought she had. To maul him with her lips in an abandoned classroom was one thing—to leave her chums and her watcher, calling his name like he meant something to her...that was something else altogether.

It didn't mean anything, of course. The Slayer's chance had come and gone. He was through playing the perpetual whipping boy. Let her try to stop the apocalypse without him. Fuck, let her plunge Angel's soul back up the git's righteous ass—it didn't matter to him. The way Angel and the Slayer had been going at it before her cherry was popped, they'd be fortunate to get a week together before Angelus reared his ugly head again.

Might be better if he told her to bugger off once and for all. And with that thought in mind, Spike whirled around angrily, only to find himself suddenly holding an armful of Buffy, her hands on his cheeks as her mouth ravaged his. Immediately, his cock sprang to life and his anger placated. There really was no remedy for outrage like a warm Slayer tongue caressing his, her legs parting just slightly to allow his denim-clad erection solace between her heavenly thighs.

"I don't know what to do," she babbled between kisses. Her body was burning up and her eyes had pooled with tears. Her mouth nipped at his flesh with desperation that had him calculating how long it'd

take to get somewhere private if he tossed her over his shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Spike. I just don't know what to do."

"What—"

"I didn't want... God!" In a blink, she'd torn herself away from his embrace. And the sudden absence of her warmth left him frozen in ways he didn't want to consider. "I didn't mean to find it," she said, every inch of her delectable self trembling with uncertainty he knew well. "It was just there. I was studying with Willow and it was just there. What am I supposed to do? He's... I loved him so much, and I was *so ready* to kill him. I was *so ready.* If I kill him now...knowing that I could..."

She shook her head hard and forced her eyes upward, and the heartache reflected behind her tears was enough to gut the strongest of men. Any hope of escaping this without his heart twice broken died that second. Forget all talk of fucking her as means of getting past his fixation and back to the way god intended it. He'd been fooling himself, and not well, either. A man didn't weep for girls who were breaking if he only felt for her with his prick.

How had she turned his world on its hinges in just two bleeding days?

Spike sighed inwardly and cast a hand through his hair. Didn't look like it mattered *how.* He was here now. He was staring at the Slayer, whose eyes were filled with tears she'd cried for someone else. And his heart, predictably, was mush. It hurt like hell, but there was bugger all he could do about it. He wanted Buffy—this he knew—but he wanted her smiling. The pain in her eyes...

Fuck me.

"Buffy, love..."

"I know...you..." She shivered hard and crossed her arms. "I'm crazy with the mixed signals and everything. I didn't mean to...make with the lunge-y."

His tingling lips didn't mind. They just missed her warmth.

"I don't know what to do," she concluded, wiping at her eyes with a pitiful sniff. "And you...with the...kissing and the temporary not-being-my-mortal-enemy thing...my head hurts."

Spike just looked at her. His hands were tied. If he stepped forward

and caressed her aching head with his lips, he might well earn a punch in the gut. If he stood idly, she might take that as rejection and start again with the waterworks.

The only thing he could offer her was support, and that went against every innate stirring in his evil body.

Anything was better than watching her cry.

"Kitten—"

"Kendra."

Spike blinked hard. "No," he said slowly, patting his chest. "Spike."

"No, I mean—" Buffy paused, her eyes narrowing. "Doofus, behind you. Kendra."

It took a few seconds for the words to register. A few seconds that cost him dearly.

The last thing he heard, following the hard and rather underserved kick to the head, was Buffy screaming the Riot Act to the slayer behind him.

And oddly enough, as the world went black, he found that rather comforting.

9

NIGHTMARES HAUNTED EVERY SECOND OF SLEEP. HIS MIND ENACTED every gut-wrenching scenario a twisted imagination could provide. And each came in the wrapping of a golden fantasy.

He saw Buffy smiling at him. Buffy stripping for him. Buffy lying spread-eagled on his bed, her pussy slick with aching anticipation of his touch. He saw her beckon him forward. Saw her take his hand in hers and guide his fingers to her slippery folds. She moaned and bucked against his hand, played to easy orgasm and drenched his skin with her heady feminine juices. She looked at him with open, trusting eyes. She looked at him in ways that made him question his existence.

Spike had always known evil things could appreciate beauty—he'd just never found purity beautiful.

And Buffy was pure. Buffy was nothing *but* pure.

And she wasn't his. As dream faded into nightmare, as Angel strode into the room, there was nothing more singular than that knowledge. Buffy didn't belong to him. She belonged to Angel. To the memory of a soul.

"Thanks for keeping her warm for me," Angel quipped, winking. "Couldn't have done it without you."

That wasn't the kicker, though. The kicker was watching Buffy's

face break into blinding illumination. The kicker was watching her scoot over. The kicker was watching her throw her head back in pleasure as Angel's hand found her pussy.

Thankfully, that was where the nightmare ended. That was when he twisted awake, finding again that he was alone in his motel bed. That Buffy's scent lived only on the clothing she'd touched earlier when she'd kissed his lips off. That she wasn't here to taunt him with the incredible wrong turn his feelings for her had taken.

She'd decided to go with the curse. She'd helped him back to the library after talking down the incredibly brassed-off slayer. She'd tended to his bruised head with an ice pack, and told her friends she wanted to curse Angel again. Any hint of the girl who had sobbed in his arms was nowhere to be seen. Buffy acted with decisiveness. She wanted Angel back, and she'd said so while standing at Spike's side.

Her argument? It would buy them time. Time to stop Acathla. Time to figure out how to put the apocalypse on pause.

It was just a happy coincidence that the curse would bring her boyfriend back. A two-for-one deal.

Spike moaned and threw his naked legs over the side of the bed, shaking his head hard. He was such a daft git. So bloody hopeless. Get a girl to smile at him, shed a few tears, and he was no more useful than Angel on Viagra. He wanted Buffy, and Buffy wanted someone else.

Story of his life.

The sun would soon fade below the horizon, and then it would be time to move. Spike was exhausted but wide awake, tense and ready for whatever the night brought on. He hadn't been able to sleep—if it wasn't the nightmares, it was worry that she might need him.

And that, friends, is the punchline.

Buffy had robbed him of his ability to sleep through the daytime, which did little more than solidify how thoroughly buggered he was. He was a demon; he was supposed to enjoy reaping havoc while the sky was dark and sleep when the sun was up. He was supposed to be out there planning an apocalypse of his own. He was supposed to not give a bleeding fuck if Buffy wanted to shag Angel until she rotted, or how many souls she stuffed up the git's righteous arse. He was supposed to be different.

He was supposed to be so many things. Right now, the thing he focused on was the fact that he was a nocturnal creature, and he was turning arse over tit to change his habits for a girl who was probably dreaming of getting fucked sideways by another vamp.

A girl who would never dream of him.

Spike padded miserably to the bathroom sink, glaring into the mirror that refused to glare back. When had life become so sodding complicated? His plan had been simple enough. Go to the school. Talk to the Slayer. Get her to concoct a brilliant plan that involved Dru begging him to take her back as well as Angelus's dusty downfall. But that hadn't happened.

Buggering ghosts. The ghosts had turned his head and given his cock another pussy to crave. Crave beyond a fleeting fantasy—crave as he'd craved no woman before her. Before *Buffy*. And if that wasn't humiliating enough, his heart, oh so predictably, had followed suit.

He was always falling for women who were infatuated with Angelus.

Perhaps he truly was a masochist.

"My Spike flies so far away from the other children."

His eyes widened in shock, his feet twisting until he found himself staring at his maker. The motel door was wide open, and there she stood. Dru. Distant. Haunting. She held herself like a true aristocrat. Her hands were hidden behind her back, her hair pulled away from her face. She was dressed all in black.

Of course she was. The white gowns had vanished once her power was restored. The white had fooled him, played to his softer side. Made him believe that the sickly girl he saw—the one who pretended to love him to get what she wanted—could ever carry over in the rebirth of what no angry mob could destroy.

Drusilla had walked right into his motel. His neutral ground. The place he stayed that belonged neither to Angelus nor the Slayer. And she'd done so without triggering any of his senses. He hadn't even smelled her.

Odd as it was, Spike was hardly surprised. If Dru didn't want to be felt, she had ways to avoid it.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he growled, his unthinking feet carrying him to her. "And haven't you ever heard of knocking?"

"I just came to see if the stars were lying to me."

"Bloody hell, Dru, we already had this argument. I'm lost, remember?" He waved his hand. "I wanna play in sunshine? I've tasted honey and I want more? Any of this ringing any bells?"

"Only dirty boys play in the sunlight, my sweet."

He rolled his eyes. "No need to tell me that. Why don't you bugger the fuck off and head back to your cozy little apocalypse, yeah? You and Grandpap made it perfectly clear that you wanted me nowhere near the precious ceremony. And near as I can recall, I didn't invite you to keep tabs."

"Mummy looks after all her babies," Drusilla replied coyly, taking a step forward. "You were always my favorite baby, Spike."

"But nothin' more than that. Trust me, got that message loud and clear."

"Daddy worries you'll ruin everything."

Daddy ought to be more worried about the amateur witch that was brewing up a cup of soul, or at least looking at the recipe. But Spike didn't say that. He wouldn't betray Buffy. The last time anyone from her lot had tried to reensoul the wanker, a teacher lost her life. Not that Spike particularly cared if one or all of the little Scoobies had their innards ripped out—he just knew what it would do to Buffy if she lost someone else. If conjuring a curse meant sacrificing a friend.

He wouldn't betray Buffy. Not now.

Look what she's turned you into.

Not even thoughts like that could persuade him.

"If *Daddy* figured me for anything of a threat, he'd be here himself to deliver the message," Spike retorted dryly, arching a brow. "You're just here to keep me in the ranks. Make sure when the mojo starts later that I'm still standin' on your side."

Drusilla's lower lip poked out in a way that, once upon a time, would have had him weak in the knees. Not now. Seeing her now only invited irritation. "My puppy feels mistreated?"

He rolled his eyes. "Yeah. For starters, *not* a sodding puppy."

"Such a sad day it is for you, William."

"You have no bloody idea."

"You're going to help the nightingale, aren't you?" She took a step forward, her eyes now blazing with accusation. "You think she sings her song for you. She doesn't, you know. She likes the way you feed and coddle her, and she will give you a treat in the end. But her song isn't yours."

Spike flinched inwardly, but he refused to let Dru see how deep the words cut. It wasn't anything she hadn't said before. Point of fact, the very first night she'd fed him the same speech. About how Buffy didn't want him and all that rot. And while repetition didn't make the hurt vanish, it did steal some of the punch.

"Still, she had the decency to tell me that before I got involved," he countered. "Go home, Dru. You're wasting your time with me."

"I don't think so, my darling." She bit her lip coquettishly and her eyes sparkled with mischief. "Acathla awakes tonight. And you're not going to ruin the surprise party."

It was only then her arms dropped and the sword came into view. A sword. An honest-to-god *sword*. Spike barely had time to blink at it before the blade cut across his neck. Paralyzed shock hardened his body. He gasped his maker's name and reached for the wound out of instinct, baring his gut in a moment of blind weakness.

"Dru—"

She barely blinked at him before swinging again. Then the wall was pressed to his back, the sword gone all but the handle that protruded from his belly.

"My Spike wants the sunshine," she said, moving away with haunting grace. When he had the strength to glance up, she was at the window, her fingers coiled around the cord that dangled beside the cheap drapery. "Sunshine, my Spike shall have."

"Dru," he coughed, blood splattering on his lip. The sun had set, of course, and wouldn't be back for hours. But it would be eventually. And as tomorrow's day progressed, the sun would crawl deeper into the room. Until his flesh sizzled and his insides imploded. Until there was nothing left of him but dust.

The room spun.

Blood. He needed blood.

"Good night, sweet prince," Dru singsonged from the distance. "May flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."

Had he been more coherent, Spike would have asked her when she'd ever had the faculties to memorize Shakespeare.

As it was, those words were the last he heard before the world blanked out.

THREE YEARS NOW. It had been three years. Three years since Merrick approached her on the steps of Hemery High School. Three years since she dusted her first vampire. Three years since her first Big Bad.

Three years since her first dead body.

It never became simple. She was never able to detach herself from the faces of those she failed to save. She still cried herself to sleep every night she had to wash blood off her hands. The twenty-second victim wasn't easier to bury than the twenty-first. The body count seemed to follow her no matter where she went or how far she ran.

Buffy had buried strangers, classmates, and teachers. She'd stood at Giles's side as Jenny Calendar was lowered into the earth.

She'd never gazed on the lifeless face of a friend. And even though the body was gone, it didn't make her tremble any less. It didn't quell the sickness in her stomach. The image was frozen in her mind. When she closed her eyes, she saw it again and again. There was no escape.

There was little difference from what she'd seen a few hours ago. Before she'd kicked herself free of police custody and torn away in desperation. The library was still a disaster. Bookshelves remained toppled. Incense and herbs remained scattered. Giles's weapons cabinet was still empty. Blood spots still stained the floor.

And then there was Kendra.

Kendra.

Kendra wasn't here anymore, of course, but she had been just a few short hours ago. She'd lain on the floor, her bleeding neck bent at a heartbreakingly awkward angle. Her eyes closed. She hadn't breathed.

Of course she hadn't breathed. Dead people didn't breathe.

Angel had told her. Warned her that she was stupid for thinking

everything was always about her. He was right. She hated that he was right. She'd stood beside her friend's dead body because he was right. Because he'd dangled a shot at confronting him in front of her face and she'd leaped at it without thinking. Without waiting. God, without even waiting for Spike.

Spike. *Spike.* Where was Spike?

Buffy stood in the empty library, surrounded by the sad remnants of the attempt to stuff Angel's soul back down his throat. Everything was gone. Wasted. Xander didn't know where Giles was. Willow was recuperating in a hospital room. Cordelia had taken off and was probably halfway to Vegas by now.

There was no Spike. Spike hadn't shown.

Xander had a theory on that. He said Spike had set them all up. Spike had ratted them out. Buffy had argued it was impossible for Spike to rat them out when he hadn't known the plan. She hadn't seen him since last night—hadn't talked with him since bidding him farewell and sneaking a quick kiss in the hallway. After worrying over the bruise on his forehead—the bruise Kendra hadn't, and now never would, apologized for giving him—he'd rolled to his feet, told her he'd see her tomorrow, and left.

Kendra was dead. Willow was in the hospital. Giles was missing. And Spike was gone.

I can't do this alone.

She exhaled slowly, her eyes landing on the sword Kendra had abandoned on the conference table. The sword Buffy had kicked a cop—one holding her at gunpoint, no less—to retrieve.

In the end, you're always by yourself. You're all you've got.

Buffy shivered. The twerp from Giles's apartment might have been right, but it didn't mean she had to take it with a smile and a nod. Angel hadn't mentioned Spike. Xander had even begrudgingly confessed the peroxided vampire hadn't been anywhere in sight during the raid.

If Spike had been a part of it, Angel would have rubbed it in her face. She just knew he would have.

Something was wrong. Something was very wrong.

She needed Spike. She might be destined to always be alone, but it

didn't mean she had to sit down and accept it. If Spike was still alive, she needed him. He would help her. He would help her save Giles. He would help her save the world.

She wasn't about to lose anyone else. Not tonight.

She would find Spike. She'd find him and kiss him until he was glad he didn't need to breathe. Then they'd find Giles and stop Angel. They would.

But she wouldn't lose him. Not Giles. Not Spike. She wouldn't lose anyone else.

Not without dying first.

10

SPIKE WAS DEAD.

Buffy stood frozen in the open doorway. She didn't know how long she'd been there. Time had stopped ticking the second her shadow crossed the threshold. Nothing about the room seemed real. Not the turned-down bed. Not the bags of blood scattered across the window-table. Not the crucified vampire pinned to the far wall.

Spike was dead.

Oh my God.

It was the most horrifying thing she'd ever seen. Beyond every body she'd found drained. Every familiar face she'd had to bury. Spike was full of life—always full of life. He was someone she knew—someone who was not dead to her and never had been. He was her enemy. He was her reluctant ally. He was someone she really enjoyed kissing. He was...

God, he was dead.

Buffy sniffed hard and wiped at her eyes. When had she started crying? She hadn't been here long enough to cry. And yet, her cheeks were damp with cold tears. She wasn't sobbing. She wasn't whimpering. She just stood in the doorway and looked at him, crying silent tears.

Spike was dead.

It had happened hours ago—she was certain. He was pale. He was so pale. Paler than a vampire—paler than any corpse she'd ever seen. His white skin melted seamlessly into the white wall behind him. He looked like a snow angel—a snow angel splattered with blood.

He was naked. She wondered why he was naked. Perhaps he'd been here with someone. Perhaps they'd had fun. Perhaps...

No. She knew that wasn't true. Fifteen years of living under her father's roof had educated her childish eyes in the differences between recently-slept-in and recently-fucked-in beds. Spike had just awoken, most likely, when this happened to him. When he had been nailed to the wall with a sword.

It had happened hours before. Hours before Kendra was murdered. Perhaps, even, hours before the fumbled confrontation with Angel in the graveyard. The confrontation that had turned out to be a diversion. A diversion planned and executed to render her completely and utterly alone.

God, she was so foolish. Of course Angel and Dru knew about Spike. Of course they did. Spike wasn't staying at a motel because he wanted to. He'd told her as much when he'd scribbled the room number onto the sticky-note he found in her backpack. She was so *stupid* for thinking they would leave him be—that her friends would be the only ones they targeted.

How odd that her last memory of Spike would be his handing her a note. The note with his room number. How her eyes had watched his lips and wished they could go back to the part where they were making out. He'd handed her something that could have saved his life had she used her brain, and she'd forgotten it because of his mouth.

"Oh Spike..."

The second the words touched the air, everything became real. It was real. And that was all it took for Buffy to break. She couldn't leave him like that. She couldn't. He meant too much to her; he was her vampire, dammit, and she wouldn't leave him crucified. Not when she was the reason he was gone. Not when his alliance with her had cost his life.

Not when she had feelings for him she hadn't gotten a chance to explore. Feelings she was too terrified to give credence. Feelings that

had allowed her to shake the shadow of her relationship with Angel off her heels, and given her the strength to acknowledge what she had to do.

She didn't love Spike, but he was *hers*. He was completely hers. He was hers to fight. Hers to kill. Hers to kiss until she couldn't feel her lips. It was his fault—he'd thrown it in with her, and she cared about him. She hadn't wanted to, but he'd made it impossible to look the other way. He'd held her when she cried. He hadn't mocked her weakness. He'd been there for her the way no one else had, or could have been.

And now he was gone, and it was her fault.

All her fault.

Choking back a sob, Buffy's numb legs took tentative steps forward, her eyes never leaving his body. His throat had been slit, trailing rivers of blood down his chest. The handle of the sword had staunched the heaviest blood-flow, but a growing pool of red still soaked his lower body. He was so still. So still.

Vampires were never still. Vampires didn't die and leave a body behind. Why hadn't Giles told her that vampires could bleed to death?

An inhuman cry scratched at her throat. She needed to get him down.

"I'm so sorry, Spike," she whispered, her vision blurring. Her fingers closed around the slippery handle.

God. His blood was on her skin.

Buffy shivered and shook the thought aside, instead throwing her weight behind her arm and tugging at the sword as hard as she could. A sickening sound spilled into the air, the movement reenergizing the blood flow. Her stomach turned and bile rose in her throat, but she wasn't about to stop on account of squeamishness. She owed Spike more than that. So much more.

It took both hands—the sword was too-far buried in his stomach. She ignored the sound of metal sliding against organs and ripped flesh; she ignored the red river that waterfalled down his snow-white skin. She ignored everything until the sword was free, until Spike's body collapsed in a lifeless heap to the floor.

"Oh god!" Buffy cried, blinking away another wave of tears. The

sword tumbled from her hands as her knees crashed to the floor, taking him into her trembling arms. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to...I just had to get it out. I didn't mean to—"

And then something happened. Something that stopped her heart.

It was nearly inaudible, but it was there.

A moan.

The gasp that crushed her chest would have killed her if she'd been anything but a slayer. Buffy's eyes widened, and she grasped Spike's cold shoulders with shaking hands. "Spike?" she whispered. "Oh my god, are you..."

Another moan. Louder this time.

"Oh god. Oh my god. Oh god."

Buffy was on her feet in a blink, Spike in her arms. She didn't know, exactly, how to bring a vampire back from the edge of death, but she'd be damned if she didn't try. Her feet carried her instinctively toward the bathroom where her trembling arms lowered him into the tub. She'd seen this in movies—people splashing water on the unconscious. Or dragging drunks into the shower because water had some sort of healing ailment that brought others from the brink of delirium. Was that even true? Her mom had never tried it with her father. She'd always just let him sleep it off. What if it worked on people but not vampires?

There were only so many options.

It was always cold water in the movies, but he was already so cold. He'd felt like ice against her fingers and she wasn't about to make him colder. Instead, she turned the faucet on at full heat and stepped back, crossing her arms nervously. Trying hard to ignore the anxious shivers that clamored her insides and made it near impossible to stand still.

Her eyes were drawn irrevocably to the gaping hole in his stomach. How could anyone, human or not, walk away from that?

She didn't know. She thought she'd known everything about vampires but she didn't know this. If he was still alive, would he have that hole in his gut for the rest of forever? That permanent, ugly reminder of what his relationship with her had cost him? God, what if he woke up and wanted to tear her throat out? What if...

Spike moaned again.

Buffy's wide eyes shot to his face. "Spike?" she ventured breathlessly. "Oh god, please."

But that was all. That was all. Nothing happened after that.

Maybe she'd been wrong about the hot water. Maybe it was cold water that held the magical remedy. Buffy lurched forward, desperation charging her veins, and switched the faucet back to cold.

And waited.

And waited.

The tub was filling. The water was turning red. Spike didn't moan again.

He needs blood.

Where the thought came from, she didn't know. But it remained, niggling at her subconscious as her eyes soaked him in. Spike's hauntingly pale body. Spike immersed in a bath of blood-water. Spike not moving.

Not moving.

And suddenly, she knew what to do. There was blood in the motel. There was bagged blood on the front table. On that crappy table every motel on the planet offered its patrons. He had blood. He had *bagged* blood. He had blood.

She had to get him blood.

Buffy twisted on her heel. She was just a second too fast to witness Spike's eyes pop open. To see them blaze with amber as his fangs descended.

But she did hear his growl, and her feet promptly turned to cement.

The next thing she knew, his hands were on her and she was in the tub with him. His eyes were yellow. There was nothing hinting at recollection on his face—there was only a feral blaze of hunger.

She was too startled to think about kicking him away. Her mind was suddenly vacant—all she knew was his name.

"Spike?"

It was the last sound to touch the air before his fangs pierced her flesh.

II

EXT

Spike was no novice to slayer blood. From the second he'd tasted it in China, he'd dedicated his life to chasing it down. Slayer's blood was the ultimate trophy, and he was determined, in this contest, to always stand victor. To have this be one thing that he did better than anyone.

He'd tasted slayer blood before, but it had never tasted like this.

It had never tasted so...

Mine.

Her blood was his. She tasted thoroughly *his*. Beyond championing her death—beyond earning his chalice—the blood in his mouth belonged to him. His life had been a series of steps to reach this moment. To hold her in his arms and claim what was his. No matter that he didn't remember how he'd gotten here, or whom he was holding—all he knew was it was right. His journey could end now because he'd tasted his purpose.

Mine, the demon purred. *She's mine.*

Spike murmured contentedly around mouthfuls. The demon was right. There had never been a more perfect moment.

A name then. He remembered her name.

Buffy.

Buffy moaned and wiggled. Buffy tried to shove him off, but the demon wouldn't be denied. Buffy couldn't hold him from what was his.

"Spike!" someone sobbed, her voice tearing with pain and drenched in unshed tears. "Please! No, oh god, please!"

Please. Please. It was a word he'd come to know well over the last century.

"Please!"

Spike blinked wearily. The shapeless forms around him were beginning to realign. He was in a tub. He was immersed in steamy water. His body was battered but not broken. He had Buffy in his arms and his fangs in her throat.

He had *Buffy's* blood in his mouth.

Spike's eyes shot open and his fangs retracted immediately. Buffy's blood. Her slayer's blood. He was naked in the tub and she was in his arms. She was...

"Buffy!" he gasped, shaking his bumpies away, panic charging his veins. Buffy's blood. He'd tasted *Buffy's* blood. His tongue was bathed in Buffy's blood. He pressed a shaking hand against her torn neck, his hazed mind racing to catch up with logic and reason. Buffy's blood coated his throat. What in god's name had happened here? "Buffy, oh god...I didn't mean to. I didn't—"

Thankfully, she hadn't been weakened to the point of battling consciousness. Perhaps he hadn't taken as much as he'd thought. He didn't know and he wasn't about to fire off any questions. For the moment, he just needed to make sure she was all right. Explanations could come later.

What she said, though, had him trembling for completely different reasons.

"It's all right," she said, waving dismissively, her hand settling over his at her throat.

"Are you okay? Bloody hell, baby, I didn't mean—"

She blinked blearily. "It...you didn't take too much. A few mouthfuls. Just...felt like..."

"My god—"

"It was my fault, really."

He would have been knocked off his feet had he not already been sitting. "What?"

"You don't remember?"

"Remember..."

His mind was racing, eager to fill in the gaps. In easy seconds, everything came rushing back. Dru. Dru had been here. Dru had cut his throat. Dru had run him through with a sword. Dru had nailed him to the wall and left him for dead. She'd raised the curtains in the room so the sun would finish the job come morning if his body hadn't drained of blood before then.

Now he was in the bath. Buffy was in his arms. Buffy was bleeding.

Buffy had saved his life.

Spike exhaled slowly, his bleary gaze taking her in. She might have been hell run over, but fuck if she wasn't as beautiful as ever before. Sitting there in bath water, her hand over his. Her hair was tousled. Her eyes were tired. There was dirt on her skin. She shook beneath his fingers, and though she bled because of him, there was no condemnation in her eyes. She looked almost...relieved.

Relieved?

"You remember now, don't you?" she asked weakly, her fingers slowly moving over his where he held her bleeding neck. "You remember what happened?"

"I don't remember you, kitten," Spike replied, cringing and reaching for his own throat with his free hand. He remembered being cut, but the damaged skin had already begun to heal. "Nothing after you got here."

A small, near heartbreaking smile crossed her face. "I don't imagine you would."

"What..." His hand dropped without ceremony to his gut, his fingers grazing the sore patch of skin which had already formed over what would have been a nasty scar. He had slayer's blood to thank for that. Slayer's blood had strength charging his body. Had him itching with a need to pay his maker back for what she'd done to him, and take Angelus down in the process. Buffy's blood had saved his life, and he couldn't remember a lick of it.

Buffy's eyes followed his hand, widening in shock. "Holy hell!"

"Yeah—"

"That's impossible! That sword ran you all the way through! There's no way..." She broke off with an abrupt jerk of her head, the hand at her neck dropping to his stomach and batting his away. "There's no way this—"

"Slayer—"

"It takes me at *least* a day to heal a cut that's maybe two inches deep. How in god's name—"

"Your blood, love." He hated the look on her face—the look those words inspired. "It's your blood. Your...slayer's blood...it's the sodding holy grail for us. For vampires. Tasting you...just a drop could bring any vamp back from the edge of death. I got good a chunk of you."

And amazingly, the knowledge didn't come with pleasure. It didn't come with a grin and a snappy remark. It didn't come with pride. Hell, it didn't even come with the urge to sink his fangs into her throat and finish what he started. He'd tasted his second slayer—the most powerful slayer he'd ever known—and he couldn't gloat. Couldn't even work up a grin that he knew what she tasted like. He couldn't summon anything but remorse.

Because he'd hurt her. He'd hurt her, and that bothered him. He was too far beyond caring why it bothered him. He knew he was hopeless for her and was exhausted from fighting it. And Christ, with her blood in his body, fighting his feelings for her was nothing short of a disgrace. She'd given him a gift, willing or not. She was in his gut, in his throat, and he was drowning in her.

That particular acknowledgment made his life a whole lot easier and a hell of a lot more complicated in one bloody blink. At least now he could stop fighting his feelings.

All he had to do now was live with the knowledge that he was falling in love with another woman who could never love him back.

"My blood...did that?" she whispered, her fingers grazing his tender skin. "I...how—"

Of course, his feelings for her coupled with the fact that he was feeling much better than Buffy realized had his body reacting in a very inappropriate way. The Slayer was sitting in a tub with him, her hands on his belly, and he was naked. He was naked, revved with the most

powerful aphrodisiac on the planet's face, and the hands of the woman his cock wanted like no other were on his body.

His cock was not in the mood to ignore that. And his demon was no longer hungry for blood. His demon wanted Buffy. All of Buffy. Right now.

Buffy knew that he wanted her, of course. She'd felt his erection against her before. She'd torn his lips off with her own. The only sense that came in hiding himself now was wrapped in self-preservation. There was softness in her eyes right now unlike anything he'd seen before and he wanted to keep it that way.

"Bring any vamp back from the point of death," he said again, praying she wouldn't glance down or nudge his erection. "Though I don't think I was—"

The shadow that crossed her face promptly silenced him. She looked, for all the world, as though she was reliving a horrid memory. It awed him to feel her trembling. "No," Buffy whispered, her voice haunted. "No, you really...I...I thought you were dead, Spike. I thought you'd bled to death or...well, that's stupid, I guess. I guess vampires can't bleed to death."

"Wouldn't know, pet. Though I'm more of a believer now than I was yesterday."

"I pulled the sword out and you made a noise, so I dragged you in here. I was about to go get the blood in the other room when you... made with the lunge-y."

He winced inwardly. "I didn't mean—"

Buffy shook her head abruptly and rose to her feet before he could blink. "Doesn't matter," she said dismissively. "You're okay. That's what matters." A pause. "Kendra's dead."

Spike would have liked to think, for Buffy's sake, that he would have been more inclined to care had the bint not kicked him unconscious the night before, but it was a lie. Kendra was a slayer and he was still a vampire—dead slayers were good news, as far as he was concerned.

As long as Buffy wasn't the dead slayer in question.

He didn't offer condolences he didn't feel. Instead, he nodded somberly and asked, "How?"

"Drusilla."

Something hard crashed in his chest, and at once, he was both filled with pride and hatred. And hatred was something he'd never thought to feel for Dru, regardless how their story played out.

Thankfully, the Slayer didn't let him stew for long. She gracefully stepped out of the tub, ignoring the water that dripped from her soaking clothes even if she couldn't ignore how it made her tremble. For his part, Spike was having a time trying to avoid staring at her nipples. Bloody hard task when they insisted on saluting him through her ridiculously thin excuse for a top.

"They have Giles," she said, her voice firm even if he knew her will was not. "Angel and Dru. We have to go."

Spike blinked. It was one thing if a slayer had been killed—now his girl's mentor had been watcher-napped? What the sodding hell had he missed?

"Slayer—"

"It was an ambush. It started today—this afternoon. Angel wanted me cut off completely." She shivered, reached for the towel rack and tossed one to him before giving thought to herself. "No friends. No watcher. No...you. He sent a lackey to one of my classes today and I was stupid enough to fall for it."

"What the hell are you—"

"Angel lured me out so I wouldn't be there to...Willow was doing the curse. Kendra was with them, so I thought they'd be okay." Buffy's eyes fell shut, toweling her hair dry without once turning to the mirror. She didn't even bother to check the wound he'd left on her throat. "They weren't. Angel had me out there and in the meantime, Dru was raiding the library. Now Giles is gone and I don't know if... And Willow's in the hospital."

"You went out to face Angel without coming to *me* first?" Spike demanded. "Are you outta your mind?"

"I'm not exactly used to tag-teaming my *saving of the world,* Spike. I just wanted it to be over." She held up a hand, effectively silencing the waiting retort on his lips. "I know. I know, I know. A thousand times over. I'm a moron. Okay? And because of that, I've lost...I've lost my friend, my watcher, and when I came here, I was terrified I'd

lost you, too." She paused. "Can we just save the world now and reflect on how very stupid I am when we're back to being mortal enemies?"

Spike couldn't help but grin. Lovely sentiment as it was, he didn't reckon now was the time to tell Buffy they would never be mortal enemies again. He didn't have warm feelings for enemies. He didn't want to *make love* to enemies. Fuck silly, maybe, but not *make love*. And while he wouldn't mind fucking Buffy blind a time or two, the dominant urge was for the former.

For the moment, though, she could think what she liked.

"You bloody well nearly did," he said the next second. "Lose me, I mean." And god help him, but the knowledge that losing him had her *terrified* made him feel as good as a bloke could after his insane ex had run him through with a very pointy sword. "Dru visited me here earlier."

Buffy froze. "The sword?"

"Her handiwork."

"Oh my god."

Spike shrugged with a nonchalance he didn't feel. No matter how things had ended between them, Dru's dust was never something he would have sought. He was through with her, yes, but killing her would have meant killing a part of himself. The part of him she'd saved from mediocrity and helped shape into the man he was today. And while coming to terms with the heartbreaking knowledge that she'd never loved him at all had promised to cripple him, he knew he could move on.

Now he wasn't sure he *didn't* want her dust. His doubt had him thoroughly shaken.

"Spike," Buffy said softly, stepping forward. "I'm so sorry. I—"

He held up a hand. "Don't bother," he said shortly, wrapping the towel around his waist. "Let's get you some dry clothes. If we're gonna save this watcher of yours, we better—"

"You really are going to help me?" she whispered, her eyes bright.

Spike's eyes narrowed. Aside from the fact he was more or less Buffy's bitch, he bloody well wasn't going to sit back and let Angelus destroy the world. He sure as hell wasn't going to let Dru think she

could get away with trying to off him. And if saving the Slayer's watcher would make her smile at him, he'd do it over and over again.

As it was, Spike was in her debt. She'd given him her blood. Perhaps not willingly, but she'd given it.

"Of course I'm gonna bloody help you," he said shortly. "That was the deal from the beginning, right?"

"I didn't think—"

"Buffy, you just pried me from a sodding wall and brought me back from what you *swore* was the brink of nothing. If that doesn't make me *yours,* I don't know what does." Spike cleared his throat and tightened the towel around his waist, doing his best to ignore the eager bob of his cock at the hint of how very much *hers* he'd become. "You want to save your watcher? Stop arguing with me and go get your biteable arse into something warm."

"I don't—"

"Top drawer."

Spike swore softly when she finally crossed into the other room, leaving him alone with a tub-full of water and blood that belonged to them both.

This was going to kill him. He wasn't sure it hadn't already.

Dru had tried to end him. Buffy had saved his life. It was Buffy he wanted in his bed and Dru whose life he no longer cared about.

This stupid town had turned his life upside down.

And something told him it was only the beginning.

12

"Drink this."

"I said I'm fine."

Spike rolled his eyes and shoved the glass of orange juice fully under her nose. "I don't sodding care if you feel well enough to tap-dance on a forklift, you're gonna drink this bloody juice if I have to pour it down your throat."

Buffy arched a brow, her gorgeous eyes sparkling with amusement. God, a man could lose himself so easily in those eyes. After this rot about the apocalypse was in the past, Spike was definitely going to take Buffy-gazing up as his favorite hobby. She was so glorious, so *wonderfully* glorious in everything she did. Every sodding move she made took his proverbial breath away.

"Bossy McBossy," she replied, accepting the proffered juice with a feigned sigh.

"I drank your blood."

"A fact I'm well aware of, considering it was my blood."

"And I've been around long enough to know you need sweets once you've donated." He held up a hand at the burning question flashing across her face. "Don't bloody fight with me."

"Sorry," she cracked unapologetically, shrugging. "It's against my nature."

Any other night and he would've gotten a brilliant kick out of her jesting. This was the sort of camaraderie which had him falling in love with her in the first place. She'd grown so used to being around him in such a short period of time—whether she wanted to acknowledge as much or not was another question. But for the way she sparred with him, verbally and with that piece of walking poetry she called a body, his insides filled with just enough hope to keep him afloat amidst troubled waters.

"Just drink," he said, determined to betray nothing.

"The words *slayer healing* really mean nothing to you, do they?" Buffy replied dryly, arching a brow as she lifted the glass to her lips. If he didn't know better he'd swear she was relishing this.

"Not when we're about to go up against your wanker of an ex and my sword-happy sire, not to mention Angelus's brainwashed apostles."

She snorted appreciatively. "Don't tell me you're intimidated," she replied, shaking her head. "But I suppose there's nothing wrong with being at full strength."

Spike smiled gently but didn't reply. There wasn't much time to waste in the seclusion of Buffy's home, but the longer they stayed, the less inclined he was to leave. While he appreciated the severity of the situation around them, he was increasingly convinced Buffy *wasn't* ready.

Oh, she could take Angelus out. There was no doubt there. The conviction in her eyes was unlike anything he'd ever seen, but god, her body was so worn. Perhaps she was immune to recognizing her own limitations, but she couldn't hide the exhaustion in her eyes. Not from him. He'd tasted her blood now—he had a part of her inside him. He'd tasted her power and as a result, he knew her strength.

And because of that, he *did* know her limitations. He could see them clearly because they were not his own. Buffy was tired. Not just physically—physical exhaustion was manageable. Buffy was worn by every feasible stretch of the definition. And Angelus would know it. He'd know the second her scent hit the air.

However, it wasn't likely Angelus would be open to postponing the

apocalypse on account of white-hat exhaustion. It was very much now or never, but that didn't mean Spike had to like it. He was too worried about Buffy to give a damn about logic or rationality. In the state she was in, she'd be lucky to be a blip on Angelus's radar.

Buffy sipped her orange juice, a long sigh rolling off her shoulders. "Happy?" she asked.

"Over the bloody moon, kitten."

She made an adorable face which he would have kissed right off her lips were they not pressed for time and suffocating under the heavy burden of the looming apocalypse. "I don't like orange juice," she complained.

"I'm not particularly fond of pig's blood, but it didn't stop me from draining three bags, now did it?"

Buffy's eyes narrowed. "Not the same thing."

"So says you," he scoffed.

"Well, beyond the obvious factors of yuck, you were all but drained."

Spike shuddered, his gut aching on prompt. Yes, he had nearly been drained, and were it not for the fiery woman sitting on the kitchen counter, he might not be standing where he was. Fuck, chances were he wouldn't be standing at all. Either his blood would have drained completely and he would have withered away, or the sun would have finished him off.

Buffy's blood had given him life. He was forever in her debt.

"Same could be said for you," he countered softly, then clarified when she shot him a questioning glance, "Drained, and all."

She rolled her eyes. "How many times do I have to tell you I'm fine?"

"Dunno. Let's find out." Spike arched a brow pointedly and nodded at the glass in her hand. "Drink up."

"This is crazy."

He grinned and shrugged. "Welcome, friends, to the show that never ends."

"You lost *way* more blood than I did."

"I had your blood to make it up for me. And, again, it didn't stop me from drinking more." Spike paused. "This is a pointless argument,

love. I'm right, you're wrong, t'was ever thus. Drink the sodding juice."

Buffy hesitated a beat, but her eyes were dancing. "Well, as long as we're concerned with my blood sugar, you might wanna get me a poptart," she replied sweetly, waving with her free hand. "Second cabinet on the right."

He arched a brow but did as she instructed, unable to hide his grin when his back was to her. "You need to be at full strength if we're gonna do this thing," he said, fishing out a pack of brown sugar pastries from the open box in the cupboard. "Angelus isn't one to fuck with half-mass."

"Kinky," she replied with a smirk, catching the individualized poptarts-package off his toss.

Spike fought off another grin. If he kept smiling at how bloody cute she was, she'd never take him seriously. He could appreciate the need to ward off reality with humor and deflection, but she couldn't afford to ignore the danger looming around them. Buffy had placed a lot of stock into Spike's help, and while her faith was something he didn't take lightly, no amount of wishing could change the fact he was still just one vamp. He'd dust at her side if it meant keeping her alive, but if he met his maker before the apocalypse was averted, she'd have no one to rely on but herself.

Granted, if they got out of this alive, it wasn't like their problems were over. Buffy had this crazy notion in her head that things were going to revert back to the way they'd been before. Before the ghosts at her school had pitted them against each other. Before he'd gotten a taste of her soft lips. Before he'd felt the heat of her skin and dreamed of how her hot pussy would feel around his cock.

Before he'd started falling in love with her.

He didn't know what it was going to take to convince her tonight was the end of Angelus and Angelus alone. Whatever they shared—whatever was happening between them—was only beginning.

"What happens when this is over?" Buffy asked, startling him with the sudden seriousness in her tone. Either she was amazingly attuned to his every thought and concern or this was weighing on her mind more than she betrayed. And honestly, for either of their sakes, he

wasn't sure which he preferred. "When Angel's dust and...what happens?"

The unspoken question dwarfed her actual words, but he wasn't about to make things easy for her. "Not sure I follow, love."

Buffy sighed and took a quick bite of her poptart. "I don't think... no, I know...and telling you this is probably the dumbest thing I could do, but I can't go into this thing without knowing what's going to happen next."

"Slayer—"

"I can't go back to the way things were, Spike. I know... I've talked about it and joked about it and pretended it's gonna happen but I can't..." She broke off. "I can't go from...from, well, this..." She motioned between them. "To wanting you dead again. If I have to kill Angel and then...turn around and kill you, too...it's going to break me. I can't turn off whatever I'm feeling like a switch or something."

Spike inhaled sharply, barely daring to hope. "Your feelings?"

"You know things have changed," she replied, her eyes narrowing as she shifted, placing the poptart on the counter beside her. "I don't make out with men at random."

"I should bloody well hope not."

"And..." Buffy trailed off on a long sigh. "Well, I don't know. I don't know anything anymore. Except I don't want to kill Angel if it means things go back...and then I have to kill you, too." A still beat settled between them. "But if I...if I *had* to... God, please don't make me, Spike. Don't make me—"

He frowned. It'd been cute at first—this line of completely erroneous thinking—but if the chit was actually serious, they really needed to work on their communication skills. "You think I could go back from this to wantin' to kill you?"

Buffy frowned. "I thought...I don't know. I thought you and Dru—"

Oh bloody hell. Was she serious? Did she really think so little of him?

"Are you completely daft?" Spike demanded, eyes blazing. "Dru tried to *kill* me."

"Well," she replied, her tone cautious, "you're a vampire."

Spike's brow furrowed, irritation surging through his veins. "And I'd wager you thought attempted murder between lovers—"

She threw her hands in the air. "I don't know what I thought. I don't know how any of this works or what vampire couples consider normal. Hell, I thought you guys were all about the kinky."

"Sweetheart, there's a big bloody difference between enjoying a rough shag to trying to kill your..." His voice faded, inhaling deeply. First thing after the apocalypse was averted, he was going to take Buffy somewhere secluded and perfect her education on vampires. She had some entertaining delusions, granted, but he didn't want her developing a complex when, in actuality, she was the sort of woman who inspired complexes in others. There wouldn't be another for him after this. He wanted Buffy—just as she was. "I admit," he continued carefully. "Dru can make things a little unclear. There were a few times over the years when her sex games got so bloody, you'd wonder if she wasn't really aiming to off you good and proper."

Buffy wrinkled her nose. Yeah, he probably could have done a better job of phrasing that. "Nice girlfriend you've got there, Spike," she drawled.

"Well, when you love someone—"

"You let them beat you bloody?"

"Oi! Don't knock it."

Spike swore inwardly the second the words left his lips. He was just digging himself deeper, but now it was more a matter of defending his character. Truth be told, while he'd never objected to whatever Drusilla wanted to do in the bedroom, he'd never shared her affinity for sadism. Never. Spike preferred his sex fairly straight forward—rough or gentle, depending on his mood. But despite that, he'd never wanted to deny his savior anything. If she wanted him to bleed, he'd bleed for her.

"Sorry," Buffy retorted, her brows arching. "I just really don't see the appeal."

"We're off the bloody point anyway," Spike replied. "Dru tried to kill me. That's not somethin' you just...forgive and forget."

She licked her lips and grew very still. "I...I thought you loved her."

So did he. It was amazing how much could change in such a short amount of time. How much a goddess of light could drown out any

want for a princess of darkness. How he could watch this tiny human with such adoration when, not too long ago, he would have withered at the idea of leaving Dru—no matter how much she'd hurt him.

Things had changed. Things had drastically changed. He could no more harm a hair on Buffy's head than he could take a daylight stroll.

There was no good way to convey his feelings about his sire to the woman he'd unwittingly fallen in love with. While his love for Drusilla had withered away to nothing more than a shadow of gratitude, he could never completely strike her from his heart. He owed Drusilla his existence, but for the first time, he felt he'd finally repaid his debt. And while he would always remain grateful to her for introducing him to the night, the wealth of what he'd once felt had deflated into almost nothing.

Dru had tried to kill him. *Really* tried to kill him. There was no forgiving that.

"What I had with Dru is over," Spike said, watching her intently. Was she really so oblivious to how gorgeous she was? How painful it was to be this close to her without touching her? Without nibbling on those succulent lips and exploring the forbidden contours of her body with his eager hands? He wanted to touch her so badly. He wanted to feel her skin beneath his fingers and drown in her kisses. He wanted her to cleanse him of Drusilla's poison and bathe him with glory only this slayer possessed.

"I don't know what that means," Buffy replied a long minute later. "So...you and Dru are of the past. But Dru being out of your life doesn't make you any less a vampire, Spike."

A long sigh tore off his lips and his shoulders slumped. And that was the sodding problem, wasn't it? He should have known the entire *evil* thing would arise at some point to nip him in the arse.

"What I am, Slayer," he said carefully, "is yours."

Buffy froze. "What?"

"I'm yours. There's...god, pet, there's no sodding way for me to go back after this." He shook his head, shaking harder than he wanted to admit. "I didn't plan it. This...this thing we have. Whatever it is."

"Whatever it is?"

Spike arched an eyebrow. If she wanted to be the first to verbally

define their relationship, she was welcome to it. But they were both licking their wounds right now—they were both trying to find themselves. And while he knew he wanted Buffy beyond the shadow of a doubt, he wasn't about to pressure her into the same realization. Not right now. Not on the eve of the apocalypse her ex-honey had orchestrated. Not when she was so miserably lost.

Perhaps his advanced age gave him perspective. Or perhaps he'd been prepared to walk away from Drusilla all along. He didn't know.

It was easy to forget, given everything she'd been through, that Buffy was all of seventeen years old. Things at seventeen seemed endless. He remembered being seventeen all too well, and he'd never thought anything could last forever as much as he had in his adolescence. Not even after Dru found him sniveling in the alleyway. Teenagers thought of forever in ways demons never could. And while Spike had thought his life with Dru would be forever, time and experience had rounded the corners of expectation.

Without Buffy, things would be different. Without Buffy, he never would have realized what he could have in comparison to what he did. Without Buffy, he'd be a wallowing mess of devastation.

But there was no *without Buffy*. She was right with him, and he was walking away from his old life by choice. Dru wasn't leaving him—he'd left her. And he'd left her with the knowledge his heart belonged to someone else. It'd happened fast, yes, but he'd never been more certain of anything in his life.

Never more certain of anything. He had absolutely no idea how it'd happened, but it had. And if Buffy thought she could shake him off after this was over, she was sorely mistaken.

Buffy wet her lips when she realized he wasn't going to make anything easy on her, her eyes dropping to her lap. "Spike—"

"I'm yours." He had the idea the words were frightening her, but with the threat of the apocalypse breathing down his neck, he didn't care. If nothing else happened—should the worst come crashing down—he wanted her to know he was at her side. He wanted her to know to whom he belonged. "I'm yours."

His fingers slid just under her chin, his palms cupping her jaw as his lips brushed hers. It'd been too long since he'd kissed her. Since he'd

had her taste in his mouth. Since he'd felt her hot tongue licking his. He loved the way her lips moved, the way she whimpered as though her control was about to be compromised. She was light. She was innocence personified. She was everything he wasn't and everything he wanted.

"Buffy," he murmured against her lips, soaking in her warmth.

"Uhhh..."

Just one more taste. One more...

It wasn't to be. He leaned in for seconds only to be interrupted by the crash of the front door as it flew open. Buffy jumped and shoved him back, and while he knew she wasn't acting out of shame, the sudden force in her movements couldn't help but sting.

Perhaps it was fortunate he wasn't given the chance to dwell on the matter.

"Buffy! Buffy, are you here?"

The Slayer's head jerked up, her eyes fixing on his in the manner of an animal staring down the headlights of an oncoming truck. He knew it was her mum without needing clarification—one didn't tend to forget the voice of a woman wielding an ax, especially if she had a famous daughter. He reckoned by the look on Buffy's face that she hadn't given her mum a moment's thought since toddling off for school. When would she have had time? Today had started with a flaming vamp-memo from her ex and had yet to end. This was just the intermission. There was no time for mums.

"I'm in here, Mom!"

Before Spike could blink, Joyce Summers had barreled into the kitchen, her wide suspicious eyes drinking in the scene before her. He could only imagine what she saw. Her daughter in a blood-stained shirt standing beside a strange man. Well, not entirely strange, but Spike had the distinct memory of being in game face and under a chunk of wall the last time he and the woman had made eye contact. He didn't expect to be recognized.

"Are you all right?" Joyce demanded. "You're not hurt?"

Buffy's hands came up. "I'm fine."

The woman's eyes fell to the blood on her shirt. "Whose is that?"

She didn't bother waiting for a response, shaking her head resolutely. "You're not fine. We need to—"

"Wouldn't worry," Spike said without thinking, wincing inwardly when Joyce's head snapped in his direction. He really would have preferred to remain as invisible as possible, but he similarly didn't want Buffy to find herself under more pressure than necessary. The girl was going to snap and they still had a world to save. "It's mostly mine."

She blinked. "What?"

Buffy elbowed Spike hard, though her eyes shone with gratitude.

As it was, his interference didn't distract the woman as long as he would've liked. Satisfied the blood wasn't due to a mortal wound, the look in Joyce's eyes swayed from concern to suspicion, and her tone followed suit. "Buffy," she said levelly, "terrible things have happened. What were you doing?"

Spike blinked and said perhaps the worst thing he could have said. "What, your mum doesn't know?"

Yeah, definitely the worst thing. The glare Buffy shot his way confirmed as much.

"Know what?" Joyce demanded.

Buffy was trembling so hard he feared she'd inadvertently drill a hole through the kitchen floor. He wanted so badly to reach out and reassure her with a touch, but something told him it wouldn't be much help under the circumstances.

Though perhaps a touch would have prevented the Slayer from completely falling off her rocker. "That I'm, uhh...in a band. A-a rock band with Spike here." She shot Spike a sharp glance, silently begging him to back her up.

Bugger. He was such a fool for her.

"Right," he heard himself saying. "She plays the...the triangle."

"Drums," Buffy corrected quickly.

He fought off a grin at the visual, but he wasn't about to contradict her. If his girl wanted to play the drums in their lie, by god, she'd play the drums. "Drums," Spike echoed with a nod. "She's hell on the old skins."

Something told him their brilliant cover story wasn't sticking.

"Hmmm," Joyce mused. "And, uh, what do you do?"

He cleared his throat. "Well, I sing."

There was a thick pause. Buffy plastered on her brightest aren't-I-the-picture-of-innocence grin, which, as expected, had the reverse effect. Joyce palpably wavered between confusion and incredulity, ultimately falling completely over to suspicion again. Her eyes landed on the blood-splattered shirt once more before she completely took in Spike's appearance.

"Buffy," she said carefully. "A girl is dead. The police were here earlier. They're saying you're responsible."

"Rot," Spike growled before he could stop himself.

"Spike!" Buffy hissed.

"No, that's complete rot. I can't believe your mum would even..." He turned to the woman, fighting back a growl. And he noted, with more than just some satisfaction, his love for the Slayer hadn't affected how menacing he could look when it was necessary. The barest hint of accusation in the woman's voice had red flashing across his eyes. Cowering right now would be the smart thing to do.

Joyce was a lucky woman. Had she been anyone but Buffy's mum...

"The police said—"

"The *police?*" Spike barked incredulously. "Are you naturally this thick?"

Buffy elbowed him again, but he ignored her. There wasn't any *oomph* behind it anyway.

"If you think she's capable of killing—"

"I'm not going to be lectured by a stranger in my own home." Joyce crossed her arms, her eyes narrowing. Intimidated or not, the woman at once looked determined to hold her ground. "Why don't you show yourself out?"

Spike huffed. He wasn't going anywhere. Regardless, he couldn't help but swell with warmth when Buffy grabbed his wrist to keep him from moving. She knew just as well as he did that he wasn't budging—this was her way of providing support, and it meant the world.

"Mom, I need him."

"Oh Buffy, come on—"

And for whatever reason, something in the girl snapped. It was unprecedented. Unpredictable. Not even Spike saw it coming. One

second she was standing there, her small, powerful hand wrapped around his wrist, and the next her eyes were flashing and her shoulders were thrown back with courage unlike anything he'd ever seen. He was used to Buffy the Confident Slayer. Buffy the Confident Girl was a completely foreign concept, and she had him enchanted upon first glance.

"You want the truth?" she snapped, plowing ahead before Joyce could get a word in. "I'm a vampire slayer. Spike here? He's a vampire."

Spike nodded awkwardly when the woman turned her eyes to him in question. What else was there to do?

"And right now, we have to go save the world." Buffy nodded at him, and that was that. He moved immediately for the back door, collecting the sword they'd propped between the cabinet and the doorhandle and resting it against his shoulder. He moved and Buffy kept talking, standing across from her mother, who was frozen with astonishment. "The girl who died? Kendra? She was a friend of mine. A good, good friend. And the people who killed her are going to end the world. They have Giles, too. Spike and I are going to stop it. So you stay here. We'll take care of everything."

A smirk tugged on Spike's lips. His girl had balls of brass. He knew her heart was thundering. He knew her pulse was racing. He could smell waves of tension rolling off her small, perfect body. But her voice didn't waver or crack. There was nothing but conviction when she spoke. She was unlike anything he'd ever seen. And if he lived a millennia he'd never forget this moment. Never.

She was perfect. And he was lost to her.

"They have Mr. Giles?" Joyce echoed, dumbfounded.

"Angelus and Dru," Spike confirmed with a nod. "They'll decorate the rug with his librarian guts if we don't get a move on."

Buffy wrinkled her nose again but shot him a grateful glance nonetheless. She knew what he was trying to do. She knew without needing to be told.

"We should call the police."

Spike rolled his eyes. Again with the sodding police.

"No. We're not calling the police. Spike and I are handling it."

"Handling *what?* What is happening?"

There was a long, tempered pause. "I'm sorry, Mom, but we don't have time for this." Buffy turned to him fully and nodded. "Spike?"

"The night awaits, pet."

"No!" Joyce stomped her foot, exasperation flashing across her face. "I am tired of *I don't have time* or *you wouldn't understand.* I am your mother, and you will *make* time to explain yourself."

Buffy didn't even spare her a glance. "I told you, I'm a vampire slayer."

"Well, I just don't accept that!"

Spike snickered and shook his head, fully prepared to ignore the psychotic woman and get to it, but he noted almost immediately that Buffy wasn't budging. And when he turned around, he could feel anger rippling off her body like tiny shock waves.

"Buffy," he said softly, encouragingly. He didn't even know if she heard him.

And a few agonizing seconds later, he had his answer.

"Open your eyes, Mom," she said slowly, her voice trembling. "What do you think has been going on for the past two years? The fights, the weird occurrences. How many times have you washed blood out of my clothing?" She fisted her shirt demonstrably. "Blood *like this,* and you still haven't figured it out?"

"Well, it stops now!"

"No! It doesn't stop. It *never* stops!"

He could smell her tears. She was seconds from losing it.

"Do-do you think I *chose* to be like this?" Buffy continued, her voice teetering toward a shrill. "Do you have any idea how lonely it is? How *dangerous?* I would *love* to be upstairs watching TV or gossiping about boys or...god, even studying! But I have to save the world. *Again."*

"No. This is insane. Buffy, you need *help.*"

It was truly amazing how people could listen without hearing a damn word. And Spike wasn't about to stand idly by—he'd already seen something too personal for words, and while his insides were quivering with rage, he knew how it sounded to outsiders. The woman hadn't seen anything but blood. She had no proof.

Well, she was about to get some.

"She bloody doesn't, you infuriating bint," he snarled, fangs descending. He drank in Joyce's horror with grim satisfaction, motioning quietly for Buffy to join him. "Accept it or not, the girl's on a timetable. If you wanna be here to chat this out in the mornin', I suggest you stop preventing us from—"

"What the hell are you?"

Buffy rolled her eyes. "He's a vampire, Mom. Get over it."

"I don't—"

"We're leaving."

"No. No!" Joyce paraded forward intently. "I am not letting you out of this house. Not with—"

"You can't stop me."

"Oh yes, I—"

It was over too quickly. All he saw was the aftermath. There was a crashing sound as the woman toppled back, and when it was over, Joyce had been shoved against the island in the middle of the kitchen. She was gasping for air as though her head had been held under water, and staring at her daughter like she'd never seen her before.

Buffy turned back to him, her heavy, determined eyes ready. She looked ready to cry but her voice betrayed nothing. "Let's go," she said.

"You walk out of this house," Joyce screamed after her, barely recovered, "don't even *think* about coming back!"

Buffy didn't even pause. She reached for his hand, and he gave it to her.

There was no more time for pausing. No more time.

They had a world to save. There would be plenty of time once this nasty business was behind them.

God, he hoped.

13

She didn't realize she was crying until she got a face-full of surprisingly cool spring air. There weren't many strong gales of wind in Sunnydale, but they always seemed to accompany the various peaks and falls of her given mood, and her mood right now was all over the place.

She felt weak and beaten, angry and hurt. Her insides were numb and she could barely feel her legs. And were it not for the hand at the small of her back, providing subtle strength through even subtler caresses, she would have completely collapsed. It was the knowledge she wasn't alone which kept her moving forward. She wasn't alone.

She wasn't ready to be alone.

"Are you all right?"

It was the sort of question one asked to be polite. The sort of question with no set answer. And even knowing this, Buffy couldn't help a dry chuckle from tearing through her lips. There was no such thing as *all right*. Kendra was dead. Giles was missing. Willow was in the hospital. Her mother had kicked her out of the house. Now, armed only with a sword and a renegade vampire, she was about to face the man who'd once claimed her heart with the hopes of ending his existence once and for all.

Spike had come to town to kill her, and for some reason, he was at her side. Her lips still hummed with the echoes of his kisses. Her skin buzzed when she remembered the way his eyes pierced hers. The words he'd whispered had her mind racing, attempting to reconcile the confusing storm of emotions she felt for him with the part of her holding onto the love she'd once shared with Angel.

Tossing in her growing feelings for Spike on the mountain she had to defeat tonight would get her nowhere. Instead, Buffy nodded tersely, a forced smile stretching her lips. "Why do you ask?"

"Buffy—" The tone in his voice told her plainly he wasn't about to drop the subject.

"Look, can we not?"

"She was out of line, love. You know—"

A strangled giggle erupted from her throat. "Really? You think she was? 'Cause kicking your world-saving daughter out of the house on the night of the apocalypse seemed to be the rational reaction from where I was standing."

"It won't take. She'll—"

Buffy stopped shortly, jerking Spike to a halt beside her. "What?" she demanded, pivoting on her heel to face him, her eyes blazing. "She'll what? Realize the error of her ways? Decide I'm *not* crazy when, hey, the world *doesn't* end? I don't have time for this. I don't have time for...for..."

I don't have time for life.

She didn't realize she'd looked away until Spike's hand settled under her chin, his gentle touch coaxing her eyes upward. And when their gazes clashed an undeniable sense of peace flooded her veins. She didn't know how or why, but he wasn't going to abandon her. Not tonight. Not after tonight. If she needed a place to stay, he would find her one. If she needed a shoulder to cry on, he would lend his. If she needed someone to fight her battles for a change, he would happily shoulder the responsibility.

Buffy was too tired to toy around with *why*. She didn't know why. But for some reason, Spike was everything to her right now. Her friend. Her ally. Her kissing-buddy. And he'd promised her he wouldn't revert to form once the fight was over. Aside from the assistance

rendered the past few days, there was no reason to trust him. He was, after all, a vampire, and vampires were notoriously back-stabbing assholes. But she trusted Spike. Right now, she couldn't help but trust him.

Perhaps the difference resided in the way she trusted him. She didn't trust him as a vampire. She did, however, trust him as a man.

"If I stop and think about everything that's happened, I'm gonna lose it," she whispered belatedly, realizing they'd done nothing but stare into each other's eyes for long, heated seconds. "Please..."

The only way to survive in this job was to compartmentalize her life. She couldn't be Buffy and the Slayer at the same time—not when the world was at stake. The Slayer had to march in without the heavy burden of Buffy's problems weighing her down. If the Slayer allowed Buffy to distract her, everything would end. It was what had killed slayers in the past, and what would undoubtedly kill her in the future. She was perpetually caught between two lives. She had to be one or the other. She couldn't be both.

Not right now.

And though nothing else passed between them, Spike seemed to understand. Light filled his ocean eyes, and before she could pull away, he'd let the sword in his hands clamor to the pavement, his head dipping and his lips brushing hers. It was a gentle touch which quickly spun out of control. His tongue persuaded her mouth to welcome him, stroking her with tenderness bespeaking everything which remained unsaid between them. He drowned her in the richness of his flavor. Wholly masculine. Wholly dangerous. Wholly *hers.*

He'd told her earlier that he belonged to her. And for the way he moaned into her mouth, the surprising softness of his hands as he cupped her cheeks to capture her in his kiss—as though anticipating a fight she hadn't the strength to put up—she could believe him. She could believe for a minute he spoke the truth.

She didn't know what to do with him, but he was hers.

Her heart was too sore for love. Too gun-shy to attempt to place a label on her feelings. Knowing she was going to slay Angel tonight for the greater good still hurt more than she could verbalize. She didn't want to think of tomorrow because she knew she had to get through

the night first. But Spike was kissing her, loving her mouth with his, stroking her cheeks with calloused thumbs and whispering unintelligible words into her body. He was hers. The world allowed for no other knowledge.

Spike pulled away just a hair—just enough for his unneeded breaths to tease her lips with his taste as he drowned her in his eyes. Her heart thundered and her pulse raced, but she couldn't look away if her life depended on it.

"This isn't over, love," he said softly, then kissed the corner of her mouth. "Not between us."

There was no questioning the conviction in his eyes. He meant what he said. Every syllable. "I know," she replied.

"You and I'll sort this out."

Buffy didn't bother pretending to not understand. It would be an insult to them both. "Okay."

Spike smiled and kissed her brow, then her lips again. "Okay," he murmured before stepping back and collecting the abandoned sword. "Okay."

It was amazing how much certainty a simple kiss could provide. And while she knew, truthfully, nothing between them could ever be defined as *simple,* the reassurance fueled her with just enough to keep moving forward.

The sun would rise and this would be over.

She wouldn't worry about picking up the pieces until she could rest.

As it turned out, the sun started to rise well before they made it to the mansion. It was pure luck, she supposed, that they ran into Xander before taking refuge underground. He'd come to serve as the cavalry and to deliver Willow's bloodthirsty *kick Angel's ass* message. In other words, he'd come with good intentions but very little usefulness. And he'd unwittingly given her the task of telling him as much.

The only thing she could trust Xander with was getting her watcher to safety.

For his part, Spike said something snide and disappeared into the sewers. Buffy forced her grin aside. She was just happy to hear her friend was conscious.

Xander watched the vampire vanish, nose wrinkled in distaste. "You gonna be all right?" he asked, turning back to Buffy. "I can put my rock to good use, you know."

Buffy glanced to the stone in his hands with a grateful smile, shaking her head. "I have all the help I need."

"Spike?"

She nodded. "And before you start—"

Xander raised his hands, stone and all, and he shook his head. "No, no. I'm all with the understanding. Really. The enemy of my enemy... and all that."

Buffy bit her tongue and decided it wasn't worth wasting time to argue her point. Her friend was the perpetual tennis ball in the way he bounced from understanding to suspicious without a blink. But she was grateful for him, and more than relieved that she could entrust someone else to save Giles's life while she and Spike focused on their respective exes. "We'll be fine," she assured him. "Just get Giles. Get Giles. Get out. I don't want to have to worry about you."

"You won't. Stealth's my middle name."

She quirked her head. "I thought it was LaVelle."

"I knew I'd regret telling you that." Xander smiled wearily and took her in his arms for a quick but much-needed hug. "Watch yourself, Buff."

"Always."

She dropped into the sewers without another word and fell quickly into pace at Spike's side. He knew the way down here and she was at his mercy. Didn't much matter, though—she needed him and he needed darkness. As it was, she much doubted Angelus and company would know to expect an underground attack. Or an attack at all. Her ex had gone to a lot of trouble to sever her resources. He and Dru probably shared the belief that Spike was dust. And the longer they believed it, the easier this would be for all of them.

The sooner it would be over.

❧

"Hello, lover."

The words made her skin crawl. He'd called her *lover* during each encounter. It was a nasty word, and it would never cross her lips again. But for what she needed, the words conveyed the appropriate message. Angelus glanced up and frowned, though the element of surprise was definitely not a luxury she could entertain for long. He was shocked to see her, which was obvious, but he'd been prepared. And right now she was little more than an unwanted distraction.

"I don't have time for you," he remarked, bored.

"You don't have a lot of time *left,"* Buffy clarified, raising the sword Spike had handed her. She could still feel the warmth in the handle from where he'd held it so long. And for a fleeting second, she allowed her mind to wander to wherever he was—to the place he'd situated himself for the surprise attack—and whisper an ethereal kiss across his lips.

"Coming on kind of strong, don't you think?" Angelus retorted, his eyes sizing her up. "You're playing some deep odds here. Do you really think you can take us all on?"

It was damned hard not to gloat, and in the end, she decided the effort was wasted. "No, I don't."

"It's what she's got me for."

Spike's voice filled the main gallery timed with a nasty scream and an explosion of dust, and chaos inevitably erupted. Angelus barely had time to gape before he found himself uppercut by the blow of a crowbar. And for a few long seconds, reality suspended into a steady stream of slow-motion. Buffy saw Angelus's eyes blaze and fangs descend—the fat load of good it did him. In a flash, Spike had clipped him again and watched gleefully as the big lug crashed to the floor.

"Guess my invite got lost in the mail, eh, mate?" he drawled, arching the crowbar far above his head. "It's a mite rude to exclude me and the lady. Especially after all we've been through together."

He glanced up and met her eyes, flashing a reassuring smile. And while her timing couldn't be worse, Buffy was paralyzed with staunch appreciation. He was magnificent. He was absolutely magnificent. His

torn black tee clung to his wiry form, accentuating his muscular build with subtlety lost on those who didn't know what to look for. There was dirt on his cheek. His hands were red with his own blood. He'd nearly died tonight and here he was. Beating her enemy to the ground.

For me.

It was fortunate he caught her staring, else she might have assumed the form of a permanent statue and let the world end all for the want of appreciating the male body.

"Slayer!" he yelled, eyes widening with worry. "Behind you!"

Buffy whirled around just in time to catch a surprisingly forceful punch to the jaw at the courtesy of one of Angelus's cronies. Across the room, Drusilla had similarly snapped out of her daze and was making up for lost time by screaming her lungs off. Her dark eyes were trained on Spike, who hadn't broken form. He was beating the living hell out of Angelus and clearly enjoying every second.

Was Drusilla angry to see Spike alive? Buffy couldn't help but wonder as she dove under the crony's swinging arm, then effortlessly lopped the vamp's head clean off his neck, courtesy of her sword. Where there was one, though, there was inevitably another. Drusilla was advancing, her steps slow and methodical, her malicious gaze not once breaking. And as though knowing Buffy would do everything in her power to stop the insane vamp, the lackeys just kept coming.

"Spike!" she screamed in warning, but her companion didn't hear her.

He was too busy beating the stuffing out of Angelus.

"Hurts, doesn't it?" he panted, smashing the crowbar across the elder vampire's head with a satisfying crack. It was amazing how much damage he could inflict in just a few brutal swings. By the time Drusilla was close enough to pounce, Angelus was nothing more than a bloodied mess on the floor.

"Spike!" Buffy cried, though her form never broke. Her heart plummeted—the malice on Drusilla's face was unlike anything she'd ever seen. The woman's eyes were thoroughly black, and in the endless sea of ebony lurked hatred which would make the devil tremble.

Spike had seen it earlier, of course. Right before his former beloved had plunged a sword through his gut. How he could look at the woman

he'd shared so much with and see nothing but the darkest storm of loathing without breaking was beyond her.

He's so strong.

"Don't stop!" Spike instructed her, gracefully deflecting every erratic blow Drusilla threw at him. He moved as though he'd already thumbed through the script, as though he knew her next attack before she did. As though reality had a five-second tape delay.

And through it all, he never stopped worrying about her. "Buffy!" he screamed. "Duck!"

Buffy dropped to the ground and rolled, the sword in her hands lashing at the charging lackey on instinct. She was showered with dust, and they kept coming. It was all very far away—she felt her body reacting to every attack, every punch thrown, but her mind remained with Spike. Drusilla was shrieking things that would break a lesser man. For Spike's part, he barely flinched.

On the ground, Angelus was beginning to stir.

"Spike—"

"Look at me again, Slayer, and I'll rip your lungs out." Their eyes clashed and she saw nothing but concern. "Finish off the giant sod. I'll take care—"

"She's ruined you!" Drusilla screeched, her blood-red nails scratching crimson-rivers into his cheek. "No crumpets. No tea. Nasty little Slayer wiggles inside your head. No more shadows. You're—"

Spike rolled his eyes and clocked his ex in the chin. "Knock it off, Dru."

How he could be so blasé when facing the woman who had run him through with a sword was thoroughly beyond her. There was nothing but cold indifference on Spike's face. None of the hatred she'd seen earlier that night. The way he'd violently rebuked the idea he could ever again love the woman who had tried to end his life. And Buffy was so enchanted by the exchange, as well as her continued choreography to avoid the laughable attacks of Angelus's minions, she didn't realize Angelus himself had managed to climb to his feet until something akin to a sonic blast pierced the room in half.

Buffy glanced up a second too soon, just as Angelus jerked the sword free of the stone demon's chest. The move was so sudden it

made everything in the mansion screech to a standstill. Even Drusilla, whose screams were likely attracting the attention of every dog in the area, fell abruptly silent with an air of reverence.

"Oh," the insane vampire breathed. "Here he comes."

Oh no he doesn't.

Buffy shot to the statue, clenching the handle of her sword. She'd fought too hard and lost too much to allow Angelus the last laugh. And while his cackling eyes told her he thought the battle already won, if she died tonight she knew damn well it would be in the fiery release of Hell on Earth. Angelus wouldn't best her. Not tonight. Not *now*.

"You almost made it, Buff," Angelus remarked, greedy eyes scaling the clean iron of the sword he'd extracted.

"It's not over yet."

"My boy Acathla here is about to wake up." God, he spoke like a proud papa. "You're going to Hell."

Buffy didn't flinch. "Save me a seat."

The extensity of Giles's training covered a wide range of weaponry. She'd fired crossbows, battled with staffs, and thanks to Xander, could work her way around a rocket-launcher without batting an eye. Now with her sweat-laced hand clutching the hilt of a sword, raising the steel in a lightning flash to parry the blow Angelus aimed at her head, navigating her way around a weapon she'd never manned was surprisingly simple. Time around her remained indefinitely suspended. The clouds in her mind parted and she thrived on one golden piece of understanding.

She had to kill Angelus. She *had to*.

"You think this matters?" Angelus rasped, lashing for her throat. "You really think this is anything but a stall? Silly, silly Buffy."

Buffy shrugged and dropped to the ground again, thrusting the sword for his legs, the teeth of the blade scratching his calf. It wasn't a crippling blow; it was hardly a blow at all. But she took her victories where she could and at the moment, she'd consider any blade-on-skin contact a small triumph.

"You play the hand you're dealt," she replied, shrugging as she rolled to her feet. "Good a motto as any."

"You think Spike—"

The blades clashed and she found herself staring up into chocolate eyes which used to regard her with loving warmth. They held at a standstill for what felt like hours before Angelus balked, his arms maneuvering upward in an arcing swing and narrowly missing her on the downward plummet. She found herself pacing backward, her body seemingly determined to put as much space between her and Angelus as possible, even as her legs carried her forward to trade more blows with his sword.

"Gotta say, Buff," Angelus snarled, attempting the above-arc swing again and sending her this time onto a small table, which rattled with her weight and sent small icons of Acathla-worship to the ground. "This is almost worth it. I love the way you move."

Buffy felt her stomach roll in disgust, her sword lunging for his chest. How a bulking giant like her ex could move as fast as he did—and duck low enough to avoid contact—was beyond her, but the next thing she knew she was leaping again to avoid a blow at her legs. The floor beneath her seemed to quake when she landed, where she immediately dropped and rolled when Angelus's sword came crashing toward her.

Only this time, she felt pain. Her arm was suddenly bare and wet. She was bleeding. It was a superficial wound, but the slice echoed through her body. Blood made everything real.

Too real.

"Gonna enjoy licking that up," Angelus snarled nastily.

"Sorry," Buffy spat, forcing herself not to reach for the wound with her free hand. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction. "Body of Buffy is a Spike-only zone these days."

The black flash in Angelus's eyes should have terrified her, but it didn't. Not like the accompanying smile. She'd never seen a smile she could truly classify as evil. A smile which would literally make one's bones rattle with fear. Perhaps it was a combination of his lips with the darkness in his eyes, she didn't know. All she knew was she'd never seen anything like it before.

"Spike?" Angelus retorted, his tone betraying nothing of his outrage. "Sorry to break it to you, lover, but Spike wouldn't know what to do with his mouth without an owner's manual. You really think—"

"That you're disgusting? Yep!"

Buffy shot out her legs, wiping his off the floor in a blink. Angelus didn't even bother in trying to climb back to his feet. Instead, he turned to face her on his knees, the sword in his hand slicing toward her in three rapid strokes, all of which met nothing but the steel of her own weapon. On the fourth swing, Buffy managed to knock his sword into the table she'd leaped onto just a minute before, pinning his grip but leaving herself open for a fierce backhand with his free arm.

In the distance—thousands of miles away—she heard a feminine wail, fading as though the world around them was blinking out. Buffy craned her head instinctively to Spike, catching his eyes as Drusilla fell from his arms in an unconscious heap.

And then there were three. The cronies had either fled or dusted, Dru was on the ground, and Acathla was waking.

But she wasn't alone.

However, for the rage that exploded across Spike's face the second Angelus's hand smacked her, she knew logic and reason had abandoned him. Spike was a creature of passion and impulse, much like she was, and she knew by his eyes that he wouldn't stop before lunging—wouldn't assess which angle would give him the greatest advantage.

Buffy sucked in a breath. Spike's face shifted and a roar split the air, his body barreling into Angelus's before she could scream in protest.

"Son of a bitch!" her companion snarled, jerking the sword out of Angelus's surprised hands, the teeth of the blade slashing across Angelus's gut once, then again when the other vampire attempted to rear around and regain control.

By the time Angelus managed to wrangle the sword back into his possession, the bulk of the damage had been done. Blood splattered across the stone floor, gushing with an effect Buffy had only seen in horror movies. His already-pale skin whitened to frightening measures. And before she could stop herself, her mind flashed to the presentation of Spike crucified to his motel wall. There was no comparison, of course, but she saw it all over again anyway. No one's skin, vampire or not, should ever be so white.

However, for his part, Angelus refused to reveal weakness or show pain. Instead, he lashed a bloody line across Spike's gut, reopening the

healing hole Drusilla had put there, and allowed him only a second to howl before sending Spike to the far side of the foyer with a malicious kick to his open wound.

"This white knight shit, as funny as it is," Angelus panted, his free hand feeling out the seriousness of his own gash, "is getting really old."

Spike collided against the wall with a devastating crash, his chest heaving and his amber eyes burning with outrage the likes of which Buffy had never seen. And despite what she was seeing—the blood, the seriousness of the situation compiling around her, a small but very present and purely feminine thrill raced through her body—something she couldn't explain. While she certainly had no delusions of being rescued, the possessive glimmer in Spike's gaze couldn't help but secure her in a way no words or actions could ever hope to achieve.

"Didn't your mum ever teach you it's not nice to hit girls?" Spike retorted, lifting himself to his feet, his left arm pressed to his bleeding gut. His legs shook but he didn't fall. He was the picture of strength.

Angelus snorted. "Didn't your *mum* ever teach you to die properly? For crying out loud, what does it take to—" His voice tore into a scream without warning, his gaze landing accusingly on the insane vampire who lay still on the other side of the room. *"—rid of one's enemies, Dru?"*

"That's precious," Spike drawled.

"Honestly, she *nailed* you to a fucking wall. Doesn't anyone stay *dead* anymore?"

Buffy snapped back to herself on a whim, her sword suddenly reminding her of its weight as she arched it high above her head. "You're one to talk," she spat, though speaking proved to be a bad idea as it only served to provide a verbal warning. Angelus whirled around and parried her attack with a hair of a second to spare, his body forced backward by the power of her blow.

"You and your game of"—she kicked him across the face and sent him back again—"musical souls."

"The game's such—"

Her leg smashed his head once more, and the giant came tumbling down. On his knees in front of Acathla, his sword tumbling from his bloodied hands. And that was it. Her opening. Her chance. Buffy

sucked in a deep breath and arched the blade back, her tired but determined arms more than ready for the finishing blow.

She was in mid-swing when it happened. Had it been a second too late, his blood would have sprayed the stone demon behind him, silencing Acathla's wake just in time for Angelus to witness the collapse of his empire. But it wasn't a second too late. It wasn't. The vampire's gasp and timely groans resounded through the empty corridors with the foreign hint of pain. His head jerked up, his eyes vacant and bright. It was just a flash but it was there—she saw it. And when it was over, he met her gaze for a blink before crashing entirely to the floor, almost instinctive sobs scratching his throat.

Buffy was frozen, her sword still poised and ready, her chest heaving as her mind raced. She knew, logically, what she was seeing. She knew it. Awareness stung every nerve in her body, awash with disbelief, her aching heart hammering so hard she was amazed it still worked.

No. No. Impossible.

Her brain refused to believe her eyes. To accept what she already knew. But it was there—it was right in front of her. And before she could catch up with herself, the vampire at her feet was climbing to a stand, his eyes thick with tears.

It sold her. Angelus never cried.

No, Angelus never cried. But Angel would.

And for that second, everything around her vanished. Acathla. Drusilla. Even Spike. Everything vanished, and it was just her and Angel. Angel, not Angelus, meeting her gaze, his own lost and confused. Angel clamoring for recognition. Angel...

"Buffy," he breathed, the cadence of her name on his lips striking her like a forgotten dream. She hadn't heard his voice in months, and without warning, every dam inside collapsed. "What's going on?"

She didn't move. Didn't dare. The sword remained suspended above her head. Her logical head was screaming it could be a ploy. A last attempt by Angelus to spare his life. She needed to be ready. One wrong move and the game was over.

Only this wasn't a ploy. Her heart knew what her mind refused to believe.

"Where are we?" he demanded, erratic eyes taking in their surroundings. "I-I don't remember."

She lowered the sword, much to the gratitude of her aching muscles. The whole of her had given way to shock. "Angel?"

He blinked, zeroing in on her wound. The superficial cut on her arm. The one he'd given her. "You're hurt."

Did he not feel the pain of the lashes to his stomach? He'd reached for her, noticed her, before turning his eyes to himself. Her heart melted and tears finally broke free.

Oh god.

And before she could stop him, before her confused thoughts could reconcile a feasible answer, she found herself in his arms. She didn't know how she'd gotten there—if she'd stepped forward or if he'd grabbed her. All she knew was the warmth of familiarity.

"Oh, Buffy...god."

Her eyes fell shut, a trembling sigh tearing through her. *Oh god.*

"Oh my god. I feel like I haven't seen you in months. Everything's so muddled. I..." His lips dropped to her shoulder, his arms tightening around her. And for a minute, for a blessed minute, she could let herself forget. She could.

Only, no, she couldn't. The haze vanished after what felt like years, and she remembered herself. She remembered where she was, and why she was here. She remembered what she was supposed to do. She remembered...

Spike.

Around Angel's shoulder, she saw him. And the hurt in his eyes nearly broke her all over again. Emotions exploded and warred, and without warning, her heart lurched and her legs begged her to go to him. To reassure him—though of what she didn't know. Past, present, and future were suddenly in the same room. Past was hugging her. Present was staring at her as though she'd just traded him for thirty pieces of silver. Future remained in the shadows, hiding its face from wandering eyes.

Angel didn't know Spike was there. Didn't acknowledge Drusilla lying on the ground, or the gentle roar of Acathla stirring behind him.

Acathla.

Buffy forced her eyes to leave Spike's, drawn irrevocably to the contorting face of a stone demon. The frightening gargoyle brows angled downward, the previous gray slab of his eyes burning red. The contours of his lips parted grotesquely, and within the depths of his mouth, she saw Hell itself.

Angel must have sensed the sudden tension in her body. He pulled away, brow furrowing. "What's happening?"

Everything.

It was what she had to do. What she'd come here to do. And the words which left her lips reflected her conviction. "Shhh," she whispered, not allowing herself to listen to her own voice. "Don't worry about it."

"I love you."

Her heart shattered and she heard Spike inhale sharply, though his eyes no longer reflected a shield of jealousy. There was something else there—awareness. He knew as well as she did what she had to do. And now he was waiting to see if she'd actually do it.

Buffy didn't give Angel the words back, but she didn't know for whose benefit. Perhaps it was cowardice. Perhaps it was necessity. Perhaps it was selfishness. She didn't know. She didn't let herself think about it. She couldn't.

If she did, she'd never go through with what she needed to do.

"Close your eyes," she whispered, her lips unable to keep from stealing a brief kiss from his.

A kiss of goodbye. Angel deserved as much.

It was the last thing he felt before the sword speared through his chest. Before his eyes thrust open in pain. Before she took a definitive step away from him, ignoring the arm that reached for her. She refused to meet his gaze. Refused to meet Spike's. Instead, she merely stared at the blade she'd shoved through her first love's body. Light flashed and the air cracked. Her feet carried her back and her eyes didn't waver. She sensed the vortex of Acathla's mouth growing wider, but not wide enough to touch her. Not wide enough to touch Spike. There was only Angel. Reaching for her. Saying her name. Standing there without his memories, and knowing only that she was supposed to love him.

Then he was gone. Acathla's mouth closed and the ethereal lights blinked away, and he was gone.

The air fell silent. Buffy fell to her knees and stared.

She had no grasp of how much time passed. How long she remained on the floor, her hands in her lap, her eyes focused forward. Her heart was beating somehow, and the blood from her wound had stopped flowing. She didn't register movement until Spike's gentle hand brushed her shoulder. Until the solitude of her surroundings burst with clarity.

"Buffy?"

The welcome tenor of his voice washed over her like a personal baptism. Buffy blinked and realized for the first time she'd been crying. Crying silent tears. When she looked up, she found herself awash in compassion unlike anything she'd ever known. And in that second, she yearned for his arms like she'd never yearned for anything.

"Buffy, love..." Spike knelt beside her, stroking the length of her arm with a feather-light touch. "Sweetheart..."

She didn't look at him. She wanted to but every muscle in her body was locked.

"I'll take you away, Buffy. Anywhere. Anywhere you want." His lips brushed her brow. "You shouldn't stay here. You—"

Suddenly she was given the power to nod, and she seized it fiercely. "Yes," she whispered, barely hearing herself. "Yes."

It was the last thing she heard before the tidal wave inside came crashing down, and she collapsed in tears.

14

The hum of the Desoto kept him company along the lonely stretch of highway. There was rarely heavy traffic in and out of Sunnydale, and he was glad. The faster he got the Slayer away from the Hellmouth, the better. Now in the aftermath, he didn't care to ever see the pissant town again.

For her part, Buffy sat silently in the passenger seat. He thought she'd nodded off, but every time he hazarded a glance her way, he found her eyes focused with frightening intensity on the endless stretch of black pavement ahead. God, what he wouldn't give to know what she was thinking.

If she was still with him at all.

Spike sighed, a very cold shiver racing through his body. He didn't want to think about what had happened at the mansion. He didn't want to think of the agony on Buffy's face, or the way she'd looked at Angel like he was her personal fucking savior the sodding second the big git's soul was stuffed up his arse. It was a hell of a time to be jealous, but dammit, he couldn't help himself. In a blink he'd witnessed and suffered through a century of déjà vu. The women in his life—the dark sorceress of his past and the golden goddess of his future—falling over themselves to be with Angel, no matter the incarnation. All Angel

had to do was gasp her name and Buffy was in his arms. As though the past few months Angelus had spent terrorizing her were so easily pardonable. As though her budding relationship with Spike meant nothing at all.

The only thing keeping him cool was the look he'd seen flash across her eyes. It wasn't the look of a woman returning to an old lover—it was as though, for a few seconds, the past few days hadn't occurred at all. As though Angelus's regime had never existed, as though someone had hit the rewind button on some cosmic remote, sending them back to a place where Buffy wouldn't know to care for Spike. Where Buffy only had eyes for Angel. In that second he'd known it wasn't her steering. It was a shadow of herself. It was the girl who'd lived before her virginity had been stolen by a monster.

The Slayer he knew—the girl he loved—had slowly returned to herself once her eyes locked with his. It hadn't been immediate, and it hadn't stopped her from kissing Angel with the lips that belonged to Spike, but he'd seen her withdrawal. The lovesick look vanished with conviction, and while the pain on her face never abated, he knew she'd come back to him.

Spike wasn't a fool. Though he'd entertained the idea of Buffy's love for the wanker ending as quickly as his for Drusilla had, he knew it was different for her. Buffy was young. She was so young and she'd been through so much. For her, this was all she'd known. She didn't have decades of experience in her past. She knew what she'd been handed. Now another door of her life was closing and she didn't know what to do or how to react.

He could relate. He'd be lost as all bugger were it not for her. And yet here he was, speeding to Los Angeles as though the flames of Hell were licking his rear bumper.

Things were different for him. He was in love. He was in love with the woman sitting in the passenger seat. Because of Buffy, the pain of his sire's attack quelled to nothing more than a gentle hum.

The pain of the love in Buffy's eyes—the love which hadn't been aimed at him—would render him dust if he didn't stop thinking about it.

Let it go. She's with you, isn't she?

Sure, because he wasn't dead. She wouldn't be with him if Angelus hadn't yanked the bloody sword out of the over-sized gargoyle. No, she'd be with her honey. Cuddled up and making kissy-face and crying a thousand tears over a thousand apologies.

Logically, Spike knew it wasn't true. But it *could* be true, and that was what killed him.

"You hungry, pet?" he asked before he could stop himself. The silence between them was unnerving. He longed to hear her voice. "I'm sure there's a greasy fast-food joint 'round here somewhere."

He didn't expect a response and was surprised when Buffy's eyes broke from the road, tilting her head in his direction. "I wouldn't say no," she replied.

A thin smile crossed his lips and he nodded. "Right," he drawled, veering the Desoto to the right-lane. They'd passed a sign announcing an impending exit-ramp a few minutes before, and while his attention was mostly engaged with the hurting slayer at his side, he didn't think he was so pathetic as to have missed the exit without noticing.

He was right. In a matter of careless seconds, they were cruising through a strip of various fast-food restaurants and lodging options, nearly all of the latter declaring vacancies. He didn't know if Buffy was in the mood to stop yet—if they'd gotten far enough away from Sunnydale. He hadn't paid too much attention to the mileage signs, but he guessed they were on the outskirts of Los Angeles. Or the outskirts of the outskirts of Los Angeles. The town seemed to double in size every time he visited.

"Name your poison, love," he offered conversationally, careful not to incline his head in her direction.

"I don't care."

"Only sodding place open this late is Denny's." At least, it was the only place he'd be willing to take her right now. The bustling nightlife of Southern California wasn't exactly the antidote to Buffy's sorrow. He didn't want to make things worse by degrading her goodness with the filth only thriving metropolises could provide.

Buffy offered a half shrug. "Then Denny's it is."

Spike inhaled sharply and nodded, flicking on his blinker and swerving into the indicated parking lot. He didn't know if she wanted

to go in or order grub to go, but this was one instance where he was willing to sacrifice her desires for her needs. They'd been driving a while now and she hadn't slept a wink. There was no harm in a breather.

"Want to just park here tonight?" he asked, attempting to keep his tone light.

"Where are we?"

"Just outside LA, I'd reckon. Maybe an hour or so."

Buffy seemed to ponder this, worrying a lip between her teeth. Her eyes were drooping, large circles arcing under either lid. "We didn't get very far," she said reasonably.

"We didn't start till a few hours ago."

They hadn't left Sunnydale immediately. Rather, after Buffy's breakdown in the mansion, he'd resigned himself to the fact that her decision-making skills were likely a little fried by everything that had occurred. They'd returned to his room in the Sunnydale Inn, which had been left untouched by housekeeping. There was still a sizeable bloodstain on the far wall and a trail of red leading to the loo.

The visual alone made his gut ache. The bleeding from Angelus's cut had stopped soon enough, but there wasn't a bone in his body left unscathed. He was worn and tired, thirsty for blood, and so worried about Buffy he was afraid he'd collapse before she did. As it was, Buffy had fallen into bed without a blink, where she hadn't slept, rather reclined and waited for nightfall.

When evening came and Buffy reiterated her desire to leave town, Spike hadn't hesitated. And now here they were—a few hours down the road from Sunnydale, contemplating a cholesterol-heavy menu in a joint no self-respecting demon would frequent. Buffy hadn't eaten since yesterday—since the poptart she'd barely touched and the orange juice she'd ingested under protest. Her stomach had been growling at him for hours but he hadn't wanted to mention it. Now he was wishing he had.

There was no good way to approach situations like these. He was howling inside, screaming at the injustice of not owning her heart when she possessed every unbeating inch of his. Loving her had

buggered his plans and good, but for Chrissake, he couldn't stop. The vacancy in her eyes crippled him.

What was she thinking? Had she made a mistake? Did she regret leaving with him? Did she regret the kisses they'd shared? Did she wish—

He was going to drive himself batty if his mind didn't mute. All that really mattered right now—really mattered—was Buffy. His feelings and bruised heart were secondary concerns. Buffy hadn't promised him anything, except that she couldn't off him. She'd only kissed him of her own volition once to his memory. Everything thus far had been entirely one-sided—she might like him, yes, but she'd never pretended to love him. She'd never pretended there would be something beyond their forbidden kisses after the big battle was behind them.

Angel was dead. Angel was dead because of Buffy, and he'd died without knowing why. He'd died just seconds after professing his love for her. Any reasonable bloke could understand why she wasn't chatty.

"Wanna brave the flapjacks?" he asked, looking at the menu but not reading it. "Fried cake with liquid sugar on top. Sounds tasty, doesn't it?"

"I guess."

She wasn't reading the menu either.

A voluptuous woman with frizzy red hair and a name-tag labeling her as *Margo* approached the table a few minutes later. She made sure to thrust her triple-Ds into Spike's face, either not registering his wince or not caring. "Can I get somethin' to drink for you, dahlin'?" There was a pronounced Texan twang in her voice.

Spike's eyes unwittingly landed on the throbbing vein in her neck. "Coffee," he said shortly, dragging his gaze away and ignoring the hungry sting of his fangs. "Black." He turned to Buffy. "Sweetheart?"

"Diet coke."

"Ya'll ready to order?"

Spike kept his eyes on Buffy, who nodded. "Sure thing," he replied. "Number three, heavy on the bacon."

Margo jotted down the order and favored him a wink. "I love a man with a healthy appetite."

He narrowed his eyes and nodded pointedly at his travel companion. "The lady hasn't ordered yet."

To her credit, the big-breasted server didn't bat an eye. She nodded and turned to Buffy, pen ready. "What'll it be, sugar?"

"Veggie omelet."

"And a side of flapjacks." At the Slayer's questioning look, Spike shrugged a shoulder and clarified, "We'll be on the road all day tomorrow, pet. Might as well eat your fill."

"Oh, that's sweet!" Margo gushed. "Ya'll taking a road trip?"

"Why don't you just bring me and the lady our drinks?"

He didn't miss the flash of hurt across the waitress's face, but he didn't care. Instead, he turned back to Buffy and reached for her hand without thinking. The feel of her skin beneath his fingers sent an electric shock through his body. "You all right?"

It was a bloody stupid question but he couldn't help himself.

"I don't know how to answer that," she replied with a soft smile which didn't reach her tired eyes. "Suffice to say, *no* sums it up pretty well."

A pang struck his heart. "I'm sorry, love...I didn't...I wasn't thinking."

Buffy nodded but didn't reply. She didn't say anything for a long time. Long after Margo returned with their drinks, and again a few minutes later with their respective orders. They ate in silence for what felt like forever. It nearly startled him out of his bloody skin when she spoke again.

A vamp being startled by a girl's voice. He was truly pathetic.

"Do you think she meant it?"

Spike blinked uselessly, a forkful of sausage suspended between his mouth and his plate. "Huss'at?"

"My mother. Do you think she meant it?" Buffy's eyes were trained on her plate, playing idly with her omelet. She'd gobbled down the flapjacks in less than two minutes. "Do you think...she told me..."

Spike stilled, unsure how to proceed. She hadn't mentioned anything about her mother's decision to boot her from the house since before Angelus found himself stuffed with soul again. Since before they raided the mansion.

"I dunno, love," he replied honestly. "Tempers were runnin' high." He paused. "Do you...do you wanna head back and talk to her? See if... she's more inclined to listen now?"

Buffy was quiet so long he began to wonder if she heard him at all. Ultimately, she shook her head. "No."

"No?" Spike arched an eyebrow and popped the bite of sausage into his mouth. "Just like that?"

"Just like that." She glanced up again, her eyes shining. "I can't go back there."

"You need some time."

He hoped she would seize his observation and either rebuke or affirm it, but she did not. Instead, Buffy finished her omelet and wiped her mouth delicately. She drank her cola and the refill Margo provided without needing to be asked. Spike cleaned his plate as well, and though his demon was hardly appeased by the lack of blood in the processed meat he shoveled into his mouth, his stomach was momentarily satisfied.

Margo approached again with the bill, all signs of southern hospitality having long abandoned her eyes. She didn't jiggle her breasts for Spike when she slipped him the check, and he was glad. There were some women on which big breasts simply weren't flattering, and Margo was definitely one of them.

At any rate, it was hard to ogle large knockers when the ones he wanted in his hands and mouth were just the size to occupy either or both desired destinations. All the while he couldn't help his eyes from wandering down the length of Buffy's throat until he was staring at her chest. Just two days ago, it hadn't been hard to imagine cradling the soft weight of her in his palms, stroking her nipples with his eager fingers. Now everything had changed. Now Buffy's mind wasn't with him. He was fortunate enough her body was.

"Do you wanna keep drivin'?" he asked at the register as he handed the cashier a twenty. "We can go as far as you want."

"Sunlight?"

Spike smiled thinly. He had a canister of black gunk he could smear across the windshield if need be. He seemed to remember telling her

as much but decided not to dwell on it. "Poses no problem, pet. We'll drive as long as you like."

Buffy seemed to mull it over, not questioning his assertion that their journey could continue beyond dawn. "No," she replied at last. "No."

"Wanna motel?"

She nodded and curled herself into his side. Spike inhaled sharply and willed his body to keep from stirring at her proximity. Still, he couldn't keep his heart from warming with hope. It was the most she'd done to assert contact between them since the mansion. She hadn't recoiled from his tentative touches but she certainly hadn't returned them. Now she was purposefully pressed against him, her head finding his shoulder as his arm closed around her. He had no bloody idea what she was playing at, or if she was fully aware of her actions. All he knew was she'd made the prospect of motel hunting both immeasurably important and incredibly dangerous.

Not if she didn't want to be touched. With less than twenty-four hours between them and the mansion, he found his hands were aching to wander across her body. To make sure she wasn't hurt physically, even if her heart was bleeding. Moreover, the taste of her blood was still prominent in his mouth. His demon was roaring for completion. He craved the touch of the woman he loved. Craved the silky hot feel of her pussy clamped around his cock. Craved things he felt now he had no right to want.

"Ya'll come back now!" Margo chimed with saccharine sincerity as Spike steered Buffy into the parking lot. He flashed her a disarming smile and made a point of brushing his lips across his girl's brow.

Perhaps he'd be back later tonight. His demon's thirst had yet to be quenched, and Margo's neck looked mighty juicy. The thought, at least, provided a moment of pleasure.

He directed Buffy to the car and helped her into her seat. Across the street was a Super 8, and he supposed it was as good a place as any for the night.

He just hoped that rest and morning light would clear the fog in his slayer's eyes.

"We have the room all day tomorrow," Spike said conversationally, though the strain in his voice was pronounced. He locked the door and tossed the room keys onto the table that sat on his left. Buffy stood several feet away at the foot of the bed, her back to him. She hadn't said anything since the restaurant. "And if you wanna stay longer, just say the word."

Buffy inhaled sharply and nodded.

"Sweetheart?" Spike sighed and took several steps forward, stopping when he was all but pressed against her, his chest at her back. "Buffy...talk to me."

She didn't say anything. His hands closed around her upper arms, and before he could stop himself, he'd inhaled the sweet fragrance of her hair. God, there was nothing about her that didn't tempt him. Just standing here—holding her but not—and he was a man lost. He'd left Drusilla for this—for the simplicity of being with the woman he loved. True, he'd left Dru for a number of reasons, one of which being his rather reasonable problem with women who nailed him to walls, but he knew he'd be here with Buffy regardless of the way his relationship with Dru fell apart.

He loved her. He loved her so bloody much.

"Buffy please..." Spike's mouth dropped to her shoulder. "Please talk to me, baby. Please..."

He knew he was asking for it. Suppose she did start talking. Suppose she broke down about how much she loved Angel and how she'd never heal from shoving him ass-first into Hell. It'd break him completely. It'd leave him in ruins. But god, he couldn't stop. He couldn't help himself. Not when he needed to touch her so badly. Not when the accumulation of the past few days was pushing past the last barrier. He'd promised her and himself it wouldn't be over with the ending of Angelus. And standing with the curve of her ass pressed against his crotch, with her scent flooding his nostrils, the last logical strain of knowledge was dangerously close to snapping.

"Please..."

Then something happened. Something which changed everything.

Before he could blink in surprise, Buffy twisted in his arms, cupped his cheeks, and dragged his mouth to hers. Warmth exploded and stars fell —her tongue pushing past his lips as his senses exploded with her taste. And that was it. He was an evil bloke. Pure evil. And the woman he wanted was growling into his mouth, shoving his duster to the ground and scraping his lips with her teeth.

Christ. What did she want from him? He wasn't a fucking saint. He thought he covered as much with the *evil* thing. But god help him, her heavenly scent was thick in the air, tickling his nostrils and making his mouth water. Her body was open to him at long last, arousal pumping her veins and need stretching every move she made. And if he answered her—if he gave her what she was suddenly screaming for, there would be no going back.

"Buffy—"

"Shut up," she barked, raking his shirt over his head before turning her hands to her own top. "Just shut up, Spike."

Objection flared within him, but god, he couldn't help himself. His greedy eyes immediately landed on her lace-clad breasts, the rose protrusions of her delectable nipples silently begging for his mouth. Spike swallowed hard and licked his lips, a disobedient hand reaching to palm one of her ripe breasts before he could help himself.

"Buffy," he choked, his dick painfully hard and straining against the denim of his trousers. "Oh fuck."

"Yes," she agreed breathlessly, reaching behind her to unclasp her bra.

And then the flimsy garment fell away, and he was staring at her naked tits for the first time. His mouth watered and his cock strained. She was even more perfect than he'd envisioned. Golden and curvy and mouthwateringly delicious. All woman. This little creature was all woman. Her breasts were the perfect bloody handful. He wanted to feel her skin against his, he wanted to suck her nipples into his mouth. He wanted to do everything at once and it left him paralyzed with astonishment.

One would think a hundred years of living would have left him jaded when it came to the female body. But the only other woman he'd ever fucked was Dru. Dru was cold. Buffy was hot. Dru was pencil-

thin. Buffy was shapely and athletic, hard where a woman should be hard and soft where a woman should be soft. Dru was pale and fragile. Buffy was sun-kissed and courageous. Buffy was Dru's antithesis, and perhaps that was why he loved her so much. She was everything he'd ever wanted while thinking he only deserved what he'd been given. He'd never wanted for anything else while at Dru's side, but staring at Buffy's body, he couldn't help but feel like he'd finally surfaced from Plato's cave. He'd never mistake shadows on the wall for the real thing again. How could he? How could he now that he'd seen perfection?

"Touch me," Buffy said with a boldness that surprised him.

No need to tell him twice. Spike all but lurched forward at her invitation, closing his right arm around her middle, his other hand wrapping around her perfect, weighty flesh as his head dove for her other breast. He licked a wet path around her areola, drumming the perfect nipple with his tongue until he wrangled a truly feminine moan from her lips. Spike grinned and swallowed her flesh whole, worshipping her breasts with his amorous mouth and growling into her skin.

Christ, she tasted so good. He'd wanted to taste her like this forever—like this and in so many other ways. The rich, womanly aroma tickling his nose beckoned his mouth like a siren. He wanted to bury his face between her legs and inhale her completely. He wanted her flavor in his mouth and her moans in his ears. He wanted her thrusting against him with desperation only he could quell. He wanted—in that second—everything.

Buffy wove her fingers through his hair and clutched him to her breast, whimpering helplessly. "Spike," she whispered, arching her hips against his. *"Please."*

All thought of going slow or providing her with an exit abandoned him without warning. He couldn't see but for the need splitting his insides. "You wanna be fucked, little girl?" he growled, releasing her breast to cup her ass completely as he angled her into the frantic thrusts of his hips. "Wanna feel my cock inside that juicy cunt of yours?"

Buffy mewled and nodded, her glassy eyes finding his before her hands dropped to the waistband of his jeans.

"You know how bad I want you, don't you?" He fisted her sweats,

grateful for the first time that she hadn't adorned herself with a pair of designer jeans before leaving her home. The unimpeded fragrance of purely woman slayer had teased him mercilessly for the duration of the drive. Now he couldn't be happier with her wardrobe. He didn't have to bother with a fly—it was only a matter of seconds before her legs were free and the only thing keeping him from her drenched pussy was a thin strip of cotton. "You know what you've done to me from the very bloody beginning."

"Spike..."

"You've known how often I laid awake at night, pulling at my dick and wishing it was you." He turned his hands to the clasp of his jeans. "Wishing you were—"

His words were rewarded with a fresh wave of desire. It exuded from her. Her flushed face. Her small gasps. The way she clenched her thighs. The hazy look clouding her gaze. God yes, she was aching for this as much as he was.

"Spike," she whispered again, but she didn't say anything else. She blinked with innocence which betrayed her. Her eyes were large saucers. A man could lose himself in those eyes—in the tumultuous storm raging within those endless depths. God knew he had.

"What?" she asked. He'd thought she'd be the type to attempt to shield her nudity, but her arms remained at her sides. Her glorious body was bare for his perusal, and Christ, it was impossible to look his fill.

The previous litany of crude references to how much he'd wanted her abandoned him. In a blink, he was overwhelmed by her beauty. "You're so gorgeous."

Words were cheap—she wasn't just gorgeous. She was radiant. She was magnificent. Just knowing her luscious body was his—his to touch, his to fuck, his to cherish—made the demon growl in delight. He would never let her stray. After tonight, there was no going back. There was no returning to the way things had once been between them. Once he'd tasted her, he wasn't letting her go.

Mine.

The demon snarled again in approval. Yes, she would be his. Spike licked his lips and raked his eyes down her body, focusing intently on

the damp material clinging to her sex. "Take your knickers off," he said slowly, popping the button of his jeans with measured intent. "I wanna see that pussy of yours."

Buffy stiffened but the air exploded with another wave of arousal. She was dripping for him, and he couldn't wait to taste her honey. And while he saw defiance flash in her emerald eyes, it didn't stop her hands —trembling now, much to his satisfaction—from seizing either side of her panties and slowly dragging them down her legs. His eyes followed the progression greedily, his own hands stripping himself of his jeans. He enjoyed the widening of her gaze as her eyes followed the enthusiastic bounce of his cock, almost as much as he enjoyed the breath she inhaled and the shimmer of juices along her inner thighs. He wanted to see her on her back with her legs spread. He wanted her to open up—to let his fingers and tongue explore every crevice of her sex. He wanted to taste everything.

And just like that, they were both naked. They were naked together for the first time. The knowledge was positively intoxicating.

If he were a gentleman, Spike reasoned as he took a pronounced step toward her, he would allow her one last out. One last escape hatch. One last chance to end the dance before it began. If he were a gentleman, he would remember the freshness of her loss and the soreness of her heart, and recognize a good rutting was likely not the antidote. But with Buffy standing before him, naked as the world had born her, he could not claim to be a gentleman. No, at that moment, he was very much a demon. A sinner. A creature of the devil who wanted nothing more than to devour her every inch.

Moreover, he was a man in love—a man in love who wanted to worship the woman he loved with his body. He craved her pussy like he'd never craved anything. He wanted to make her forget everything —Angel, her mother, the apocalypse, everything.

He wanted to make her love him.

"Spike?"

There was only question in her tone. The resounding echo of a girl too lost to be found. And if he allowed her a moment too long of introspection, he feared her sudden rush of bravado would vanish and he wasn't strong enough to give up the promise of her touch.

"Back up," he growled before he could stop himself, gesturing to the piece of furniture which housed the motel's television. There was a good two feet of space to the television's left—providing her scrumptious arse with more than enough wiggle room. "Sit."

"You're not in control here," she fired back, though her voice was shaking.

"No?"

"I want—"

"And you'll get what you want. Lord knows I've wanted it long enough." Spike wrapped a hand around his cock and stroked himself unabashedly for her widening eyes. "I want your pussy around me so bloody badly. I wanna taste every sodding inch of you. I wanna fuck you till you can't stand." He broke forward for her without a second thought, shoving her onto the stand and spreading her legs with his free hand. "You want me here, don't you?" he rasped, uncaring he was repeating himself, his eager fingers parting her slick vaginal lips, drunk instantly when her honey ran onto his skin. "You want me to fuck your brains out."

Buffy sobbed and bucked against his hand, nodding desperately. "Yes," she whispered, shuddering hard as though the word scandalized her. "Make me forget."

Rage split through his body without warning and he didn't know why. The head of his cock rubbed the length of her sopping hole, slathering him with her juices and driving him out of his bloody mind. "You wanna forget?" he snarled. "You want me to fuck his memory right out of you?"

Buffy's eyes flashed and she met his with crippling understanding. "Spike—"

He didn't want to hear it. Didn't want to see her awareness. Didn't want her to see the hurt she caused without knowing it.

She wanted to forget Angel.

By god, he'd make her forget.

Spike snarled and smashed his lips to hers, slamming his cock so deep inside her light exploded behind his eyes and he saw stars. He was suffocating in heat—surrounded by liquid velvet and squeezed so tight it was a wonder he could feel his dick at all. White hot pleasure

crashed over every plane of his body. It was the most perfectly bittersweet moment of his life. He knew all at once he'd sold himself forever—he'd given into temptation and made himself more an addict for her. And in doing so, he'd lost her completely.

Knowing it didn't slow his body down. Too soon he was sliding out of her pussy and slamming in again. Her body rocked hard against his, a heady gasp tearing through her throat as her lips tore from his and her head flew back. "Oh my god."

"That's right," Spike growled, unable to quell his fury. Whether at Buffy or himself, he didn't know, but at the moment it didn't seem to matter. Logic intervened and told him plainly he had no right to be angry with her. Again, she'd asked for nothing. Nothing but a good fuck, which he could give her. Which he would give her over and over if it was what she wanted.

She was so tight. He'd never known a woman this tight.

She was tight because this was only her second time with a man. Her virginity had been intact not too long ago, and she'd given it to her precious Angel.

Spike roared, his neck snapping back, his hips pounding into hers hard enough to hurt. He wasn't being careful and he knew he ought to be, but he couldn't help himself. "Look at me," he growled, seizing her cheeks and leveling her eyes with his. He was rocking against her with a fierceness which almost terrified him. His cock pierced her soft flesh with ruthless intensity, dipping into her pussy over and over again so hard it was a wonder the wooden surface on which she sat hadn't cracked beneath her. "Is this what you wanted?" he growled.

Buffy sobbed and nodded.

"Then *look at me.*" He bit at her lips furiously, possessively, marking her body for all she was worth. "I'm not him, Buffy. I'm *not.*"

"I know." To her credit, her eyes didn't waver from his. Their eyes locked and held, mingled pants lingering between them, his cock sliding between her soaking flesh, stroking her innermost parts as her molten walls molded around him. "Unh...Spike..."

It was all it took to melt his hard façade. Spike found his anger fading away, soaking her in and realizing for the first time this was truly happening. The dream wasn't dissolving into a slow awake. Her

heat was singeing his skin, her small, timely gasps only serving to forward the eagerness of his thrusts. He loved the way her breasts flattened against his chest. He loved the way her body rocked with the sharp drive of his hips. He loved the 'O' her perfect lips formed, the cloudy haze storming her eyes, the way she gasped every time his cock sank inside her heat. She was perfection—she was going to burn him up and bugger if he cared.

"Oh Buffy," he moaned, his eyes rolling back, fingers digging into her hips. "You're so warm."

"Nnuah," she offered ineloquently, her hips attempting to meet his every thrust, even from her slightly disadvantageous position atop the television stand.

"You're so *fucking* warm. Christ, you feel good." Spike's mouth dipped to nip at her throat, slapping against her hard. "So...so bloody good." He licked his way back to her lips, captured her in a needy, desperate kiss. He needed her taste in his mouth. Needed her tongue entwined with his. "I've wanted you so much."

Buffy mewled in protest.

"Wanted you..." Spike kissed her again, pressing his brow to hers. "Look at us, baby. Look at us." His eyes were glued to the mesmeric sight of his cock, glistening with her juices, pushing rhythmically into her pussy. "Look at how well we move together."

He felt her tremble beneath his fingers. Undoubtedly she'd never seen anything like what he was showing her, even if she had had sex before. Angel would've been a sodding prude. He wouldn't have wanted her focused on their bodies as much when in actuality, the union of their bodies was bloody glorious and not something to be disregarded as sloppy or sinful.

Though perhaps that was the *lack of a soul* thing talking. Spike just didn't understand the human tendency to demonize an act so natural it was the very method by which life was created. Pleasure was similarly forbidden—and for the pleasure waving through him with every thrust, there was no question whether or not he would ultimately end up in Hell.

Perhaps his ultimate sin would be dragging Buffy with him. One glance at their thrusting bodies, and she couldn't stop staring. Her eyes

were glued to his cock, to the way her flesh folded around him, her pussy welcoming him with every plunge. "Oh..." she whimpered and sank her teeth into his shoulder. "Spike—"

His eyes widened and his hips bucked madly against her. God, she had no idea what she was playing at. "Buffy!"

Then something happened that he couldn't have predicted. Her hands found the smooth planes of his chest and before he could blink, he'd been shoved clean out of her body, cock bouncing against his stomach as his legs hit the edge of the bed. And before he could raise his voice in protest—though to scream or whimper he didn't know—Buffy pushed him onto the mattress completely and straddled his waist, her eyes gleaming with intent.

Spike inhaled sharply, his chest heaving with breaths he knew he didn't need. He'd never breathed so much as he had around her. "Buffy—"

"I don't *want* you to be him," she growled, and though it was a belated reaction to an earlier assertion, it hadn't lost its punch. "I just want you to fuck me."

The word smacked him hard. In Buffy's voice, it sounded so raw, so taboo—it was a word he never thought he'd hear her say. Not in anger. Not in bed. Not in anything. And for the life of him, he didn't know if he was pleased or distressed.

As for the implications surrounding the word in question, his mind closed and refused to consider it. Buffy had his cheeks in her hands the next instant and was ravaging his lips with hers as he slid a hand between them to position his cock at her sopping sex once more.

Then she sank down and the stars exploded for the second time. Spike's jaws fell slack, a strangled moan catching in his throat. Holy fuck, she was such a goddess. A warm, wanton goddess. Her pussy clamped hard around him, sucking him so deeply into her he truly understood the old adage of not knowing where he ended and she began. She was soaking. God, she was perfect. And he'd dust before letting her go.

"Buffy," he gasped, his fingers digging into her thighs. But she didn't say anything. She didn't have to. Her body did all the talking.

The sight of her lifting off his aching cock only to welcome him

back into her wet heat was mesmerizing. He could watch himself sink inside her pussy all bloody night. He was completely split apart, bliss ripping through his body and burning every black stain marring his past into a euphoric baptism of absolution. Buffy's head rolled back, and he felt her stretching around him, her body adjusting to the heady strain of control. Spike was certain she'd never steered before, and knowing he could provide at least one first—one thing no one else had shared with her or ever would—sent a purely masculine jolt of pride through his pleasure-riddled bones.

"Oh yeah," he growled, licking his lips as his eyes flicked from the wet suction of her pussy swallowing him to the bounce of her small, perfect breasts. He tightened his hold on her thighs, arching his hips upward every time her vaginal walls pulled on the skin of his dick. "You're burning me up, baby."

Buffy moaned and bit her lip, her right hand closing over her breast. The ecstasy crashing over her face shook him with gut-tightening awareness. It was the most erotic thing he'd ever seen. Buffy teased her nipple as she bounced mercilessly on his cock, moaning unintelligible words which sounded like his name but could have just as easily been a number of things. Spike clenched his jaw, his balls tightening as he reined in control—pressure built and warred for supremacy, but while he longed for release, there was nothing stronger than his need to prolong this moment. This wonderful *first-time* inside Buffy.

"You love this, don't you?" He flashed a grin when her eyes shot open. "You love riding me."

Her lips parted, heat crashing over her face. The thrusts of her hips became more demanding, as though to answer him with her body if not her words. "Guh," she managed to cry. And that one little nonsensical word meant more to him than anything she could have otherwise conveyed.

"You love driving my cock into that sweet cunt of yours." Without warning, Spike hauled himself off the bed, pressing a hand to the curve of her ass and subtly encouraging her to keep bouncing, even as he speared himself deeper inside her. "You feel that, Slayer?" he whispered when his mouth was at her ear, her nipples rubbing his chest and driving him out of his sodding mind—though from the feel of her or

the heady moans reverberating through her body, he didn't know. "You feel how your juicy little pussy sucks me right bloody back inside you every time you—"

"Oh god!"

"Fuck yes." Spike covered his mouth with hers and flipped her onto her back, consuming her whimper when the move jerked him hard inside her. "I love the way you feel."

"Spike..." Her nails scratched at his shoulders, her legs wrapping around him as he began to pound into her. She was so soft. So soft and warm and wet and *his*. God, she was his. He was going fuck Angel's name right out of her vocabulary. Never again would he find himself standing across the room from the woman he loved as she wrapped herself in another bloke's embrace.

Never.

Jealousy split him again and Spike roared before he could help himself. He knew he had no right—the git was dead and the matter was done with, but he couldn't stand the idea of competing with his grandsire's ghost. He intended to keep Buffy forever. *Forever.* He didn't want to worry about who she saw when she slept. If she was thinking about someone else when he touched her. He wanted her with him. Always. *Always.*

He fisted a handful of her hair and tilted her head back. "Look at me," he growled over the noisy slaps of their bodies.

Buffy's eyes were wide but void of fear, and she didn't question him. Instead, she merely held his gaze, her hips arching off the bed in time with his desperate thrusts.

"My name. Say it."

There wasn't a second of hesitation. "Spike."

"Who's fucking you, Slayer?"

"Spike..."

He sighed hard and dipped his head, nipping at her lips with his teeth before consuming her in another desperate kiss. He mauled her tongue with his, sucking her so deeply into his mouth he'd be tasting her for weeks. And that was just the way he wanted it. He would make it his prerogative to never awake without Buffy in his mouth ever again.

"Feel so good," he murmured when their lips parted, brushing a kiss over her cheek with a sudden rush of gentleness. He released her hair and scaled his hand south, slipping between their thrusting bodies and finding her clit with a purr of satisfaction. Buffy jerked and gasped, arching into his hand, her vaginal walls tightening hard around his cock.

"Ohhh!" she cried. "What...what are you..."

"Wanna feel you come. Drench me, baby. Lemme feel it."

"Oh! Oh my *GOD!*"

Then she was squeezing him with an intensity he'd never felt before. Squeezing him with muscles he didn't know existed. Squeezing him with desperation unlike anything he'd experienced, as though attempting to lock him inside her with each slippery slide from her wet pussy. As though to make it impossible for their bodies to ever part. And every wonderful squeeze had his eyes crossing and tortured growls ripping off his lips. Spike pinched her clit and howled, the pads of his fingers quickly setting to rub her out of her mind. His fingers were wet. His balls ached. Buffy was thrashing and mewling beneath him and reason blinked out the window.

He needed her. He needed this to be forever.

He needed to ensure she never left him. Not for a second. Dru's infidelity had hurt, but Buffy leaving him would render him dust. He couldn't let her go. Not now. Not ever.

And as his demon finally roared free, fangs descending as his blue eyes glowed amber, he knew what he needed to do. He knew.

He needed to make her his.

Thus before he could stop himself, Spike buried his face in the crook of her neck, his incisors piercing her flesh, and as the warm ambrosia of her blood flowed into his mouth, he knew he'd arrived home.

Buffy screamed and clenched hard around him, soaking his cock as her body exploded into a series of spasms that had him spilling himself inside her the next second. It was the purest release he'd ever known. Thrusting hips determined to take as much of her as she'd give him, her blood bathing his tongue and the singularity of intent clearing his mind.

"Mine," he growled against her flesh. "You're mine, Buffy."

She sobbed in pleasure. "Yes. Oh god, yes."

The skies parted and something within him locked. "Mine," he said again, this time proudly and not possessively. His long tongue licked at the mark he'd given her, trembling when she did. "God, Buffy...you're mine now."

There was nothing for a long minute.

"No," she whispered, shattering him with alarm a split second before her teeth sank into his shoulder. "You're *mine."*

Spike's eyes fell shut and his already hardening cock grew fully erect in a blink. "Oh yes. Yes."

No sense arguing with the truth. He was hers. He was completely hers. He always had been.

So overwhelmed with belonging, he didn't consider asking her if she'd felt it, too. The way the air had trembled. Beyond their panting bodies, beyond the fingers at her clit stroking her still as he began thrusting inside her again, something else had changed. Something big.

Tomorrow, he thought. *We'll talk tomorrow.*

He was too much in need of her to talk now. Tomorrow, when the gritty edge of his desperation was at least fleetingly satisfied, he would tell her.

Right now, he just wanted to make love to her. Over and over and over again.

The rest could wait until tomorrow.

15

She'd never before awakened in a bed with a man and the sensation filled her with a devastating rush of warmth and alarm. The arm around her middle tightened almost immediately as though sensing her unease, the chest pressed against her back rumbling a soothing purr as Spike subconsciously drew her nearer to nuzzle her hair. Buffy lay awake for a long time, staring mindlessly into nothing. Trying hard to put right what had happened last night in the jumbled mess of her mind. What she'd done in the mindless aftermath of complete devastation.

The tears she'd cried weren't for Angel. Not entirely. While she knew she would never forget the betrayal in his eyes or the way his hand had reached for her, she'd reconciled with what she'd done almost immediately. There hadn't been a choice—Angel himself had made sure of that. It was sacrifice Angel or lose the world, and the world deserved to be saved far more than he did.

Angel didn't know why he'd died. Why she'd run him through with a sword. Why she hadn't returned his declaration of love. Why anything that had occurred in the last moments of his life had occurred at all. It was something she couldn't change. Something she'd

just have to live with. Something she'd done to save the world. Something she couldn't regret.

It wasn't losing Angel which had broken her. It was everything. It was this. It was lying in an unfamiliar bed in the suburb of a city which hadn't been her home for two years. A city where she'd left as a child and was returning to as an adult. It was lying in bed beside a man who had touched her in ways no man should—her worn, beaten heart was bleeding, and she'd willingly tossed herself into another arena. She was broken all over and she'd hoped Spike would fix her.

She didn't know why she'd thought sex would make it better. Lying in the calm beside him, the idiocy of her actions glared with unforgiving scrutiny. She'd used him. She'd tapped into the feelings she knew he had for her and used him in order to feel something other than hollow. She'd used him and she was disgusted with herself.

Namely because despite all her efforts, turning off her own feelings was impossible. She'd thought she could ignore what she felt for Spike in the aftermath of something so brutal. She had been wrong. So wrong. But that didn't make things better.

No. It made things immeasurably worse.

And she hurt. God, she hurt. She hurt for Spike. For the tender way he cuddled up behind her. For the gentle purrs he released into her hair and the loving way his hands caressed her body, even in sleep. He gave her so much without asking for anything, and while last night had been one of the most explosive nights of her life, her bruised heart wasn't prepared for another crushing blow.

I can't do this.

There was nothing left to give. Nothing left in her whatsoever. No want of love to give. No want of love to receive. Nothing but an ugly scar where there had once been warmth—a scar which ached with resounding freshness whenever her treacherous mind wandered into the forbidden territory she'd crossed last night. In everything that had happened, she'd never suspected this would be the fallout.

Spike hadn't been coy in his intentions or desires. Since the beginning, since the sinful kiss they'd shared in the halls of Sunnydale High, he'd been as forward and blunt in his wants as any man she'd ever known. He'd rocked her foundations and wheedled his way into her

heart. He'd defied everything she knew about conventional vampires in how *unconventional* he was. He'd been her friend and confidant when she'd felt at her loneliest.

She'd wanted him so much before what had happened at the mansion. Before the totality of her loss came crashing down and she realized the consequences of everything that had occurred since she awoke that fateful morning.

She'd lost her home. She'd lost her friends. She'd lost her watcher. She'd lost her mother. She'd lost her first love. She'd lost everything.

She'd lost everything but Spike, who refused to be lost. Spike had rushed her away at her request. Spike hadn't pried her for conversation. Spike had fed her, cared for her, and wouldn't have touched her last night had she not been the one to jump him. Had she not been so desperate to feel something beyond the cold that she was willing to do anything or use anyone in order to fulfill her needs.

Even someone she cared about.

At once, Buffy felt old. Very old. She'd just barely crossed the boundary of her seventeenth birthday and she felt like decades had passed overnight. She'd used someone she cared about and there was no taking it back. There was only the hurt she'd cause him in the afterward. The knowledge she had nothing she could give him. Nothing of the words he'd whispered or the caresses he'd given her. There was absolutely nothing.

Sex without love was something she couldn't abide. Not after what she'd had. A part of her had hoped Spike would fuck her cares right out of her, but he hadn't. He couldn't. Instead, he'd been convinced he was fucking Angel out of her when there was no way he could. Not when Angel wasn't the source of her pain. Angel was far removed from her—she hurt for him but not *because* of him. Not because of what she'd done. Killing Angel had been necessary. She'd known it going in and she knew it now.

It just hadn't happened the way she'd wanted it to happen. Losing Angel hadn't crushed her, but it had been the final straw.

And now here she was. Lying beside a man who cared for her—a man she cared for in turn—but there was nothing more between them. Nothing she could part with. Nothing her broken soul could entrust

into his bloodstained hands. He was a vampire—a vampire whose moral boundaries were about as set as the devil's in paradise. He said he wanted her, and she believed he meant it, but what would his promise be worth in a month? In two months? What would it be worth to him when he realized how broken she was? What would it be worth to him after the excitement was over and it became painfully clear she couldn't stomach being with a man who regarded morality with the same casualness that others might regard the weather?

Spike had whispered pretty words but pretty words couldn't save her.

Buffy shivered hard and sighed. She knew her conclusion wasn't fair. She knew it but she couldn't help herself. The bottom line remained that Spike was still a vampire, and no amount of poetry or promises could change his nature. Spike was a very soulless vampire. Spike could destroy her without hurting a hair on her head.

If Spike gave her a reason to kill him as Angel had, she wouldn't survive. And she didn't want to stick around long enough to find out if he would.

Buffy sniffed hard and slowly wiggled out of his embrace. She expected the arm around her middle to tighten at the first hint of movement, but Spike offered little more than a yawn and turned over in his sleep. She threw her legs over the side of the bed, wincing when her sore muscles complained under the movement. Her thighs were tender, and her pussy ached. Spike had nearly broken her at first in his anger and outrage at what he'd thought was holding her back.

Then the night had turned on her, and the fury in his eyes washed into bone-melting awe and wonder. He'd stroked her face with his fingertips, pumping into her body and whispering words against her lips that would have crushed a lesser woman. He'd claimed her as his own. His fangs had pierced her throat and her blood had flown into his mouth. He'd murmured words and proclaimed her as his. She supposed it was the truth.

She did belong to him. She just couldn't have him, and he couldn't have her.

Her vision blurred as she raised herself to trembling legs. She ignored the dull ache attacking her muscles with every step she took,

just as she ignored the cold air stinging her skin and the resounding pang which struck her heart the further away from him she walked.

She couldn't stop herself, however, from glancing wistfully over her shoulder at the man she'd left on the bed. Her eyes were soft and her heart was sore. There wasn't an inch of her that didn't hurt.

Somehow, Buffy made it to the bathroom without collapsing. She flipped on the light and winced as her tear-filled eyes blinked in adjustment. A long violent sigh rolled off her shoulders, and before she knew what she was doing, she was standing under the shower nozzle, her face turned upward as water cascaded over her aching body. It always seemed to work in movies. The cleansing power of a good scrub-down. The purity of water to wash away the night's sins. She hoped the dirt and grime staining her flesh would carry with it the weight holding her down, but she received no such satisfaction.

She could bathe and scrub all she liked. Her problems weren't going anywhere. She was still far from home. She was still quaking with the aftermath of Spike's passionate lovemaking. She was still breaking because she knew she wasn't programmed for this. For any of it. For the softness in his eyes or the way he touched her like she was cherished. For feeling like she ought to give him something when she had to keep whatever she had left. Whatever feeling beyond the cold had to be preserved, else she'd truly be left with nothing.

It was because of that, she couldn't stay with him. At all. She couldn't hand herself over to reckless abandon and allow him to fuck her concerns away. She couldn't do last night again. Never again. She couldn't have sex when love wasn't in the equation, and though she felt closer to Spike than anyone, there was no love. There was the want of love, but wishing could not make it so. She couldn't love when she was broken.

And even if she could, one resounding truth refused to waver.

No more vampires.

Buffy sniffed again and wiped at her eyes. A useless gesture, of course, but needed nonetheless.

I can't do this.

There was no reason to believe Spike would make any of this easy. A part of her had expected him to join her in the shower, and she was

not disappointed. Buffy honestly didn't know how much time passed before the shower-curtain rattled and his presence consumed the small space surrounding her. Her body rejoiced even as her heart broke down sobbing again. She stood motionless, facing the showerhead, trembling and waiting for him to make a move.

And god, when he moved, the walls came tumbling down. Spike's arms wrapped around her middle, his strong chest flattened against her back. His cock, hard but undemanding, settled provocatively against her ass. And he held her for long minutes without a word.

He was going to crush her.

"It's all right, kitten," he murmured, and she realized with a start she was crying again. Spike didn't pressure her—didn't ask why or plead with her to stop. She'd seen men come undone at a woman's tears and wasn't sure whether or not to be grateful that he didn't demand she cease sniveling for his benefit.

It didn't matter. She couldn't stop. She *wasn't* all right.

"I'll take care of you." His lips brushed the bite mark he'd given her the night before. Buffy trembled and gasped, an unwanted but sorely-needed rush of lust making her already-wobbly knees even weaker. To her surprise, Spike didn't purr in delight. Instead, he merely kissed the mark again and nuzzled his face against the curve of her neck. "I'll take such good care of you."

"Spike," Buffy whimpered, her hand falling to his where it rested against her abdomen. Their fingers intertwined without hesitation. As though this was what they were built for. As though every move was purposefully synchronized, and her body knew it in spite of her head's confusion and her heart's objections.

His left hand fell from her waist, his right maintaining a possessive, near reverent clasp on hers. Perhaps subconsciously, his hips had begun a seductive dance against her backside, the sensual length of his cock rubbing her ass into a new kind of crazy. She had no idea how it was possible to collapse with desire with her heart and mind at such war—especially with her body sore and overly tender from last night. But god, at the softest touch, her insides liquefied into molten desire. She was at once aching and consumed with need. Wetness slicked the flesh between her thighs. Sparks of arousal had her every

fiber blazing. Her conviction, fresh and painful as it was, surged and died. She knew then she wouldn't be able to walk away without one more taste.

Without knowing exactly what she was leaving behind.

Buffy wasn't accustomed to being so easily manipulated. So effortlessly aroused. Not once had Angel left her burning like this. His touches had always warmed her, made her feel precious and cherished, but not hot and desired. While his kisses had done their part to ignite an inner fire, Angel had never pursued her arousal. Not until the night she'd given him her virginity.

Spike didn't just pursue her arousal—he hunted it down. He craved it. He drove her out of her mind and made no small noise about the magnitude of his rejoicing when his pursuit was met with success. Spike wasn't the type to be content simply building a fire. No, he would caress her until her insides were burning, then encourage the flames to a roaring explosion.

The determination housed within her bones began to waver. How was she supposed to think about leaving him when he touched her so lovingly? Her set mind blanked completely as his free hand dipped between her thighs, nimble fingers caressing her tender folds with a flippancy which made the strokes seem almost accidental. Raw emotion spread through her body like a disease, and she sagged against him, weakened and powerless to fight.

Allow me this. God please, allow me this.

"Are you sore, baby?" Spike asked before sucking her earlobe between his teeth and giving it a seductive tug. "I wasn't exactly gentle with you last night."

Could he feel her indecisiveness? Did he know she was too much of a coward to stick this out? Did he know she was slipping away from him? Did he know she wouldn't be with him this time tomorrow?

Tears threatened to spill down over her cheeks again. Buffy's eyes fell shut and she trembled, her legs spreading in silent welcome. He didn't question or allow her time to second-guess the invitation. Instead, he captured her clit between his thumb and forefinger, his mouth dropping again to the mark on her throat. His arm tightened around her middle when she gasped.

"Answer me," Spike pleaded softly, his voice tight with need. "I want to be inside you so bloody badly, but if it's gonna hurt—"

"I am a little sore," she confessed and regretted the words immediately for the way he inhaled sharply and began to pull away. The decision she'd made was unmovable—her intentions undeterred. But she'd be damned if she didn't leave him with memories of warmth and tenderness to coincide with the cold solace he'd provided her the night before.

She'd need memories of this to keep her warm when she was alone.

"I don't wanna hurt you."

Alarm seized her insides. No, she needed this. She needed him one last time. Before she sent herself into a self-imposed exile, she needed Spike. She needed to know exactly what she was leaving behind. She needed to try and convey everything she didn't want to feel through touch—and in doing so, everything she wanted to give him. "Please."

"Please?" he echoed, his teeth gently scraping the bite mark. "Please what?"

"Please, Spike..."

Spike squeezed her hand and tugged her against him so that her back was resting completely against his chest, her weight supported by his entirely. "Please what?" he echoed. "Hurt you? Sorry, sweetheart, no can do. I'm not angry now. I hurt you enough—"

"You didn't—"

"And I'm not gonna."

Buffy shook her head, hot sparks blazing across her skin. "Don't hurt," she managed between gasps, coherency mingling with desire. "Just...just love me."

For a second she thought she'd said something to upset him. Spike went rigid, breaths crashing against her wet, trembling flesh and his body quaking so hard against hers she honestly didn't know where he ended and she began. Perhaps she'd gotten ahead of herself—not that it mattered, of course. It wasn't like she was going to see him again. Today would be her last with Spike. She was spiraling down a dark path where even he could not follow. She didn't need any more demons whispering in her ear. She didn't need another vampire lover.

Not when she couldn't allow herself to love him.

The silence around them broke on a reverent gasp. "Oh Buffy," Spike moaned, twisting her at once in his arms. And the thin veil keeping reality from fantasy shattered. He was there, drowning her in the crystal tide of his endless eyes, preventing her from hiding herself from the veracity of the world around her.

Her heart hammered hard against her chest, making her knees rattle and her bones shake. And when his lips fluttered over hers, a dam inside broke. His kiss was so soft. So tender. His tongue stroked hers, savoring her, his small whimpers rumbling against her mouth. He tasted so good—the perfect embodiment of the ever proverbial forbidden fruit. Buffy could kiss him forever and not want for anything. He was all male. He was danger personified. Yet in his arms, she felt safer than she had in all her life.

It was false security, she knew. The hands which caressed her had caused endless amounts of pain and suffering. How many mothers had wept over dead sons and daughters as a result of these hands? How many husbands had lost their wives? How many children had been left orphaned? How many times had Spike licked his victims' blood off his fingers? How many tears had he left in the past?

Those were the sort of scars which could never be healed. Not with time. Not even with death. And she knew it wasn't really Spike's fault. Spike couldn't be held accountable for being what he was—for doing what was natural to him. She couldn't hate him for being a vampire. But she couldn't lose herself in another killer's arms. She couldn't—not when she was still scrubbing Angel's dust off her skin.

She couldn't risk choking on darkness. Spike had already wormed his way deep into her heart. She hadn't thought of what would come of it in the aftermath of slaying Angel. Perhaps, had Angel not come back in those fateful final seconds, she wouldn't feel this way. She wouldn't have been reminded of the prevailing responsibility on her shoulders. The calling she was fleeing from but could never escape.

Once the emptiness subsided she knew she would have to pick up the pieces. Her sense of duty would return. And if she stayed with Spike now, if she allowed their relationship to deepen even more, and if he one day betrayed her, there would be no recovery.

It was a dangerous supposition, she knew—living her life based

on *what ifs*. She didn't like it, but she couldn't trust herself with anything absolute. As long as Spike was a demon he would always be evil. Always. He could promise her the sun and moon and stars and mean every word. It didn't matter. His nature demanded blood and violence. Spike had no ties to her beyond the forged alliance they'd formed over the past few days and the passionate night they had shared together.

She cared for him. She truly did. And she hated knowing she'd used him. Even if Spike had known he was being used.

He had, too. He'd known he was being used. Last night, it had angered him. He didn't seem angry now.

"You taste so good," Spike murmured into her mouth, hiking her legs around his waist, the head of his cock rubbing along her aching slit. "So warm and sweet."

Buffy mewled against his lips, her self-loathing deepening. She wanted to shut her mind off completely.

He stroked her clit almost lazily, his mouth breaking from hers to whisper small kisses down her throat. "You're mine, you know," he whispered, his teeth again grazing the bite mark he'd given her. "This here? This makes you mine. Forever."

The words made her stomach clench but Buffy didn't reply. She merely tightened her arms around him and rubbed herself against his hand.

"Say you're mine, Buffy. Say it again."

Her eyes blinked with new tears. "I'm yours," she said, but the words rode out on a long, strangled sob as his cock sank deep into her pussy. Her vaginal walls clamped hard around him and tortured bliss spread through her veins. The water hitting her skin had long gone cold, but she didn't care. Between the cold at her back and the cold body of the vampire moving inside her, she was surprised she hadn't melted with heat.

Nothing in her life made sense. Nothing.

"Again," Spike begged, burying his face in the crook of her neck. "Say it. Please, baby..."

Her heart wrenched. "Yours."

Deeper and deeper. Buffy couldn't keep herself from crying. Spike

didn't question her. Didn't do anything but caress her face and kiss her lips as his cock slid rhythmically in and out of her body.

She wanted to freeze this moment. To forget the pain ripping her insides apart. To forget the world which defined them by what they were. She would never have this again. This was a moment she would bottle and carry with her wherever she went.

Because, with Spike or not, she was his. Somehow she knew she was his.

She just couldn't stay.

"It's all right," Spike murmured, kissing her shoulder. "It's all right."

But it wasn't. It wasn't.

And try as she might, even as he made love to her with his words and his lips and his body, Buffy couldn't stop weeping. She just prayed he didn't look into her eyes. If he did, he'd know immediately this was their last time together. And he'd hate her for it. For using him. For making him believe something. For making him think she could give him something she didn't have.

He'd be within his right to loathe her. God knows she loathed herself enough.

The very thought, however, left her feeling colder than before. And Buffy knew without question that she wouldn't survive it. Even if she never saw him again, she couldn't abide the thought of Spike existing in the world...and hating her.

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She wasn't with him.

Spike watched her carefully, his body wrought with tension. He wanted to approach her even if he feared making things worse. He wanted to kiss her, but despite their tender lovemaking in the shower, he somehow knew physical comfort wasn't something she needed. She'd whispered things that made his undead heart sing. She'd asked him to love her, and it had taken every facet of his tired being to keep from assuring her that love was the one thing she would never need to ask of him. Love was the one thing she would always have.

He just didn't know if she wanted it—not in the way he wanted to love her, anyway. The Buffy he'd known in Sunnydale had vanished completely. The spark in her eyes had faded, along with the smile on her lips and the laughter in her throat. The life in her was gone, and he didn't know what to do.

God, he didn't know what to do.

So he watched. He stood quietly beside her, leaning against the wall with his arms folded as she fluffed her hair almost robotically. She couldn't see him in the mirror, of course. The mirror reflected her and her alone.

But she *wasn't* alone. Every rigid move she made was wrung with

awareness. She felt his eyes on her as sure as she felt anything. Spike was certain of it.

His eyes fell almost reluctantly to the mark on her throat. The mark on her throat which declared her as his. They still hadn't spoken about it. About what had happened the second he'd sunk his fangs into her luscious body. There wasn't an inch of him that failed to hum. He was pulled to her and yet kept his distance. His arms ached to be around her. His body, unaccustomed to the tug of its mate's call, was hard and desperate to be inside her again. Spike had never thought himself as one to claim or be claimed—not after the failed attempt to stake his claim on Drusilla.

His demon snarled at the thought of his maker, but even as his cells drew him near his mate, his mind couldn't help but wander. It was easy to see now that Dru had never been his, and he supposed a part of him had even known it at the time. Still, it hadn't made the burn of her rejection any less painful. He well remembered the endless sea of hurt—the wail consuming his insides had echoed through his body for years. He hadn't understood then, even if her refusal hadn't completely surprised him. He hadn't understood how a woman who seemed to love him could refuse a man devoted to worshipping the very ground she walked on. A man who would dedicate his very existence to making her happy.

He hadn't been good enough for Dru. It was a sad reality—one which had followed him in shadows for years. One he would have ignored until the end of time had it not been for Buffy. Had Buffy not led him into sunlight. He burned for Buffy but didn't dust—she provided what no woman before her had or ever could. She'd made him see.

He'd left with her consciously. Dru was god-knows-where. Perhaps he'd been a sentimental fool in leaving her alive, but even with as much as the bitch had hurt him—even knowing of her intention to destroy him—the part of him that remained grateful to her refused to take her life.

She would not be so lucky a second time. If Dru attempted to break into his life again—if she came after him or Buffy—he would

destroy her. His debt to her was repaid in full. He'd already granted clemency she didn't deserve.

Buffy was his everything. He felt like he belonged after so many years of wandering through darkness. He felt as though the clouds had finally parted. He'd found in her what other men wasted lifetimes searching for, and he'd found her by accident. The love burning his chest was almost painful, but imagining a life without the warmth she gave him was strikingly unbearable. He'd only had her for a short while and he already knew he couldn't manage without her. It was a stark rebuttal of whatever he'd thought he'd felt in the past. With Cecily. With Dru. He didn't know how it was different, but god, it was. And it was wonderful.

He suspected it was wonderful because it was real. He'd been attracted to darkness in the past. He was, after all, a vampire. But even as a man, his heart had led him to women encased in shadows and too in love with themselves to ever give love to anyone else. Cecily had been pride wrapped in selfishness. She'd stood as wintry as any woman he'd ever known, and she'd sent him running into the arms of true blackness.

Buffy wasn't dark. Not even now when she was broken could she hope to be dark. She was lost, doing her best to keep from completely shattering with every step. She was in need but she wouldn't ask for it. She wanted so badly to be strong. She didn't know how to move beyond this. She was hurting—god, she was hurting. But she wanted him to think she wasn't. She didn't know she wasn't standing alone.

And he knew she was going to run.

Spike's eyes darted to the ground, a long sigh commanding his body. It was damned hard staying quiet. Pretending not to know every wayward thought that crossed her beautiful head. His knowledge had nothing to do with the claim, though the feelings he felt rippling through her energy only substantiated what he already knew. He didn't want her to know that he knew—he didn't want her to think he would try to stop her.

He wanted to stop her. God knows he did. But he knew stopping her would forfeit the sacred trust between them. Stopping her would

make her think he didn't value her independence or her strength. Stopping her would compromise everything.

He would let her go because he loved her. He wouldn't let her get far—just far enough. But he would let her go.

He had to if he had any hope of keeping her.

Any more distance between them would mean the end of them both. And he couldn't let her leave him forever. He loved her too bloody much not to be near her. She didn't know she belonged to him, or rather that he belonged to her. But she had given herself to him freely. She could have refuted his claim when his fangs found her throat. She could have laughed and shoved him off her. She could have refused him.

She hadn't. And Spike's love for her had deepened. Not because she hadn't refused him—it had nothing to do with Buffy's acceptance of a claim she didn't know he'd placed on her and everything to do with her acceptance of *him*. In a moment of pure instinct, she'd said yes to him. She'd said yes. And while he'd already loved her with everything he was before the magical word crossed her gorgeous lips, his love had fused into something larger and more powerful than he'd thought possible. He was helplessly and hopelessly hers, and as long as he breathed air he didn't need, he would bend reality to give her what she needed.

Even if what she needed was freedom.

A long, trembling sigh rolled off his lips. For now.

Just enough to give her a head start.

"I bloody hate mirrors," Spike said, swallowing every emotion that crashed over her face at the intrusion of his voice. "Most of the time, anyway."

Buffy nodded, her eyes shooting to the place in the mirror where he would be standing if he cast a reflection. He found it endearing, something that told him plainly that she was aware of him—even more so than she knew. That she didn't consider him absent just because she couldn't see him.

"Most of the time, I do, too," she replied, her lips pulling into a half-smile that didn't reach her eyes. "My hair never does what I want it to."

"Your hair's perfect."

"It's—"

"Looks like you've been well shagged, and I happen to find that look rather fetching." He smirked, his eyes dropping to take in the delicious curves that composed her backside. "I'm also finding I like seeing your front and back at the same time."

Buffy paused again, her eyes once more seeking him in the mirror. She locked gazes with him without knowing it, and the power behind her intuition stole unneeded breath from his lungs. "I don't have much of a front," she replied, casting a self-conscious glance to her succulent breasts. "I used to be able to fill a C-cup, but that was before the slayage started and my baby fat went away. Now it's all B all the way."

"You're gorgeous."

"So says the man who's gotten lucky twice."

"So says the man who's had those delicious tits of yours in his mouth," he countered, enjoying the blush that stretched across her milky skin. "You're flawless."

"You're thinking with your penis." In another woman's voice, it would have sounded like an accusation. In Buffy's, it was almost an endearment.

God, he loved her. He was going to miss her so bloody much. He missed her already and she hadn't left yet. Spike honestly didn't know how long he was going to be able to withstand the distance between them. He wanted to give her time but something told him he'd be lucky if he managed to hold off his instincts as long as a week, his first one being to be around her always. Letting her go at all went against everything he knew.

Throw in the claim and he was thoroughly lost. He was lost enough without the words and the sacred bond between them.

"Doesn't make it any less true," he replied, his eyes dipping to her breasts. Christ, now he wanted her again. He didn't know why she was primping her hair, but something told him it wasn't to shag him before she took off. "Trust me, love...there's not a thing about you I'd dream of changing."

Buffy's eyes darted downward, her skin flushing a deeper red. "Stop," she protested softly.

"Stop what? Telling you you're beautiful? Sorry, love...I'm a man

who appreciates beauty. Not gonna hush just because you've gotten some wonky complex."

"I don't feel beautiful."

"That's where the wonky complex comes in." Spike swallowed hard and took a step forward. "Where we going, kitten? You hungry?"

She paused, visibly searching for words. "Yeah," she agreed. "Actually. Yeah. I...I dunno, I didn't think I'd be hungry after all we ate last night."

"It was the first thing you'd eaten since we left Sunnydale," he pointed out. The obvious response—an observation that they'd undoubtedly worked the meal off with the naked acrobatics the night before—remained lodged in his throat. He wasn't going to use sex to dominate her because Buffy wasn't the sort who could be dominated. Any attempt would only hurt her in the end.

Moreover, a submissive Buffy was the last thing he wanted. He wanted fight in her eyes and a smirk on her lips. He wanted her swinging and her body moving the way the Powers intended. He wanted his Buffy the way she was. Exactly as she was.

He wanted to fall to his knees and wrap his arms around her middle and beg her not to leave. He wanted to promise her a thousand things she wouldn't know to believe until she got a taste of the freedom she craved. This thing she felt she needed to do.

"Well, pet?" Spike prompted. "You wanna stay here and let me grab something? Or do you need to get out?"

She was quiet for a long second, and when she licked her lips he had to choke back a moan. He wanted to lick them for her.

"Are you going back to the place we went last night?" she asked. "The diner?"

He shrugged a shoulder. "I'll go wherever you want."

A half grin tugged at Buffy's lips. "The woman from the diner was lusting after you bad."

Spike snickered. "You noticed that, huh?"

"The way she was drooling all over your...sausage?" Buffy unknowingly met his eyes again in the mirror's reflection, and the ghost of her former cheekiness made his heart drop. It didn't last long, but it was

enough to give him hope. "No," she continued, glancing down again. "I completely missed that."

He smirked and stepped forward, his hands, possessing a mind of their own, slowly lifted to caress the soft, warm temptation of her bare skin. His lips ached to follow suit and brush against her shoulder. His body was wrought with tension and strangled with need—knowledge pressing down that these moments would be their last. Their last for now. Their last until the clouds around his mate parted and she returned to him.

"The bird didn't notice I had everything a man could want right across the table," he murmured before nipping at her earlobe with disobedient teeth. "That'd be you, baby."

Buffy trembled beneath his fingers. "Ohhh..."

"Mmm..." Good intentions dove out the window. He needed to have her. Just one last time, he needed to have her. "Buffy..."

Fortunately, the quivering girl under his hands seemed to agree with him. Before he could blink, Buffy released a long moan of surrender and twisted in his arms, cupping his cheeks and angling him into her kiss, splitting every vein in his body with bittersweet bliss. She tasted so good. So fucking good. All lightness and purity and she was his. His beautiful, broken girl. Her mouth bruised him in hard desperation, her tongue whipping his, her lips owning him completely.

"Spike..."

He nodded urgently against her, his hands dropping to the hem of her camisole. "Can I?" he asked, already urging the fabric up her body. Buffy mewled her consent and dragged his mouth back to hers, rumbling harmonious moans against him as he filled his palms with her breasts. "Buffy...god..."

"Need you. Please." Her shaking hands fell to his waistband, fumbling with his belt buckle. "Please. *Please.*"

"I'm here, love," Spike replied, his voice impossibly calm in cool contrast to the heat ripping him apart. His cock ached and strained hard against his zipper, desperate for the feel of her warm hand around him. He needed her so much. So fucking much. He needed to feel her in his arms, her pussy wrapped around his cock. He just needed her, and he needed her now. "I'm right here."

Buffy shook her head and gave up the conquest of his fly with a defeated sigh. Her eyes were wide and panicked, filled to the brim with tears. "Please," she cried. "Please..."

It was almost funny the way things could drop. Without warning, Spike's heart shattered. He knew what this was.

This was goodbye.

In her mind, probably forever.

But it wasn't. It wasn't forever. For them, forever was just that. The time they'd spend apart would be ultimately dwarfed by the millennia at their feet.

"I'm here," Spike told her again, his voice achingly vacant. He reached between them to undo his fly, then took her wrist and guided her hand to where he needed her. "I'm right here."

He'd say it over and over again if she liked. Whatever she wanted, he'd give.

"Please," Buffy begged again and wrestled a kiss from his lips. "Please."

Spike swallowed hard and bit back tears. "Whatever you need, baby," he replied hoarsely, a low moan tearing through his body when his cock finally sprang free and into Buffy's waiting hand. "Whatever you need."

"I need you," she whispered.

His heart melted. "You've got me," he swore, dipping to capture one of her perfect nipples between his teeth as his hands tore at her jeans. "You've got me. I'm right here."

"Spike..."

"I'm right here."

He didn't know if she truly heard him. He barely heard himself. All he knew was that she was asking him for something she already had—something she would always have—and no amount of swearing himself to her achieved the reassurance she so craved.

But if this was the last, he wouldn't deny himself. He couldn't. Not with her pussy soaked for him. Not with her hand wrapped around his cock. Not with the tears drowning her eyes or the gasps seizing her throat.

He would worship her body with his. He would shower her skin

with kisses and pour his love into her however he could. However he could without frightening her with words.

He would love her now and hope she felt everything he didn't say. Hope she'd feel just how much this wasn't over between them.

Just beginning.

BUFFY COULDN'T STOP CRYING.

Her hands trembled as she bunched the hotel's complimentary toiletries into her worn school backpack. Her legs wobbled with every careful step she took across the blindingly-white-yet-worn carpet. Her cheeks were wet and cold, her nose a runny mess, and though her eyes were half-blinded with tears, she moved around the room as though she'd lived within its confines all her life.

Every cell in her body tugged her back to the bed. To the gorgeous vampire draped in linen sheets. He slept peacefully, murmuring every few seconds but never waking. He slept while she gathered what few things she had. The backpack she'd retrieved from the Desoto, the value-pack of underwear she'd purchased when they stopped for gas, and whatever free-accessories she could locate. And with every move she made, her body sank further into depression and her tears came harder. The ache in her chest had every nerve weeping for respite. She didn't understand it—she barely understood herself.

What had happened between them had rocked her completely. It would be easy. God, it would be so easy. She could discard everything she felt—every tug of her soul in the wager between right and wrong and lose herself in Spike's arms. She could. And at that moment, she wanted to.

But it would kill her. In the end, when the sting of cold finally melted into warmth and she returned entirely to herself, being with Spike would kill her. Not by his intent—by what he could not control. Her feelings for him were already too complex to name. Spike was so murky when it came to the definitions of good and evil. There was nothing evil about what he'd done for her thus far. He'd sworn his allegiance to her, nearly died because of her, saved the world with her, and

helped her save her from herself by getting her away from the scene of the crime.

He'd been whatever she needed him to be. Last night when she needed to forget, he'd allowed her to use him as means to banish the world. He'd allowed her to bruise him with her body and had bruised her in turn. He'd given her pain because she'd wanted it. This morning and today, he'd given her peace.

He'd shown her the man inside all the while keeping the demon at bay. But the demon was as much a part of him as the man. It was something he couldn't help, and would ultimately destroy her. His inherent evil couldn't remain dormant for long. Once it showed its face, what little was left of her would be completely crushed.

Buffy sniffed hard and wiped at her eyes, her gaze reluctantly falling on Spike once more. He was so beautiful. So distant. Temptation wrapped in sin.

She wanted to stay. She wanted to stay so badly. But she couldn't. If she did, she'd be right back where she started. She'd be a slayer in love with a vampire—one with nothing holding him back from destroying her.

Buffy inhaled sharply, slinging her backpack over her shoulder.

Go now.

Spike murmured again and stretched in his sleep.

Her feet carried her across the room before she could stop herself, her wet, tear-stained lips brushing his as she battled the prevailing need to break down completely. She reached into her left pocket and withdrew the hasty note she'd scribbled for his benefit. She'd hoped to leave him a prolific explanation, complete with her regrets and her reasoning. She'd hoped to leave him with something more than what she had.

In the end, though, her trembling hand could only manage two lines.

I'm so sorry. Goodbye.

She would be miles away before she delved into her other pocket. Before she discovered something that hadn't been there before. A roll

of cash, composed mainly of hundreds and fifties. A roll of cash and, in strikingly elegant penmanship, a note.

Only the best food and the best rooms for my slayer. Don't think I won't find you.

- Spike

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The note remained in her pocket for two weeks. She couldn't bring herself to remove it—couldn't stand the idea of any further separation from him, even if it was to leave behind the scrap of paper on which he'd written. She felt strangely close to him with his writing in her pocket.

The revolving door of emotion had finally landed on comfort. Discovering the note had left her numb for what felt like days, and in the immediate aftermath of shock, it was always natural to search for anger in place of cool, rational reasoning. Spike had known from the beginning what she was going to do—he hadn't stopped her, he hadn't even confronted her. He hadn't done anything except what she'd told herself she wanted—he'd let her walk out the door.

He'd known all along. For some reason, it made her angry.

Anger never lasted, of course, especially when it was unfounded. In Buffy's case, her anger stretched the length of perhaps thirty seconds before she dissolved into tears. And it seemed she hadn't stopped crying since.

Spike had let her walk away. He hadn't tried to stop her. He'd let her do what she felt she needed to do.

And now she ached. There wasn't an inch of her that wasn't sore.

Pain stretched her every nerve, every cell. Her insides were consumed with hurt. She felt it with every step. Every time she tried to climb to her feet, all of her went rigid and she found herself sapped of the will to move.

It was as though her body had collapsed on her. Now she was lying in bed, her eyes blankly fixed on the cream-colored wall. The room she'd booked was nice, as per Spike's instructions, and she still had plenty of money left even after two weeks and Los Angeles' sky-high prices. She didn't want to think about where he'd gotten it or when he'd had the time to place the cash in her pocket. She didn't want to think about the decision she'd made at all.

She didn't want to think about how alone she was.

The pain stretching through her worn body was unlike anything she'd felt. It had begun as a stomach ache—a vague annoyance. Nothing she would have expected to extend into all-out incapacitation. But for the past day and a half, Buffy had lacked the will-power to do much of anything. Hours were occupied on her hotel bed, watching the news as her thoughts wandered to the life she'd left behind.

To those in Sunnydale—faces she knew and loved. Faces she didn't know when she'd be ready to see again. Any thought to a possible homecoming was far away—a distant speck of nothing on an endless timeline.

Buffy shivered, a dark shadow filling her veins. She tried telling herself that time healed all wounds. That the boulder resting on her heart would eventually erode into nothing. That she would awake one morning without feeling like every corner of her body was cracked. Her memories would wash into something painless and she would face the prospect of a new day without breaking.

She knew time healed all wounds, but even knowledge couldn't provide clarity. All Buffy knew right now was she didn't want to go back.

It wasn't a matter of *now*.

It was a matter of *never*.

Buffy sighed heavily, wincing as she forced herself to sit up. Every move made her weakened body scream in protest. If the world wanted to end right now she'd be in no place to stop it. She couldn't slay a fly,

much less a vampire. Acathla's jaw could drop and suck everything into the spiraling bowels of Hell and she'd be useless to do anything more than find something and hold on tight.

Something was wrong. Wrong and more than wrong. Buffy knew depression could debilitate people, but it wasn't supposed to be like this. So consuming. So...

She wanted Spike.

The thought of him had her screaming nerves sighing with a small measure of relief. Spike. Spike would make everything better. His touch would cool the fire scorching her skin raw. The comfort of his arms would ease every screaming ache in her body. She wanted him so much.

Something was very wrong. Something had happened—changed. Something was different. He'd brought her body to life with pleasure. He'd held her and kissed her tears away. He'd been everything.

He'd bitten her.

Buffy's eyes went wide, her hand shooting to the tender mark on her throat.

He'd bitten her. He'd bitten her, and something had changed. He'd said something.

His cock inside her, his eyes possessing her, his hands marking her. His fangs stained with her blood. His body worshipping hers, loving hers, in all the ways she couldn't bear to let him.

Mine, he'd said.

And she'd said yes.

Not only that, she'd bitten him in turn. And she'd said the same. She'd staked her claim on Spike.

Blood. Vampires. Words. Oaths.

Something had happened that night. Something unprecedented. Something that had changed everything.

She just had to find out what.

It felt very wrong stepping inside a public library without Giles over her shoulder. For a long second, Buffy stood motionless in the foyer, her eyes absorbing the bustling movement of readers moving from aisle to aisle of books. She was so unaccustomed to seeing the library—any library—filled with eager patrons that for a second she considered stepping outside to double-check that she was in the right building.

It wasn't until she was standing in front of a stern-looking librarian that she really began to miss Giles. In Sunnydale, asking for books about demons and vampires wasn't something that earned an arched-brow and a cleared throat. And while she was nearly certain the reaction she received from the librarian was all in her head, it didn't make the effects resonate any less.

No, Buffy felt most assuredly alone.

"Vampires?" the librarian repeated. "Anne Rice, that sort of thing? Our paranormal romance section—"

"No," Buffy replied quickly. "Not paranormal romance. I mean... like...non-fiction."

"Oh." A blink. "Certainly. This way, please."

Ten minutes later, she was hidden away in a secluded area of the library, staring at a page of text she honestly hadn't the first idea of how to decipher. And in seconds, she found herself sinking in her seat. This was so much not her area. The books. The knowledge. She was more a stake-in-hand-slaying-baddies person. Without someone to translate what the words meant, she might as well have been reading Greek.

Buffy really didn't know what she was looking for. There wasn't a word for what she was feeling. For the pain stabbing her heart with every breath. For the way her hand trembled every time she moved to turn the page. For the hurt consuming her chest.

For the way she craved Spike—craved the comfort of touch and silky touch of his kiss. Craved him like she'd craved nothing before.

"I'm getting nowhere," she murmured, turning another yellow, aged page. Words meshed into a shapeless blur. "This is me...getting nowhere."

How could she research something based on something she was

feeling? Spike had said *mine* when he bit her. *Mine.* There wasn't an index big enough to cover the implications that monosyllabic word.

If there were any implications.

If this wasn't indeed all in her head.

Buffy sucked in a breath and turned another page. Nothing. Nothing. Garlic. Crosses. Holy water. Speculation on the earliest vampires in history. Words here and there about the ways vampires were born, a debate on whether or not they aged, and a few paragraphs from so-called experts as to the truth behind the Slayer myth.

"Nothing, nothing, nonsense, and more nothing. Good going, Buff. Way to crack the case." Buffy sighed and surveyed her surroundings wearily. "I'm also talking to myself, which isn't exactly the best of signs. I'm talking to myself and I'm learning nothing. This was definitely worth the trip."

Her words died with an electric crackle of energy. A crackle which undeniably should not exist in a library. In a blink, she was shot back some three hundred miles, buried in a book in Sunnydale, where energy crackles and dimensional rips were something normal. Something not completely out of the ordinary.

Buffy didn't know how she knew it was a dimensional rip—she just did. It was split-second recognition. Something she knew immediately, without fault. Without hesitation.

And just as quickly, the pain in her body hardened into a rush of determination. She shoved everything internal aside and jumped to her feet, instincts leading her toward the roar of the blast. Thoughts rushed alongside reason and collided in a jumbled mess. She didn't know where she was running or what toward—she didn't have anything with her but Spike's note—and reality, it seemed, was on an indefinite hold.

The air split with a scream. Buffy turned a corner and saw it.

She didn't have time to stop. She barely had time to hesitate. The light was blinding, a cloudy swirl of shapes and colors. Something in the distance bellowed but she didn't allow herself a beat of hesitation. There was a girl with a book in her hands—a young girl whose face was stricken with terror.

"Help!" the girl screamed. "Oh god, please!"

The blinding cloud of light was growing wider. In a second it would consume the entire aisle, and the girl would be gone.

Buffy didn't breathe. Didn't think. She just moved, closed her hand around the girl's wrist. Then she was running again in the other direction. The girl fell in clumsily behind her, a deadweight, but quickly gathered her bearings and broke off in a sprint.

"I—"

Buffy shook her head hard. "Don't talk," she said hurriedly. She shoved the girl behind a row of shelves and dropped instinctively to the ground, pain spearing through her body like thunder. Her heart hammered, her breaths crushed her chest, and every inch of her was aching beyond ache.

Beside her, the girl she'd rescued was shaking hard. "What was that?"

Buffy didn't answer. Or rather, couldn't. Even if her thoughts weren't racing and her body wasn't about to crack and shatter in a thousand indiscernible pieces, this wasn't her area. This was so not her area. This was Giles's area. Her area was saving the helpless. Her area ended now.

A few minutes went by—a few minutes that could have easily spanned a few hours for as much as her insides hurt. The roar of the dimensional rip rolled into a gentle rumble before dying out altogether, and the shadows it cast against the row of bookcases similarly faded into nothing. And then there was nothing. Nothing but her heart drumming hard against her breastbone and the terrified tremors of the girl at her side.

Nothing that Buffy could see, anyway.

"Stay put," she said sharply.

The girl nodded and jerked her head forward, her eyes focusing on the carpet.

Every move she made cut deeper into her body, but Buffy forced herself to ignore it. Worrying a lip between her teeth, she raised herself onto her knees and peered around the shelf.

Nothing. Nothing at all. Not a hint of the rip which had torn through the barriers of reality just seconds before. No screams. No blank stares from a group of bystanders. In the distance, she heard

conversation and the click of fingers against keyboards. She heard the scan of books being checked out and the recitation of due dates from the lips of librarians. It was all there—far away, of course, but there. People around her were continuing with their lives. On the surface, nothing had happened.

How was that possible?

Buffy thought immediately of Sunnydale, and she knew the answer. If it wasn't right in front of some people, they didn't see it. And she had been alone on this level of the library. She'd been alone other than the girl. She'd been alone with her book on vampires which provided no answers and a thousand additional questions. Life continued around them as though nothing had occurred, because ostensibly, nothing had.

"I-is anything there?" the girl asked. "S-s-sorry. I don't mean—"

"I don't see anything," Buffy replied. "Lemme make sure...wait here."

"Okay."

Buffy climbed to her feet, fighting off a wince. "I'm gonna go check it out."

"Be careful," the girl whimpered, but she didn't need to be told that.

The walk back to the aisle was long. Every step seemed to render her destination further away. She was panting hard, her breaths stabbing her lungs. And when she reached the row of books where the dimensional rip had opened, there was nothing to suggest anything extraordinary had occurred. No burnt carpet. No books on the floor. Nothing.

Well, nothing except for the green demon, whose eyes were so wide she was at first convinced that her presence had come as the greater shock.

"Great googly—"

Buffy's hands flexed in need of a weapon. "Hey—"

"I'll just..." The demon motioned in the other direction. "Be on my way."

"Not so—"

The words barely had time to touch the air. The demon waved awkwardly, then turned on his heel and bolted. And while she

commanded her legs to follow him, they had hardened completely into lead. She toppled forward before she could stop herself, her palms bracing her fall and the impact sending shockwaves of pain through every fiber of her being.

That was how the girl found her. Curled on the floor, gasping for air and needing Spike so badly that she was certain she wouldn't make it through the night.

"Oh my god," the girl cried, falling to her knees at her side. "Are... are you all right?"

Buffy whimpered, her voice clawing for escape.

"I'm gonna get you help," the girl promised. "Just stay—"

"Uhhh..."

"I'm gonna—"

"No," she managed at last, rolling onto her back. "No. I..." There was no one who could help her. No one but her vampire and she still didn't know why. "No...I'm...I just need..."

There was a beat of silence. "Let's get you out of here," the girl said softly. "I'll get you help."

"No—"

"You saved my life. I'll get you help."

Buffy wanted to argue but found she hadn't the strength. She hadn't the strength to do anything. So she didn't speak. She didn't try something she knew she would do little more than zap what diminutive energy she had left. Instead, she allowed the girl to help her to her feet. She took her arm when offered and wobbled on unsteady legs to the nearest table.

"I'm Fred, by the way," the girl said awkwardly. "Fred Burkle."

"Buffy," she replied in kind, though it came out as little more than a gasp.

"I'm gonna get you help."

There was no way she could, but the point was very much moot.

Instead, she allowed Fred to escort her from the library, hoping the girl's strength would be enough for both of them if she collapsed again.

Hoping Spike would be waiting for her when she left the library, ready to make good on his promise. Ready to find her.

She hadn't even the strength to cry when she stepped outside at Fred's guidance, and was greeted by the sight of nothing at all.

Spike wasn't there. He wasn't anywhere, and she couldn't blame him. She'd left him. And in spite of whatever he'd told her, in spite of the note burning a hole in her pocket, there was no reason to expect him.

Not when she'd been the one to walk away.

And now her bones were diseased with pain. Her heart was sick. Her skin was tender. There was no part of her that didn't hurt.

She was alone.

18

Buffy wasn't accustomed to relying on the kindness of strangers. In her experience, the notion itself was a living contradiction. And yet, here she sat in the welcomed comfort of a stranger's home, sipping tea the same stranger had made her and awaiting a bowl of homemade soup. This was the sort of thing she would normally dismiss without much thought, but with her body aching at the slightest twitch, she was suddenly faced with the awareness that if it came down to it, she could be at the stranger's mercy.

Buffy was either entirely fortunate or entirely foolish.

"What was that thing?" the girl called Fred asked. She had a charming Texan accent that Buffy hadn't noticed at first, but was now prominent.

Though where to start with that question...

She was surprised it had taken Fred as long as it had to start asking, but even with the added time, Buffy hadn't managed to find a suitable answer. And she realized this was because she didn't want to. Her heart wasn't in making up stories anymore. She shouldn't be the only one burdened with knowledge. The Powers had chosen her, and now she was choosing someone else. There wasn't enough will left in her to give a damn.

"It was a portal," she said without ceremony and swallowed a mouthful of tea.

That went over about as well as one could reasonably expect.

"A..." Fred's voice trembled. "A what?"

Buffy would like to think she would have been inclined to comfort the girl were she not hurting, but after everything she'd been through, she couldn't muster much sympathy for people who got to live without the burden of knowledge.

"Yeah...a portal."

"A portal to...to what?" Fred rounded the sofa with a cup of tomato soup in her hands. She placed the offering on her worn coffee table and took a seat in the rocker opposite Buffy. "It's not some kinda code, is it?"

Buffy blinked. "A code?"

"You know. The government uses code words all the time." The girl's eyes brightened. "Is that what this is? Oh, wait, you couldn't tell me if it was, could you. Or could you? We can come up with our own code. Something like...blink once for yes and twice for no."

Buffy's jaw went slack. The excuses people made to guard themselves against the truth were frightening at times. Then again, she could be cranky because she felt she'd been poisoned. If she didn't know better, she'd swear her insides were diseased and rotting, chipping away until there would be nothing of her left.

She felt she was melting from the inside out.

Fred flushed and glanced down. "I guess not, then."

"Chances are it was to another dimension," Buffy said, reaching for the proffered cup of soup. It smelled wonderful, and even through the gnawing pain eating away at her, she could discern a good amount of it was due to hunger. "That...that demon...came out of it."

Fred paled visibly. "D-demon?"

Buffy's eyes fell shut and she suppressed an inner groan. After so many years fighting evil, there was no good way to cushion people from the truth of the world around them. Even if she wanted to, she hadn't the slightest idea where she would begin.

She didn't know how much Fred truly wanted to know and how much was just curiosity.

Oh, to hell with it. She asked.

"Demon. As in monsters."

"L-like...werewolves? A-and zombies?"

"That and then some."

Fred sat back, stunned. Insofar as reactions went, it was rather tame. Buffy took the opportunity to drink more soup.

After a moment, Fred drew in a huge breath and jerked forward, her eyes going wide. "Oh my god, is it actually possible to reanimate dead flesh? Because that sort of research could be incredibly beneficial to the medical community. Think of all the diseases we could cure. The milestones we could overcome. The...what?"

Buffy just stared at her. "I think you might be the only person I've ever met who's gone from *zombies* to *medical breakthrough*."

Fred flushed and glanced down. "Sorry," she said self-consciously. "I'm...I'm a scientist. My brain just goes there."

"You're a scientist?"

"Well, I...yeah, I am. I majored in mathematics and physics and I'm working on my doctorate. My knowledge of other sciences is also... well, out there." Her blush deepened and she glanced down, shaking her head. "I normally don't brag, I promise. But I am..."

"Wow." Buffy paused. For whatever reason, she'd thought Fred to be around her age, but admittedly learning the woman had a few years on her did put things in a clearer light. Like why she lived in not-a-slum and had credit cards. She cleared her throat. "Well...you're, uhh, taking this really well. Like *better than anyone ever has* well." A beat. "Except Oz, but he is super chill."

And in Sunnydale. Damn, there was that pang again.

"Some of the theories I've studied are out there," Fred explained, shrugging. "Plus, it's kind of hard to ignore the fact that I saw a green guy with horns. A-and the portal." She waited a moment. "So seriously? Zombies?"

Buffy couldn't help it. She cracked a grin. "You really like zombies, huh?"

"Well, *like* is a strong word. It's just...the idea of reanimating dead flesh is fascinating." Fred's eyes flashed with said fascination, adapting the sort of look Dr. Frankenstein might have worn before he created

his monster. "I don't suppose you've ever...seen a zombie, have you? Or do they prefer to be called Non-Living US Citizens?"

"I don't think there's a PC term for zombies, no. None that I've come across, anyway."

"So you have seen one?"

She made a face. "I...ummm...well, a girl I know last year was... uhh...targeted by a zombie to be his undead eternal girlfriend. Really, from what I've seen, the whole thing is messy and icksome."

Great. She'd used a standard Buffy-nonword in the presence of a scientist. She might as well go around telling people her age and her IQ were identical.

Fred nodded. "I'd imagine so," she said, seemingly oblivious to Buffy's discomfort. "That sort of knowledge in the wrong hands could go a long, long way. Wars never ending, the resurgence of dictatorships. We'd potentially have a world filled with Machiavellians." The possibility seemed to alarm her. "This is definitely the sort of thing we should keep to ourselves."

"I'll have to go take down all my Fabulous-Job-Opportunities-For-Zombies signs, but I think we can manage." Buffy shifted again, wincing as her body rebelled and surged with another wave of pain. "But...I think you get the idea. Zombies. Werewolves. Demons. Vampires—"

The poor girl looked horrified. "Vampires?"

Buffy had to bite back a grin. It always surprised her how vampires somehow warranted a larger reaction than the litany of other non-human creatures which prowled the night. "Yeah," she agreed. "Vampires."

"The kind that suck blood?"

"Do you know of another kind?"

Fred worried a lip between her teeth and appeared to give the query serious consideration. "I guess not." She frowned. "It's kind of funny, I guess."

"Oh yeah. A regular barrel of laughs."

"I just mean, I'm sitting here learning about vampires and Non-Living US Citizens and portals and...it should sound crazy, like you said." Her eyes narrowed. "How do you know all of this?"

A soft, sad smile tickled Buffy's lips. "Because I'm a part of the crazy."

Fred blinked. "Which part of the crazy?"

"I'm the Slayer." Buffy waited a beat, then winced. "It's not as ominous as it sounds. Well, I guess it is if you're a demon. Essentially, I'm the person the PTB tapped to keep all the ooglies from ending the world."

Yeah, that didn't sound nuts or anything.

Fred studied her for a moment. "Don't take this the wrong way... but you don't look like you're up for saving the world at the moment."

It was a fair observation, considering Buffy felt like her insides had liquefied and were looking for the nearest escape hatch. But for whatever reason, Fred's words struck her as funny, and she couldn't help but bark a laugh.

"Well, I'm allowed a certain amount of downtime after stopping an apocalypse," she said. "You should have seen me after the last one. At least I didn't literally bite the bullet this time."

"Apocalypse. The last one? As in, there was more than one?"

Buffy winced.

Whups.

The look on Fred's face became distant, almost hopeless. "I...wow... I think I...I think I need to sit down."

"You are sitting down."

"Oh." A beat. "Good for me."

"It's okay," Buffy offered lamely. "I...I might not look it right now, but I...I've gotten pretty good at stopping the end of the world."

Fred glanced up again, wide-eyed.

Buffy waved her hand. "Professional world-endage stopper," she asserted. At the girl's blank look, she sighed and figured it was time to get comfortable. It looked as though she was going to be here for a while. "It's why they call me the Slayer."

"Who's *they?*"

"The people who continually muck up my life," she replied.

Then, hesitating, she decided to throw the girl a bone. It was only fair—Fred had brought her into her home. She'd fed her and gotten her

comfortable, and had offered more than once to pull out the sofa fold-out bed.

Trouble was, the longer Buffy stayed, the slimmer her chances of leaving for the night became. And while she knew it was dangerous to form attachments, there was something about having someone to talk —someone she didn't know but found herself liking nonetheless— which offered more than its fair share of comfort.

Fred deserved a chance to escape with only a few shocking revelations to mull over. Many people managed to accept the fact the world around them was a fake, covering for the subculture of demons, and continue with their lives relatively unbothered. The girl had already learned more than she should have, but there was still a chance for her to return to her normal without too much of her world turned upside down.

Buffy sighed. Maybe if she kept talking, she would forget how much she missed Spike.

Shaking her head to clear her thoughts, she slowly turned back to Fred and swallowed hard at the girl's wide-eyed anticipation. "Do you..." she began slowly, "do you really wanna know?"

Fred didn't hesitate. "Absolutely."

"It's gonna change things for you."

"Things are changed for me anyway. I don't think I could manage now knowing even *this* much without knowing all of it."

A smile tickled her lips. "All right," she agreed. "I...I might take you up on your offer, then."

"My offer?"

"Unless it's no good, which is fine. I just...this might take a while." Buffy paused before clarifying, "The staying here thing. I thought—"

"Oh!" Fred jumped to her feet. "I'll go get you blankets and pillows and...and...I have a teddy-bear you can borrow if you want. His name is Wilsbury and he's..." She froze and the pink in her cheeks deepened. "I'll just...you're free to ignore that. The part where I still have a security blanket at the age of—"

Buffy held up a hand and smiled. "I have a pig," she said softly. "He's back at my hotel...so I'll be glad for some company."

Fred looked appalled. "A pig?"

"A stuffed pig."

"Oh. Oh, right." She glanced down self-consciously. "I'll just...go get the stuff."

"Don't you want me to tell you?"

The girl nodded. "Oh yes. But we have all night, don't we? I want to get you comfortable. I mean...you saved my *life.* The least I can do is get you a teddy-bear on loan."

Buffy's eyes bounced between the cup of soup and the half-consumed tea. "You've done a lot, Fred."

"You saved my *life.*"

"We don't know that. You might have been taken to a fluffy bunny dimension."

Fred waved a hand. "I'm getting you stuff. You just sit tight, all right? And let me know if there's anything else I can get you."

She disappeared down a hall and Buffy collapsed wearily against the sofa. She knew the helpful thing to do would entail climbing to her feet and setting up the pull-out bed, but she doubted she had the strength to make it to her feet, let alone do lifting of any kind—heavy or not.

God. Her life was such a wonderful mess. She was sitting in a stranger's living room in the company of perhaps the last genuine person Buffy had ever known, and her heart felt like it was dying.

Spike.

Where was he tonight? Was he thinking about her? Did he even care anymore?

A long sigh rushed through her lips. Of course he didn't care. She'd given him no reason to care.

After all, she'd left him.

❧

TOUCHING her note gave him some comfort, but not much. Not enough to quell the resounding scream piercing his every nerve. For the first time since he'd fought to liberate himself from his own grave, he could feel his demon clawing at his insides as though trying to rip its way to freedom. He needed to touch her—he needed her skin

beneath his hands and her taste in his mouth. His need for her eclipsed anything he'd ever experienced, burning a hole in his heart so deep the universe was in danger of falling inside.

He didn't have a sodding clue what was wrong with him...except, no, he did. Only one thing had changed since they'd entered their motel room, and that was something he hadn't planned on. Didn't know much about, save from what he'd read in the few books that mentioned it. He'd known enough to know what it was but not enough to anticipate this.

Which was more than he could say for Buffy. She didn't know at all —probably didn't know anything about claims to begin with. Hell, *he* hadn't known until Angelus had mocked him with it, and even then, finding reading material hadn't been easy. Easier than swallowing his pride and asking about it, of course, but not a bloody sinch.

Turned out this century had something to offer, at least. Lots of those dusty old books had been put online. Once he'd found out how to look them up, he'd done all the reading he could.

So claims came with body pain. Would've been useful bloody information.

God, what a fool he'd been. He should have told her immediately—should have kept his trap shut to begin with. It had been bad enough when Dru had rejected him, but now he was staring down an eternity tied to a woman who was in love with someone else. He'd damned them both because of his petty fucking jealousy. Because the thought of her wanting Angel while he was inside her had ripped him to shreds.

He'd promised himself he wouldn't hurt Buffy again. But he had. Spike had always been an impulsive git and love made him more so. Always going for the quick fixes to mend a heart too frequently broken. He hadn't been thinking clearly.

It took being away from her to realize that.

If he had been thinking clearly, perhaps then he wouldn't be where he was now. Standing outside the Hyatt Regency Century Plaza, where Buffy had, until recently, been sleeping. Despite his frustration that she wasn't still here, he was thankful that she had at least followed his request that she take care of herself.

Except if this pain was due to what he'd done in that motel room,

she had to be hurting and she wouldn't know why. He'd done that to her.

I'm so sorry. Goodbye.

The note remained in his duster pocket. He rubbed it between his fingers.

It had only taken him a day to catch up with her and from there an hour or so to discover where she'd checked-in. The money he'd given her wouldn't last forever. Eventually, she would find herself without a roof over her head and a stomach begging to be fed. And as much as Spike wanted to respect her need for distance, the burning desire to touch her was too bloody painful to ignore.

He'd be inside the hotel now if he thought he'd find her. But she hadn't come back here tonight.

Spike sighed and fished out his half-smoked carton of fags from his other pocket. Buffy's scent was ripe around him; it wouldn't take long to pick up a trail. He could find where she'd gone. He could track her down. He could.

Or he could wait. Gather strength. Give her more time.

And himself time to figure out what the hell to say to her. How to begin to explain himself. If he even could.

I'm so sorry. Goodbye.

His eyes fell shut, will battling need.

She was out there. She was somewhere. And she needed him.

He liked to believe she could feel he was near. If she could, she'd know he was coming for her. That he had found her as he'd promised.

He could only hope she was ready.

19

Having known Fred less than twenty-four hours, it took surprisingly little for Buffy to deduce that her new acquaintance shared Willow's view on playing hooky. One's job was to be taken seriously—as seriously as homework and studying and separating one's whites and coloreds when doing laundry.

Therefore, Buffy was more than surprised when Fred announced over their breakfast of Frosted Flakes that she was calling in a sick day.

"You are?"

Fred nodded. "I have a lot of vacation days saved up and they go to waste eventually."

"But you...*enjoy* work." It was true. Having listened to the girl ramble all night, Buffy had reached the startling conclusion that there was someone out there who was more library-dependent than Giles. She hesitated to think what would happen should her watcher and her new friend ever find themselves in the same room. Or worse, in the same corner of the same library, desperately needing the same book.

"There's more to life than work." Fred shrugged. "Besides...I don't want to leave you by yourself."

"You don't even know me," Buffy protested, forcing herself to her feet with a wince, jerking her empty bowl out of Fred's reach.

She might feel like an invalid but that didn't mean she was going to let a virtual stranger wait on her hand and foot. Fred could remind her about the saving-of-her-life thing all she wanted; Buffy had been raised under the rules that when a guest in someone's house, she was supposed to pick up after herself. And for whatever reason, she couldn't stand the thought of doing her mother's parentage injustice by ignoring it now, no matter how hard her body complained.

And right on cue, Fred chirped in with what was now a familiar song. "You saved—"

"—your life. And as I explained again and *again* last night, it was... well I know it wasn't *nothing* for you, but it's just not that uncommon for me."

"Do you know anyone in the city?"

Buffy blinked. "What?"

"You told me you'd lived in Los Angeles before. Do you know anyone in the city?"

The question took her completely off guard. Immediately, she flashed to the old Hemery yearbook buried in her closet back home, compiled with familiar faces and phone numbers from people she'd once called friends. People she could barely remember now. People who would laugh at her if she contacted them for help.

It didn't help that almost everyone's last memory of her involved arson.

The fact that she thought of her father *after* considering the list of nameless faces she'd once called friends drew upon itself how very much she couldn't rely on him. Showing up on Hank Summers's doorstep was as good as purchasing a bus ticket home, and home was the last place she wanted to be.

The only place she wanted to be was with Spike.

"I...I know people," Buffy replied, trying and failing to ignore how small her voice sounded. "I know them. My friend Kimberly...she lives somewhere. I'm sure she lives *somewhere*."

Fred arched a brow. "Well, somewhere sounds a little ambiguous, especially when *I'm* right here," she said. Then, softer, she added, "I know you don't know me, but I'm nice and I shower every day and I have canned goods. Plus you—"

"Saved your life. I know."

"I was gonna say, you have the super-strength going for you, so you could take me if you thought I was gonna ax-murder you."

A wry smile tickled her mouth. The ache withering her muscles into complete uselessness begged to differ. "Well...I guess it's to my advantage that you think that."

"If what I saw last night was you when you're not feeling good, I'd hate to be on your crap list when you're at your best."

Buffy withheld a snort. Either Fred's imagination had run away with her, or she'd managed to keep herself from facing any real danger since moving to Los Angeles.

Of the two possibilities, the first was the most likely. Buffy hadn't encountered much hero-worship since she was called, but she was certainly familiar with the concept. All she'd done last night was tackle the poor girl to the floor and somehow Fred had concocted this miraculous image of the Slayer and her powers. Never mind the portal or what else—last night hadn't been about being the Slayer. It had been about being human. Human and aware of the world. The true world. Anyone with a heart would have done the same.

Still, undeserved hero-worship or not, Buffy couldn't deny that it was nice having someone worry about her. Someone who wouldn't hold her to unrealistic expectations and glare at her disapprovingly when she proved to be as human as the next person. Someone unlike the friends waiting for her back home.

The only other face she could conjure who would meet these guidelines was Spike.

Buffy honestly had no idea how long she would be in Los Angeles. For the moment, the idea of getting anywhere near the vicinity of Sunnydale made her diseased bones feel damn near brittle, no matter that logic told her homesickness would invariably set in and send her home before the summer was over. Loneliness, however, was something she could control. Only a fool would reject an unsolicited offer of friendship.

"I don't want to be an inconvenience," Buffy said.

"And you're not," Fred assured her. "It's pretty much a win/win all around. Plus, if you stayed with me, you'd save loads of money—"

Somehow, Buffy managed to keep from dropping her bowl into the sink. "St...stay with you?"

"Unless you don't want to...but..."

"You don't know me, Fred. This is insane."

"I know," Fred replied brightly. She didn't have the appearance of one who *knew.* She looked too cheery—too friendly—for her own good. "But I'm a pretty good judge of character."

"There's a difference between being a good judge of character and inviting a stranger to stay with you."

"If you wanted me dead, you wouldn't have hurt yourself saving my life last night." She batted a hand. "No matter how long I'm here, I can't get rid of my darn southern hospitality. You don't have to stay if you don't want, but it'll save you money and I could use the company. Plus, if you're looking to stay in town long, I can help you try and find a job." Fred trailed off, her brow furrowing. "Actually...how long *are* you planning on staying?"

Buffy blanked. It was easy to think of that question in the abstract. The last thing she'd ever thought she'd be asked to do was estimate a timetable. When the journey home was admittedly far away, but not so far she couldn't see the finish line.

"I'm...I dunno," Buffy answered lamely. "I haven't thought about it."

"Oh," Fred replied, shrugging. "I only ask because my neighbor, Mr. Binns, is moving out. His wife's sick and their insurance won't allow them to stay in the city anymore. It's sad, really...but he's always been very nice to me, and he wanted to give me first dibs on the apartment because it's so much bigger than mine. But honestly, I don't need space like that and I was gonna..." She worried a lip between her teeth. "I guess a point would be nice, huh? The point is I could talk to him...if you're thinking about staying for a while. It's a nice apartment and from what he told me, not too expensive. Just too much with medical bills piling up. I can see about getting you in before my landlord advertises a vacancy."

The offer came from nowhere, thus it took Buffy a few long seconds to understand what Fred was saying. She didn't know why, but she'd never imagined getting a place and paying actual rent. Rent for

more than a room and a toilet and those funny chocolate mints housekeeping left on the pillow. Rent for a place to live.

A place to live.

In Los Angeles. In a city that wasn't home.

"I'd...I'd need a job," she said softly. "My...friend—he left me money. A lot of money. More money than...well, I don't wanna know where he got it. It's not important. But he left it for me."

Fred nodded and didn't ask questions.

"It'll run out, though," Buffy concluded, flattening a palm against her stomach. It didn't help, pressing down upon her sore skin, but for whatever reason, touching where it hurt made her feel momentarily better. As though she were in charge. "Eventually it'll run out."

"I can get you a job," Fred said again.

"Okay...so what are you, the Goodwill Fairy?"

The girl's cheeks flooded with red. "I...uhhh, sorry. But I can get you a job. Truly. Assuming you don't mind libraries."

Buffy couldn't help it—she laughed. It hurt to laugh, but she laughed anyway. The past two years of her life had been spent in libraries. She knew the Dewey Decimal System by heart. If there was one place she felt at home, it was a library. "No," she clarified, waving at Fred's confused look. "No, I—ummm. I don't mind libraries. Not at all. I just...this seems surreal, you know? I show up and... You think you can get me a decent place to live and a steady income? This sort of stuff never happens. Not in the world I live in, anyway."

Fred's blush grew deeper. "I know it's a logistical anomaly," she replied self-consciously. "Even as I say this, my brain is scrambling to calculate the odds, and the probability is zero. And Buffy, if you'd rather not take the apartment or whatever job I can manage for you at the library, I won't be offended. I know we just met and this is all very new for you. Or...no, it's all very new for *me.* Not you. But I really do want to help. In any way I can. I can't promise the job at the library would be anything exciting or beyond re-shelving misplaced books, but it's better than flipping burgers, in my opinion."

"Seconded."

"A-and the room...well, like I said, it's bigger than my place. Not that I live in the best neighborhood, but—"

"I'm sure it's perfect."

Fred flashed a bright, sincere smile and nodded enthusiastically. "It's big," she said again, as though that was the main selling point. "He had me over for tea once and it's—"

"Big," Buffy finished for her, warding off a flinch. Her legs didn't seem to want to stand.

"Yes. And nice."

"It'll only be me if I get the place." But already, Buffy was envisioning hanging up punching bags and setting mats along the floor—making the space she'd never seen livable for someone like her. Someone who would need the extra room for stretching and aerobics. For keeping herself in shape even if she didn't plan to actively patrol while living in Los Angeles. Something told her she would need to exert at least a little energy while she was here or else she'd go mad with inactivity.

Her muscles, however, whined at the thought of exertion, and her stomach felt prone to chuck out the cereal she'd just finished eating.

Though it went against every natural instinct, not to mention what she'd told Fred last night, Buffy began to consider the wisdom of avoiding the doctor's office, especially while she had money. She was damn near certain her body was betraying her on grounds of a mystical level, but there was ostensibly no harm in seeing if human painkillers could do any good.

However, this line of thought likely meant the hospital, and Buffy hated hospitals. The last one she'd been in had nearly killed her, that being literally, thanks to Der Kindestod. Had she been at home and surrounded by familiarity, she was certain she would fight to her last breath before succumbing to medical care. But here, there was no mom to worry about her or friends to annoy her or watcher to clean his glasses. She was in an unfamiliar place with a person she'd only just met, who only had a sincere desire to help.

"I'll talk to my landlord," Fred offered. "He likes me. I'm sure I can get you in."

Buffy nodded and forced a smile to her lips. "Thank you."

"Don't mention it. You—"

"Saved your life."

Fred grinned. "I've been saying that a lot, huh?"

"It's no big. I just..." Another wave of nausea crashed over her. Buffy bit her lip, willing her eyes shut as she rode it out. "I..."

"Buffy?" The smile was gone from the girl's face. "What is it? Are you okay? Is it... Is there something I can get you?"

I need Spike.

These weren't the words she said, however. Every nerve in her body screamed for him, but she couldn't say it. She couldn't make out *why*. Only that she needed him. She needed him now, and desperately. Spike would make everything better.

God, just thinking of him hurt. What had he done to her?

"I..."

"Okay, that's it," Fred said suddenly, her voice hardened with resolve. "I didn't say anything all night or this morning, but this...this just isn't *normal*. I'm taking you to the doctor."

Even though Buffy had just reached the same conclusion, it was her instinct to protest.

"Ah, ah," Fred cut Buffy off before she even had a chance to object, miming zipped lips with a stern, almost maternal look in her eyes. "No fightsies. We're going to the doctor."

The girl could give Willow a run for her money when it came to Resolve Face.

"Okay," Buffy agreed. "Okay."

Her consent was the cue her body needed. She felt the floor slip from under her, felt cool ceramic tile beneath her hands and watched the world spiral into an endless twist of color before blacking out completely.

WERE BUFFY IN LESS PAIN, there was every chance she would have found Fred's incredibly-tame-but-very-heartfelt curses even more amusing than she already did. As it was, the fact that it hurt to laugh took some of the merriment out—some, but not much. She refused to keep from giggling where giggling was appropriate. If this affliction

took away her ability to find the funny, she would surely wither to nothing.

"Stupid, lousy, good-for-nothing doctors," Fred cursed, seizing Buffy's arm on a whim and dragging it around her neck. "Here...lean on me."

Right, because I didn't feel pitiful enough.

However, Buffy didn't argue. She was grateful for the aid. Her legs felt as though they were about to give out.

The trip to the hospital had consumed the day, eating away at sunlight and casting the veil of night upon them before the staff ultimately decided there was nothing medically wrong with her and showed her the door. Without insurance or anything except the cold cash in Buffy's pocket and what meager earnings Fred immediately offered to put forward, ignoring Buffy's protests, there was no logical reason to keep her overnight.

"All in your head, my butt," Fred all but snarled. "I swear, I have half a mind to go back there and give *Dr. Jenkins* a...piece of my mind."

"That's a lot of your mind going around," Buffy observed. "Oh—ouch!"

"What?" the girl demanded, panicked. "What? Did I run you into something? I'm sorry—"

"No...it's just... *God,* this thing is getting worse."

"Are you okay? Should we go back?"

Going back wasn't really an option. They'd already deduced her problem wasn't a medical one, and after getting into some sticky questions about family history, had told her they were very sorry but there was nothing they could do.

She was homeless, after all. Another teen walking the street. Why should they worry about her?

"You wanna try the free clinic?" Fred asked. "We might—"

"No," Buffy replied, sharper than she intended. "I..."

It was fitting, she supposed, that she only become truly aware of her surroundings when there was nothing to do about it. Her slayer senses were so fogged, it would take the world's largest defroster to get her seeing clearly again. Otherwise, Buffy was certain she wouldn't

have allowed Fred to drag her down a poorly-lit street on a side of town which looked less than reputable.

This was bad.

"Oh god," Buffy said.

"What?"

"Where are we?"

"Not far. About three blocks from the metro rail. We'll be home soon."

"We didn't come this way."

"Shortcut."

Shortcuts. Always the shortcuts. Vamps dug the shortcuts. It was how most stragglers ended up dead.

"Fred..." Buffy sucked in a deep breath, summoned all her strength, and shoved her friend away. *"Run."*

"What?"

"Run!"

The command was punctuated with a timely, familiar roar, and then the world around her fell to chaos. Buffy fell face-first onto the cement, her palms bracing her fall but her lack of vigor doing little to cushion her as she rolled into a useless lump beside the curb.

The sound of Fred's screams filled the air. The dumb girl wasn't running.

"Get *out* of here!"

"Buffy—"

Another vampiric snarl tore through the night. Buffy forced herself onto her back and attempted a flip-up to her feet. Every nerve in her body screamed in protest, but she forced herself to ignore the pain. She shoved everything aside—commanded her exhausted mind to focus. To regroup.

"Yes, yes, run," a particularly nasty voice said encouragingly. "We'll help your friend, here, home."

"You sonofa—"

"Fred!"

Then something amazing happened. It was, perhaps, the most welcome feeling in the world. One second her body was about to collapse inward, and the next thing she knew, the pain began to recede.

Not gone entirely, but the strain on her insides softened and the brittle feebleness of her aching muscles hardened with familiar strength and resolution. Buffy seized it, grasped it, and held on. She was on her feet in an instant, delivering a swift kick to the vamp charging at her left while rounding the other vamp with a punch strong enough to send him into the nearest waste bin.

Perhaps she was in so much pain she could no longer feel it. She didn't know. All Buffy knew was she had to get Fred out of there.

Now.

"Oh my god," Fred said. "Buffy...are you...?"

"I swear, if you don't run, I will personally break all your bones so leaving the house is not an option." Buffy pointed and flicked her brows. "Run. Don't stop running."

"I can't leave you—"

"Did you not hear the *breaking your bones* thing? I'm fine." This last point she demonstrated by kicking her leg backward just in time to send the vamp who had been creeping up on her back into the waste-bin. *"Run."*

Buffy didn't have time to determine whether the look on Fred's face was relief at her apparent resurgence of strength or hurt at her callousness, and though it bothered her, she couldn't let herself dwell. There would be time to apologize later.

"Dayum," one of the vamps drawled, climbing wearily to his feet. "See that, Frank? She sent yours off runnin'."

The vamp in the waste-bin said nothing, but he didn't look pleased.

"All right, boys," she said, "step on up. I've been itching for a good fight."

And then everything around her fell deathly still, and the world became unglued.

"Be careful what you wish for."

A hand seized her wrist and suddenly she was jerked around, tumbling hard and fast into familiar arms, her breasts suddenly pressed against a chest she knew well. She felt him gasp at the contact. And the second his eyes crashed with hers, every cell in her weary body burst into song.

"Spike..."

"'Cause if it's a fight you're itchin' for, pet," he said, his eyes lingering for a moment on her mouth, "I'd be more than happy to oblige."

Then his lips crashed upon hers, and everything around her melted away.

20

True, it wasn't the longest kiss on record. Not even the most romantic, all things considered. They were locked together in a stolen moment, nipping at each other's lips as the two fledgling vamps stared in confusion. For the world, Spike couldn't think to complain. This wasn't exactly how he'd pictured making his grand entrance, but his plans were typically shot to hell anyhow, and he wasn't one to deny himself when the girl he loved was so willingly squirming in his arms and gasping into his mouth.

"Spike. *Spike.* Oh god..." He felt wetness against his skin and reared back in astonishment. Tears burned rivers down her cheeks. She was crying. "Are you real?" she demanded, then consumed his lips before he could reply. "Is this real?"

God, if he hadn't been hard before, he was certain he could cut glass now. All he wanted to do was shove her against the nearest wall and lose himself in her body. The heat of her practically burned a hole in his jeans. She was everywhere, and he was drunk on her.

But they weren't alone. He didn't particularly fancy trying to shag her while avoiding blows from a couple of bystanders.

"Mhmm," he agreed, kissing the corner of her mouth. "Real as the fangy bloke behind you."

Buffy blinked but didn't have time to react. Spike seized her by the shoulders and gently pushed her aside before sinking his fist into the attacking vampire's gut. The fledging keeled over with a gasp only to be kicked to the ground the next second, the whole of him dissolving in dust from the force of a flying stake.

Spike glanced up. Buffy had regained her footing.

"I hate being interrupted," she grumbled, breaking into a run toward him. Only it wasn't for him and he knew it. Spike ducked in time for her to roll off his back, her body contorting so her legs could slam into the second vampire, who soared across the alleyway and smashed into the brick wall of the neighboring building. "Hello! Ruining a happy moment here!"

"I'll bloody well say." Spike flashed her a winning smile and dove his hand into his duster pocket, retrieving a stake. A quick flash and the second vamp joined the first, his ashes scattered along the pavement. "Serves him bloody right for interruptin' a snog with my lady."

He didn't know whether to be surprised or disappointed at the fallen look on Buffy's face. In truth, he'd expected their reunion to come with a quick punch to the jaw rather than what had happened. The past few weeks with Buffy had made him especially privy to the wide range of her emotional reactions. She either fell soft or hardened up on instinct, and it was a coin's toss on which way the pendulum swung.

He frowned. He truly did have a problem mixing metaphors.

"What are you doing here, Spike?" she asked, her eyes heavy. Her lips wet and aching to be kissed. God, he just wanted to kiss her. He'd waited so long. The hurt was gone now and the rest didn't matter. He just wanted to kiss her.

But he didn't kiss her. The fact that he was able to keep both feet firmly planted on the ground was more than admirable. "You know what I'm doing here."

"I left."

"Yeah, and I said I'd come after you, pet. What? You think those were just words?"

She stiffened righteously and crossed her arms, her green eyes betraying conflict she couldn't hide. "I didn't ask you to come for me."

Spike perked a brow. "And I didn't ask you to leave. What of it?"

"Spike—"

"Don't start by telling me you're not happy to see me, love. I know better." He took a step forward, unable to keep from sizing her up. "The way you kissed me...you've been pining for your Spike, haven't you?"

"That's none of your business."

"Buffy..."

"I mean—" She cut off abruptly and rolled her eyes. "Oh for god's sake, who am I kidding?" And without warning, she jumped into his arms, her hands framing his face and dragging his mouth down to hers. The second her lips brushed his, the world around him melted and the monster in his chest purred.

This was how it should have been. Every sodding second. Buffy was his. She was *his,* and he'd missed her so much the pain in his gut had trembled at the weight of the ache in his heart. There was nothing about her he didn't love. The way she smelled of raspberry shower-wash, the way she moaned into his mouth when he sucked at her tongue, the way she subconsciously danced against his erection. The way she snarked at him while trying to contain giggles. The way she clung to him when she wept. The fire in her eyes. The witty retort on her lips. Her sodding holier-than-thou attitude and her perpetual martyr complex. He loved it all. She was bright and vivid and alive, and she was his.

He had her in his arms again. There would be no letting her go after this.

"What took you so long?" she demanded breathlessly, nibbling on his lower lip. "You...g'nah."

His hand had found her breast. The small, fleshy roundness of it, her nipple hard against his palm. And when he massaged her—Christ, the sounds she made. It was nearly enough to make a grown man come in his trousers.

"You tell a girl...you'll find her...and...and it's been—"

"Too long."

"Yes. Yes, too long."

"Didn't think you wanted to be found, love," Spike told her truth-

fully, pressing a kiss to the corner of her mouth before his wandering lips began a southbound trek. If he wasn't careful, he was going to end up fucking her against one of the alley walls, and though excusable given the circumstances, she deserved better. "You ran off."

Buffy's head rolled back, his mouth worshipping her throat. "I...I had to."

"Mmm," he hummed. "Why?"

"Because...I...oh god, I don't even...*ahhh!*"

Spike grinned and licked the bite mark again. "You like that, baby?" he whispered. "Bet this pretty little neck has been achin' for my fangs."

"I've been aching all over," she retorted, fisting his hair and jerking his head upward so she could kiss him again. And then she froze—she went positively rigid against his mouth—and he knew without needing to see her eyes narrow or her brow furrow in concentration that the tide had changed.

It didn't stop him from whimpering in protest when she pulled away and quickly put herself out of kissing distance. "I've been aching all over, actually," she said. "Until now."

"I'd think that'd be a good thing, pet," Spike replied weakly. "Unless you want the hurt to go on."

"You don't understand—"

He perked his brows. "Don't I? That twisted feeling in your gut? The way your muscles cramp? How it hurts to bloody breathe? Got so used to breathing around you, I rightly forgot I had the option of not. Hurt to get up. Hurt to move. Hurt to eat. Hurt to...there wasn't much that didn't hurt, was there? Had to give up my smokes 'cause the whole process was a bloody nightmare."

Buffy's eyes were wide. "So it's...it's been that way for you, too?"

"Not exactly what I'd call a picnic, eh, Slayer?"

"But it's gone now. I was...just a few minutes ago, and then you were..." She paused, every inch of her suddenly weighted with suspicion. He couldn't say it was altogether unexpected. "What did you do?" she demanded. "What's making me—"

"Us," Spike corrected.

"Whatever. What did—"

"You're mine, Buffy. That's what I did. I made you mine. I claimed you."

Off her look, he knew she had no idea about what he was talking, and while it didn't surprise him—while he'd known to expect it—he found he was still irritated. If any human should be privy to ancient vampire rituals, it was the slayer.

Never mind that he hadn't known himself until he'd looked it up in several old, dusty books, but it was the principle of the thing.

"You...claimed...what's that?" She scrunched her nose adorably. "I'm not exactly free territory. You can't just stake a flag in me and declare me Property of Spike."

He warded off a grin. Something told him smiling at her would be a mistake. "Didn't need a flag, pet," he replied. "Got fangs."

"So you..." Buffy inhaled sharply, her hand flying to the mark on her throat. "You...the bite. That's what...you..."

"It was instinct. It wasn't planned. You were...you were under me... surroundin' me..." Spike sighed and forced himself to keep from falling back into the memory of her hot pussy gripping him, drenching him, marking his body forever. The lost look in her eyes—the venom in her voice in spite of her raucous need for what he offered. She'd wanted the memory of Angel fucked out of her, and the hint that Spike was nothing more than a stand-in for what she truly wanted had reared the possessive demon inside. He'd needed to make her his, and he had. "You were...you were around me. And I couldn't...I couldn't stand the thought that you were just fucking me to get *him* outta your head."

Buffy wet her lips. "So you...claimed me."

"Yeah."

"And that's why I've been sick?"

Something flashed in her eyes, and he knew then that she'd suspected. It wasn't surprising—Buffy wasn't dumb and she knew blood had power. Still, he supposed there was a difference between suspecting and knowing. Now she knew, and she was brassed.

Buffy shook her head as though trying to clear it. "You've made me physically *crave* you because you wanted me to—"

"I just said it wasn't planned."

"Well, okay then. So what now? How do you undo it?"

The question alone nearly brought him to tears. Spike's jaw hardened, his pain shoved aside in the namesake of pride. He wouldn't let her see how her words cut. "You don't," he ground out.

"Don't what?"

"Undo it. There is no bloody *undoing* it. We call it *claiming* for a reason, honey. Vampires mate for life...or unlife. When they choose their mate, there's no undoing it." He flashed her a particularly ugly smile, spreading his arms wide. "You're stuck with me."

For long seconds, there was nothing but the heavy crash of her breaths and the rhythmic rise and fall of her chest. Her eyes shone, flecked with a warped fury of fear and horror. "But...you... You were with Dru—"

Spike laughed bitterly. "Well, I never claimed Dru, did I?"

"Why...why not?"

"She wasn't mine, Slayer. She belonged to her precious *daddy.* Just like Darla. Every bint who so much as catches a whiff of that bastard all but throws herself..." He broke off, shaking his head. "You were...I couldn't bear it. Not another woman I... Not *you,* Buffy. Not you, too. So I claimed you. Made sure you and Angel and the whole sodding world knew you were—are—*mine,* not his."

And there it was. The anger bubbling beneath the surface of confusion finally touched the air. In a blink, all came thoroughly unwound. "You unbelievable bastard!" she screamed, her fist connecting with his jaw and sending him across the alleyway and into the front of a large trash dispenser. "I was *grieving.* I *killed* him. Do you get that? Do you understand? I *killed* him. This wasn't a pissing contest—whose fangs are bigger. I'd killed Angel and you were jealous because I wasn't overjoyed about that? What kind of person are you?"

Spike wiped his bleeding lip with his duster sleeve, ignoring the aches shooting through his tired body as he climbed to his feet. Honestly, he'd more or less expected this. In a relationship such as theirs, no heated conversation could go without a dose of violence.

"Not a person, love."

Buffy stared at him, shaking. "I can't believe you'd do this to me."

"I just *told* you it wasn't planned, you daft twig," he growled. "It

wasn't planned. Hell, you're the one who jumped me that night, remember? I'd tortured myself over you as it was. Kissing you. Touching you. All that song and dance we did back in Sunnyhell and you were so bloody far from me. Even when I was inside you, I couldn't touch you. So I claimed you."

"I didn't ask for it!"

He huffed indignantly, throbbing with hurt. "Yeah, well, I didn't ask to be claimed back, so we're even."

She blinked dumbly. "What? Did not!"

A self-satisfied smirk wormed its way to his lips. He hooked two fingers under the neckline of his tee and jerked the fabric down until his shoulder was bared. The shoulder marked with her teeth. "Claiming's a simple ritual for what it does," he said casually. "For vamps, at least...not sure for other demons. All we need is a taste of blood and two words. I say, 'mine' and you say—"

"Yours."

The word rode out on a gasp—a small, breathless revelation. She remembered, then. She remembered the second it happened. The second she became his.

Spike nodded. "Right. If you hadn't said that, we wouldn't be here."

"I didn't know—"

"'Course not. Doesn't matter if you knew it or not." Spike broke, shaking his head. "The funny thing? The claim would've worn away if you hadn't given me this." His fingers grazed the bite mark before releasing the neckline altogether. "Claim's gotta be accepted and reciprocated. It's a...for lack of better words, a marriage of equals. I can't take you by force and that's why your consent is so important. And in claiming me back, we acknowledge that we're the same. I'm yours, you're mine." Spike glanced down, unable to withstand the horror in her eyes anymore. "The pain...it goes away after a while. Took me a bit to remember that. Never planned on claiming anyone who wasn't Dru, and I sure as bloody hell didn't plan on not being with her when I did. But it'll pass. The pain you've—*we've* been going through. It'll pass. For now, the thing is, we've essentially bonded on the principle that we belong to each other, so it's bloody unnatural for us to be apart."

"Oh my god..."

"It won't always be like this," he said again. "It's just...it's too new now. Like a kid, right? Needs his mum all the time at first...but as he gets older, he becomes more self-reliant."

Buffy was shaking so hard it was a wonder the ground beneath her didn't quake. "Oh my god," she said again. "And this...this can't be...I can't..." She looked up sharply, her eyes glistening with fresh tears. And Christ, all he wanted to do was take her in his arms and hold her until the pain went away. Until she realized he wasn't the devil and he would be the one to stay at her side for all eternity. He would love her hard and well. He already did.

"You let me leave," she said suddenly. "You let me come out here and...you let me be in such...in such *pain*—"

What?

"What?" Spike blinked, his hands coming up. "Slayer—"

"You knew I was going to leave! How could you let me leave without telling me this? Without—"

"I didn't—"

"I have the note. Unless there was someone else named *Spike* staying in our room—"

"I didn't know it'd be so bleeding painful!" he barked. "How could I? Never been claimed before. Never had a mate before. No one told me how this worked!"

"You seem pretty well-read—"

"And that's just it, Buffy. *Well-read*. Had a little time, didn't I? Caught up on my homework. I would've been here sooner if..." His voice trailed off on another cynical laugh, his arms going up, his mind railroading into a brick wall. "You know what? Sod it. Damned if I do and damned if I bloody don't. You think this has been *fun* for me? Think again, kitten. I know you don't love me. Know this isn't what you wanted. Know you'd rather spend eternity with anyone but me." Spike sighed and met her eyes. "I can't change what we did. But...Buffy, we can..."

He didn't finish the thought. He knew what she would say, and the thought was too painful to harden into reality.

Perhaps he was fortunate, then, that the air split with a timely scream.

"Oh god," Buffy gasped, whirling around. "Fred."

Then again, Spike mused wearily as he watched his girl tear down the alleyway. *Maybe not.*

21

A thousand terrible images flashed through Buffy's head as her suddenly rejuvenated body sprinted across an endless stretch of pavement. Visions of Fred on the ground. Fred in pain. Fred holding her bleeding stomach. Fred's wide, brown eyes finding hers, wordlessly demanding how such a thing could happen. How, after all the kindness she'd shown a stranger, she could be repaid like this.

"Fred!"

A scream directed her feet. Buffy took a sharp turn to the right and found herself lost in another shadowy alley, chasing phantoms.

"Fred! *Fred*!"

There was a flurry of movement and she was suddenly roadblocked by a human wall. A gang of ten or so, dressed in street clothes barricaded her pathway, staring at her with intent which couldn't be mistaken. Buffy jerked to a sudden halt, her chest heaving, her eyes stretching wide with confusion.

It took several minutes to register that she was on the business end of several crossbows. These kids wielded crossbows. There was something very much wrong here.

"Okay," she said slowly, her lungs fighting for air. "You got my

attention. Either you're here to help or you're keeping me from my friend. What's the what?"

"The girl's ours, vampire," one of the kids spat, hoisting his crossbow higher to make sure it was seen. "She's safe. Can't say the same for you."

Buffy's eyebrows shot skyward. "Okay, what?"

"We saw you," another voice supplied. "Can't do much in this part of town we won't see."

"You saw me, what?" she retorted. "*Dusting* vamps? Yeah. That's kind of what I do. Fred's with me—and as comforting as those weapons might be, I promise she'll be safer with the Slayer at her side."

The first guy spoke again, the crossbow shifting slightly in his arms. "The Slayer?" he repeated. "What's that? Some kinda demon?"

Buffy stared at him blankly. "Okay, how is it that the people on the *Hellmouth* are more in the know than you? Are you telling me I actually needed to move to a big city to have a secret identity?" Her hands found her hips, her head tilting. "Superman was right all along. Who knew?"

"What the fuck are you talkin' about?"

"Where's Fred?" she countered, her eyes blazing dangerously. "I need to see she's okay. And believe me, if you don't cooperate, you'll see how very ineffective those weapons are in the face of a pissed-off slayer."

The two apparent ringleaders exchanged a telling glance.

"We could stay here and chat this out until the sun comes up and then you can see how very much I don't dust," Buffy offered happily. "Just let me see my friend unless you *want* to see some violence."

There was nothing for a few seconds. They simply stared at each other.

"It's all right, Briggs," a voice said from the left. Buffy whirled around—someone was emerging from a patch of shadows. Another kid, though *kid* was becoming a relative term in her mind. He was in his early twenties, perhaps, judging by looks alone. His skin was dark, his eyes heavy, carrying the weight of having grown up much too quickly—a feeling Buffy knew intimately. She knew without being told

she was looking at the actual leader. His authority couldn't be denied. His presence had the rest of the gang immediately at ease.

"She ain't no vamp," the newcomer said.

Buffy nodded shakily. "Just now catching on, are you?"

"We were tailing those two you and your boy took out."

"Tailing? In a big, silent way?"

"We're good at keepin' invisible if we want. Find it's easier to kill vamps if we're stealthy." He held her gaze a minute longer before turning to address the one he'd called Briggs. "Go get the girl."

Briggs wasn't as easily convinced. "We don't know jack about this, Gunn."

"We know this chick ain't no vamp," came the retort. "Go get the girl."

There was a long pause before anyone moved. Briggs didn't draw his guarded eyes away from Buffy until it was physically impossible to keep staring at her. Then he was gone, and despite herself, Buffy found her shoulders slumping with relief and a sigh rolling off her lips. Briggs might not be the leader, but somehow she didn't think he discriminated against whom he killed as long as the vamp toll was higher at the end of the day.

People like that terrified her. While she hadn't run into any vigilante vamp hunters in the first year of her Calling, Merrick had warned her that certain areas of Los Angeles were riddled with displaced teens who took matters of supernatural law into their own hands. They weren't to be trusted, for they trusted no one but themselves. Outsiders, even if the outsiders fought on the side of good, were only given slight favor above the society which had so often spat in their faces. She wasn't supposed to interfere with their operation. There was no talking them down or enlightening them with reason and knowledge. She was going to do her duty, and wish the best for everyone else.

"Sorry 'bout Briggs," the other guy—Gunn—said, stepping forward. "We don't see moves like yours that aren't a vamp's or a demon's. But I saw it. You fought them."

"Yeah," Buffy agreed shortly. "I fought them. And funny thing, I didn't see you at all."

"Told you. We ain't seen unless we wanna be seen. We were tailin'

those vamps. I was about to send two of mine in as bait, then you and the girl came along."

She nodded, her eyes narrowing. "So you decided to use us."

"We would've helped if help was needed. You had it under control." Gunn motioned to the remaining vigilantes, and in one stroke they all lowered their weapons. They operated seamlessly—a machine that knew how to effectively use its parts.

"You grabbed Fred, then?"

"Fred the girl?"

She nodded.

"Girl was freaked," Gunn confirmed. "Screamin' things about vamps. She said you were doubled over in pain, so when we saw you tossing the vamps around like dolls..." He trailed off with a frown, his brown eyes growing wide as though only then realizing something wasn't right. "Where is he?"

"Where's who?" she asked quickly, her tone laced with faux-innocence.

"Your boy. The one you macked on before remembering there were demons in the alley."

Buffy stiffened. Her racing mind attempted to recount the last few minutes—what had happened before she took off after Fred—and she couldn't remember if Spike had gone into game face or not. She hadn't noticed. She hadn't cared. She'd just been relieved to see him. More than relieved—had she not regained her emotions, she would have begged him never to leave her again.

Then there was the revelation. The cause of her pain. The reason she'd felt, for the past few days, she was being gutted from the inside out. Like someone was dicing her up. Felt the need for him beyond anything she'd ever known. They were linked by blood. The night in the hotel—the night that had forever changed her life—had indeed forever changed her life. She'd thought just having him inside her was an awakening. Turned out the fangs he'd buried in her throat and the words he'd whispered meant more than fleeting, sexual possession. She should have known. With vamps, it was always biting and blood and if it wasn't for food, there had to be a different reason Spike had staked his claim on her.

And she'd claimed him right back.

Buffy cleared her throat. "He's not here."

Even as she spoke the words, she knew she was lying. Spike wouldn't leave her. Not now.

Not with this thing between them.

This was, of course, confirmed the next second. She felt him before she heard him—felt him before the telling hiss of a match lighting filled the alley. The warm glow of a cigarette burned in the shadows. She didn't know how long he'd been there. Her nerves were still flamed from having touched him. Having kissed him. Having been near him at all. Everything was on overdrive.

"Almost right, pet," Spike drawled, blowing out a cool stream of smoke. "Don't think I'd let you run off and have all the fun, do you?"

Gunn started in surprise, and he didn't look like a guy easily taken by surprise.

"What the *fuck*?" came from the crowd.

"Man, this night is fuckin' crazy," affirmed another.

Spike's brows arched appraisingly as he strolled out of the shadows, situating himself firmly at Buffy's side. The unspoken implication both warmed and irritated her. He was staking his territory—he was making it known that any quarrel they had with her, they had with him, as well. And while she appreciated the support, there was nothing here she couldn't handle.

Especially with her body still buzzing from what had happened earlier. What she'd learned.

Gunn shot a warning glance to Buffy. "This your boy?"

She blinked. "I thought you saw him."

"Thought I saw a lot. Can't be too careful, can we?" He inhaled sharply and stepped forward, a dangerous gleam in his eyes. "Where'd he come from?"

Spike took his cigarette between his index and middle finger, rocking slightly on his heels, as he sized the other man up. "You think your lot's the only ones good at slinking in the shadows, mate?" he asked. "Don't feature letting my girl outta my sight too long. Rough neighborhood, and all that."

"Think we both know she can handle herself."

"Mhmmm," Spike purred, taking another hit of nicotine. "With lots of little boys runnin' around with crossbows and knives, thinking she's a demon?"

Apparently, the idiot vampire had never taken the course in not pissing off people with pointy weapons. "Little what?" an angry voice demanded. "Does he know who the fuck we are?"

"I don't think he cares," Gunn answered, not taking his eyes off the Brit. "So, what's the story? You one, too?"

"Depends," Spike replied coolly. "One what?"

But Buffy knew exactly what Gunn meant, and she wasn't about to let Spike dig himself an early grave. Not only would it be redundant, it was her job. If anyone got staking-Spike privilege, it was her.

"He is," she confirmed with a nod. "He's a slayer, too."

She wisely ignored the half-shocked, half-amused look she earned with that particular lie. Meeting Spike's eyes now would be very much of the bad. She just hoped he got over it fast enough to make the transition from vampire-to-slayer believable. If Gunn hadn't seen Spike's bumpies, they had every shot of getting out of this unscathed.

Especially since the gang seemed to have no knowledge whatsoever about slayers. If they could pass off the notion that slayers were chosen haphazardly by the PTB, Spike's super-strength wouldn't be nearly as difficult to explain.

To her relief, Spike didn't rebuke the notion or openly question where she got off spreading things like that around. Instead, he offered a swift nod and said, "Yeah. That's right. I'm a slayer. Buffy and me, we're the slayers. The two in LA, or what all. We were just having a moment when those nasty, evil, *disgusting* buggers decided to interrupt."

Buffy rolled her eyes. *Lay it on thick much?*

"—they came after us with their fangs, 'cause that's what vamps do, y'know, and—"

"Spike!" She elbowed him swiftly and flashed Gunn an apologetic smile. "He—umm. Gets a little...excited when we talk about the...the killing of...evil things."

"It's my bread and butter," Spike agreed, his fingers absently

caressing his ribs. "Bloody hell, Slayer, you forget your strength sometimes."

Gunn's eyes narrowed warily, and though it was more than obvious he was growing more uncomfortable with this by the second, he seemed strangely willing to let it slide. "So," he said. "What's the deal with slayers?"

"Yeah," came a voice of unrest from the crowd. Several kids had raised their weapons again. "If you two ain't demons—"

"We're Chosen warriors," Spike said proudly, puffing out his chest and tossing an arm around Buffy's shoulder. "Me and my girl here. Chosen two. Selected by the wankers upstairs to even out the cosmic odds. Demon fighters with demon strength and all that."

"It's a thing," Buffy said quickly, relieved beyond nothing else when Briggs stepped back into the alley by way of an open warehouse door, dragging Fred by the arm.

And suddenly there was an out. She had what she wanted. She had Fred.

They had to get out of here before Spike said something notably unsoulful and got them all in even more trouble.

"Oh thank god," she breathed, tearing from Spike's side. "Fred!"

The brunette's eyes filled with tears the second they met hers, relief flooding her face. "Buffy!" she gasped, jerking free of Briggs's hold to meet her halfway. And before she could blink, Buffy found herself with an armful of Fred, who trembled and clung to her as though they'd been separated for years. "I'm so sorry," the girl swore. "I tried to explain. I tried to tell them you weren't a vampire, but—"

"Buffy a vampire?" Spike drawled, snickering. "There's a pretty thought."

The comment earned an awkward pause and several wary glances.

"And by pretty," he continued, "I mean...nasty and evil and not at all good, 'cause then I'd have to kill her, and—"

"How are you?" Fred demanded, releasing Buffy from her bear hug long enough to visually verify she wasn't bleeding out of every pore or about to collapse on the pavement. "I didn't wanna run. I didn't—"

"I told you to run," Buffy reminded her softly. "You did the right thing."

"But you were hurt. You were—"

She shook her head. "It's cool. I'm good now."

"Gunn," Briggs said suddenly, "who the fuck is that?"

Buffy whirled around, her instincts flaring. Spike stood more than ten feet away. If the gang was growing suspicious, they needed to make a quick exit. Quick meaning now. She had Fred and she didn't exactly want to stick around and make conversation with a bunch of street-fighters who didn't know vamps from non-vamps, ambiguities aside. It took Briggs's voice to remind her he was the one she didn't trust.

Well, the one she didn't trust the most.

"A slayer," Gunn replied, his voice weighted with doubt. "Like the girl."

"Two slayers?"

"Apparently."

Then Gunn turned back to Buffy, his eyes sharp and, for the first time, she became acutely aware of how intelligent he was. No matter the language he used or the group with which he ran, this man was not to be underestimated. He was sharp. He was suspicious. And for whatever reason, he was providing her an out.

Every inch of her filled with gratitude.

"So the two of you are slayers," he said slowly, nodding to Spike. "Think you can handle yourselves? Me and mine got more sweeps to do. People who *aren't* slayers."

"Vamps to kill," Spike agreed eagerly, his eyes bright.

Buffy groaned inwardly. There was no way he was going to get over this *I'm-the-slayer* thing.

Gunn tossed the vampire another glance, thickened with even more suspicion. "Right," he said. "So take the girl and get gone. And some advice? Not the best area to be makin' out, even if you two are slayers." He turned sharply to his gang and jerked his chin up. "Let's roll."

"Whoa, wait," Briggs protested. "We gonna let 'em go?"

"Not the enemy, bro," Gunn replied. "We're all on the same side, here."

"And we're gone," Buffy agreed, grabbing Fred's wrist. "We're all kinds of gone."

Briggs stared at her for a hard minute. "Right. Whatever. Don't let us catch you down here again."

"Oi! The Slayer's gotta go where she—we—"

Buffy rolled her eyes and seized Spike by the scruff of the neck with her other hand. "Don't worry," she shouted over her shoulder, dragging her people along with her. "I think this town is sufficiently big enough for the...all of us."

"Rough-housing, pet?" her vampire purred, wrenching free the second they turned a corner.

"That's the last time you get to be a slayer," Buffy muttered.

"I take it I missed something?" Fred asked meekly.

"Oh, so much." Buffy sighed, reluctantly releasing the brunette's wrist. "Fred, Spike," she said, then returned in kind. "Spike, Fred. Fred's my friend. She let me stay at her place. And Spike's my..."

Spike swallowed audibly when she didn't complete the thought and shot her a speculative glance, but neither broke stride.

Spike's my...

Well, wasn't that the question of the hour?

"Pleased to meet you," Fred said quickly. "Can we do this somewhere that's not outside? I think I've had my share of vampires tonight."

A small smile tugged on Spike's lips, but thankfully, he didn't comment.

Instead, he laced his fingers through Buffy's, his palm against hers.

And without warning, the walls in Buffy's mind collapsed. Her heart flipped and the whole of her trembled. He could reduce her to nothing more than trembling female nerves with one little gesture. One little gesture which somehow meant the world.

I think I've had my share, too.

Not that it mattered. It didn't, and she didn't mean it anyway. Spike very clearly wasn't going anywhere.

She'd have to kick his ass if he disappeared.

Especially now.

Not that he needed to know that.

Though something in his smile told her he already did.

22

"You've got to be bloody kidding me."

It took everything in him not to collapse to his knees. Not to wrap his arms around her middle. Not to turn into some simpering ninny right there at the doorstep of her little friend's apartment. He'd only just found her again—there was no way he was going to walk away now. Not with the taste of her in his mouth and the warmth of her burning his hands. He knew she was confused, and Christ it wasn't like he could blame her, but he couldn't abide the thought of being shut away again.

He knew Buffy realized the importance of the claim. They were linked. His blood belonged to her. Everything he was belonged to her. Everything she was belonged to him. It was the way things were. The way they'd made things together.

He couldn't walk away now. Not tonight. Not ever.

Every contour of her gorgeous body was wrought with tension. She was prepared to fight. She would not compromise.

"I can't deal with this tonight," Buffy whispered, her gaze trained pointedly on a spot on the floor. "Please, Spike."

She wouldn't even look at him. Did she fear breaking if she saw the desperation in his eyes? Was she trying to hide from him? Bloody hell,

he was so buggering inept at feeling through the claim. All his research had indicated an immediate perception into his girl's thoughts. Her blood was in him, linked to him, and he was supposed to know how to best care for her—what she felt, what she needed.

Though he hadn't the foggiest idea how that was supposed to work. The texts he'd studied hadn't said anything about sharing minds, and for that, he was glad. But he'd thought there would be something. Anything. A smidgeon as to what she felt. The tiniest trickle through their sacred connection allowing him to sense her emotions. Sense her *anything*.

He honestly didn't know what he'd expected. And though it would be infinitely easier to know what to do had the window to her mind opened and fed him her every thought in a clear, crisp monolog, figuring her out was a part of the mystery. A part of the fun. And he knew as well as anyone that listening to voices in one's head would eventually drive one batty.

Then again, the distance she insisted on placing between them was doing that all on its own.

"It's too much to take in tonight," she continued softly. "I can't..."

He took a mad, desperate step forward, silently imploring her to meet his eyes. "Buffy...you know what...there's no undoing it. We're—"

"You can say it as often as you like, I still need time."

"Forever, pet. You're mine."

Her head snapped up at that, her emerald eyes a gorgeous, tumultuous sea of confusion. "I'm not," she said shortly. "I'm *mine,* Spike. I belong to me. You might've...put the whammy on me, but I'm still mine. I don't know what you want—"

"Yes, you do," he growled, seizing her by the chin. "You bloody well do, you—"

"I can't do this tonight. You can't just tell me everything's changed and expect me to take it with a smile and a nod. You can't."

Spike's eyes narrowed, desperation colliding with anger. "Everything changed for me, too, you know. I didn't fuck you that night with a mind to claim you, you barmy twig. That was a mistake and you can't expect me to pay for it for the rest of eternity just because you need

your bloody *space.* You begged for it and I gave it to you. What more do you want from me?"

The harshness of his words was a slap. When her wounded eyes widened, he honestly didn't know if it was regret or satisfaction cementing his gut. Perhaps a spiraled mixture of both.

"You're right," Buffy said, her voice clipped and, to her credit, fortified. That was his girl through and through. She refused to betray weakness. "I need space."

"Space isn't gonna do rot. We need each other."

Her gaze flashed. "I don't need—"

"Yeah? And what happens when the pain in your gut becomes so bloody terrible—"

Buffy help up a hand, trembling. The small weight of her resting against the doorframe made her seem so far from him. He couldn't get into the apartment—couldn't just barge his way inside to claim what was his. No, little Fred hadn't extended an invite and based on the way the brunette purposefully strode behind Buffy every few seconds, it was more than clear one wasn't forthcoming.

"It's just for tonight," Buffy said. And then, softer, "Let me have tonight. You're not going to leave town, are you?"

It'd bloody well serve her right if he did.

"No," Spike replied, his shoulders rolling back with the weight of a long sigh. "No, I'm not going anywhere. I'm on your leash, aren't I? Can't go anywhere without you."

Her eyes narrowed. "And the reasons for not doing this tonight just keep coming."

"Buffy—"

"You dumped this on me," she said, her argumentative tone falling flat with defeat. "I know...look, Spike, I know nothing can be done about it. I get that. Contrary to what pretty much all my teachers back in Sunnydale will tell you, I'm a pretty smart cookie. Tell me something once and I get it."

He shuffled. It was so much easier remaining angry with her when she was unreasonable. The sudden lack of quarrel in her voice drained him of his need to scream and throttle her. Rather, the hopelessness seeping into her eyes made his heart wither and his arms ache. She

belonged with him. And if she was going to deny him his right, she needed to be a bitch about it so he wouldn't feel like a prat for cutting her with words.

"Time's not gonna do rot," he said again, his voice smaller. "Won't change anything."

Buffy trembled with resolve. "This isn't about changing anything," she said softly, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. "But if you want me to get to a place where I understand and...I just can't have you here. I'm sorry." She paused, a harsh, humorless laugh. "I don't know. I don't know *anything.* I've been waiting for you to find me for so long and then you did and you slam me with...with *this.*"

"I found you, though," Spike replied, a pathetically hopeful smile tickling his lips. "Promised, didn't I?"

"You promised. I didn't...I believed you'd try, but...I dunno." Another long sigh rippled down her spine. God, she looked so tired. "I left and I guess I thought you'd eventually think I wasn't worth it and...I dunno...maybe you'd go find Dru and leave me to it."

He would have been startled dumb if it weren't for the hot anger that immediately commanded his veins. "Dru?" he spat. "You thought I'd go back...to *Dru?"*

To her credit, Buffy looked properly discomfited. "Well...I dunno."

"Not only did the bitch try to kill you, love, but have you forgotten the tiny incident of her sodding *nailing* me to my bedroom wall?" He slammed an angry fist into the wall before he could help himself. "I told you before...before the fight, before we even left the Hellmouth, that me and Dru were through."

"That was then," she said softly. "That was...before..."

"Before what?" he growled. "Before I fucked you? Yeah, Slayer, you're right. It was before then. It was well before I carted your ass out of Sunnyhell and before I claimed you. And if that didn't bloody well seal it for me, then just being with *you* sure as hell did. There isn't anything in this world or any other that could convince me back into her bed. She sodding killed me and she tried...and I've had *you.*" He sighed and glanced down. "I've had you. I'm spoiled for anyone else."

He felt it the second the air changed. Felt it the second her defenses crashed. The stiffness in her shoulders rolled into a softness

only a few ever got to see. The tenderness he'd enjoyed in the few minutes they'd had together which weren't filled with confusion and arguing and hard fucking. He remembered taking her against the shower wall. Remembered the desperation with which she'd begged him to take her before she'd slipped out of his bed and run away from him.

She'd asked him to love her. She'd asked him, tugging at his fly, her eyes wide, to love her.

And now she was so far from him. She was so far. Thinking he could go back to Dru—that he could go to anyone.

He didn't think he was being particularly secretive in the fact that he loved her. While the words were shy, he'd told her a thousand times with his hands and eyes and lips. He'd kissed her and moved inside her body and, even when they were miles apart, done his best to keep her properly cared for. He hadn't had much, but he'd given her whatever he could.

"I'm sorry I left," she whispered, startling him out of his reverie. "I should have tried...I dunno. But it felt like I needed to leave. I was scared. I'd killed him...he'd come back and I'd killed him and I didn't know what to feel or how I should... And then there you were, being wonderful and confusing me even more, and I needed to get out."

There was no way for her to know how her words cracked him, shattering whatever was inside. "I would've given you whatever you needed," Spike told her softly.

"I know. But I needed to leave to... I needed..."

"Buffy—"

"I was sorry after I left. Almost immediately after I left." She lifted her hand to her throat and tenderly massaged the bite mark gracing her skin. "And when I saw you again tonight, it...I was so happy. But Spike, this...this *forever* thing? I'm what, exactly? We're linked by blood and I understand that, but it's going to take me time to..." She sighed again, shaking. "I'm not the sort of person who can just accept these things. I don't know what it means, for you or for me. I just got out of this thing with Angel. I don't know if I'm ready for... I don't think I'm ready. And if you want me to ever be ready, you're going to need to give

me time. I know I had time, but it's different now. You changed everything with what you told me."

A poignant smile twitched Spike's lips and he inhaled sharply, doing his level best to conceal how his unbeating heart constricted and withered with every word she spoke. It was all right. Sure. He understood. It was simple, really. Maybe if Angel hadn't had that bloody soul of his stuffed up his righteous arse the last second, things would be different. But she'd seen it—she'd seen him, the bloke she loved—and everything had changed then. Well before Spike ushered her to his car. Well before she'd mauled his lips and taken his cock inside her perfect little body. Well before she climbed out of bed and left him for what she thought would be forever. Well before missing him. Well before the claim.

It had been easier for her when the boogeyman wasn't someone she loved. She'd left her mum's house after a rather nasty fight, prepared and bloody well content to be at Spike's side. She'd verbally snapped at Angelus in ways no girl ever had, and it was Angelus she'd been prepared to fight in that last battle. To have her own defenses ripped away when the face she hated suddenly dissolved into the face she loved again had thrown her for a loop the likes of which no one else had suffered.

Buffy's reality had crushed her fantasy. He knew it. He'd seen it happen. He'd watched as she stood torn between worlds—between the kisses she and Spike had shared, the flirtation, the intrigue...and Angel. The sodding white knight. She'd killed Angel but she hadn't said goodbye. No, she'd carried him with her all the bloody way out of Sunnyhell. She'd tried to fuck him out of her system by fucking Spike instead, but it had only confused her young idealistic mind to the point where she'd taken off. She'd left him because he wasn't the answer to her broken heart. No matter that she was the answer to his.

And perhaps she was sorry she'd gone now. Perhaps she truly had missed Spike. Perhaps she didn't know he loved her, or couldn't believe he loved her. Perhaps she'd arrived in Los Angeles and craved him because he replaced sorrow with pleasure. He could drive her body to heights she'd never before explored, and it was buggering hard to remember how miserable she was with his tongue lapping at her pussy.

The harder he made her come, the longer she remained with him. She hadn't left him until he slept.

The unforgiving truth was Buffy wasn't prepared to be his. She didn't want it. She might want him, sure, but she didn't want his to be the face with which she awoke for the rest of forever.

It all came down to one central recognition—Buffy didn't love him.

And thanks to his fangs, he had infinite time at her side. An eternity knowing Buffy could never love him back. He was locked inside forever with the woman he cherished, but he would never know the warmth of her heart. Even when they again took pleasure in each other's bodies, she would remain out of arm's reach.

"I don't want to leave you," Spike whispered, then winced inwardly. The words were so desperately pathetic.

"Believe me," she said, her tone caught somewhere between compassion and irony, a small, sympathetic grin stretching her lips. "I'm really getting that."

"The pain—"

"We already... You're not going far. And I said it's just for tonight." She pressed her forehead against the door frame. "It's *just* for tonight. If you come in here, I'm just going to want you to fix everything and I can't let that happen." A pause. "Plus this is Fred's place and she said no more houseguests."

"I could fix things," he offered weakly.

She shrugged and continued, talking now to herself. "Could also be because she knows you're a vamp now and has no reason at all to trust you."

"I like fixing things."

"No reason to trust except for my word, but my word got her kidnapped by wannabes and stored away in some warehouse while you and I traded smoochies."

"It wouldn't be so bad to let me fix things."

Buffy leveled him with a glance. "Yes, it would. I can't keep asking favors from people."

"Suddenly taking care of you's a bloody favor, is it?"

"Spike, *please.* If you care about me, you'll just trust what I need

right now is for you to go away." She sighed. "Please don't go far, but...I need to think. I need to think and I *can't* with you here."

He knew he was pathetic. He also knew he was an instant away from begging.

But no good would come from it. Buffy was resolved and she had been since they'd left the alley.

And it was, as she kept insisting, just one night.

God, there was no way she knew how long a night away from her lasted. But he wouldn't beg. He wouldn't. She had everything else from him as it was. She wasn't about to get his pride.

Well, what was left of it, anyway.

"Right," Spike said, drawing in a deep breath and throwing his shoulders back. "Space, then. And time."

"You can come back tomorrow," Buffy retorted quickly. "We'll talk tomorrow."

"Right. Tomorrow." A nod. "Right."

Spike turned and began down the hallway before he said sod-all to pride. One more night, she said. Just one more night. She needed time to think, and it was only a night.

To her, perhaps.

But he knew her. Spike knew her and he knew her well. And nothing in Buffy's gorgeously thick skull could ever be settled easily when she was so conflicted.

This was the first night of their new separation. The first of many more they would spend apart. She'd know this in the morning. When she awoke and realized that sleep had done bugger all to fix her problems.

He just hoped she figured out what she wanted before the next apocalypse swallowed the world.

23

In all honesty, Buffy didn't know whether or not to be grateful when Fred neglected to demand answers. It was hard enough closing the door with Spike on the other side. Another a lengthy discussion would positively wear her out. This she knew from experience.

Though admittedly, a thousand years ago and under different circumstances, she and Fred likely would have bonded over fatty snacks as Buffy related the silky contours of Spike's lips in full detail. But things had changed, and she was so much older now. So much older than she'd been just a few months ago. She was the mate of a vampire—the *eternal* mate of a vampire, from what Spike had said. She was tied to him forever through blood. Because of the night they'd shared. The night wherein she'd selfishly jumped his undead bones and used the feelings she knew he had for her.

She'd used him, and she'd been rather shameless about it. But it wasn't as though she'd felt nothing for Spike—quite the contrary, she'd felt more than she should. Ever since he'd cornered her in the halls of Sunnydale High, no matter they'd both been under ghostly influence, a spark had ignited in her belly. A spark she'd done her best to ignore since he'd first stepped out of the shadows and into her life. He was

gorgeous. He was dangerous. Compared to her roll in the sack with Angel, Spike had been warm and considerate. Not only that, he'd cared for—and about—her. He'd genuinely cared about her. She might have fucked him silly upon arriving at their motel, but he'd made love to her afterward. In the shower. On the bed. After violence came peace, and Spike had been there to provide it.

Now, however, her feelings for Spike were caught in a tangled web of confusion. Never had she thought his reentrance into her life would coincide with a crisis of this magnitude. Even before he reappeared, she'd wanted him back, she'd regretted leaving, and while every part of her ached for his touch, things were different now. Perhaps Buffy was feeling things due to the claim. She didn't think so—she felt no less conflicted now than she had before leaving Sunnydale.

Buffy simply hadn't been prepared for *forever.* She was only seventeen, for crying out loud. She barely knew how to reconcile her feelings for Spike with what she'd already been through, and now they had forever hanging over them. It was too soon for her healing heart to be tossed into another relationship, especially one twisted with passion and anger and fire. Everything she never wanted to touch again. Not so soon after killing Angel.

Not when she hadn't yet determined if she was truly grieving him or if her pain came from being the one who killed him.

Either reality wasn't pleasant. Every time Buffy thought she was on her way out of the hole in which she'd dug herself, her foot would catch and her hands would slip and she'd feel herself sliding further into darkness. She'd thought she was over killing Angel a couple times now only to be proven wrong by the way her stomach would churn every time she recalled the betrayal in his eyes. But that was it—guilt. She felt guilt. She didn't think she actually missed him, and the strange thing was, it felt wrong not to pine for his arms or ache for his lips or the soothing reassurance he provided in...well, turning up cryptically to tell her she was about to die.

It felt wrong not missing him.

Almost as wrong as the unfair allegations she'd leveled at Spike tonight. Perhaps she had overreacted to killing Angel and underreacted to what Dru had done to Spike because Spike *had* walked away.

Mentioning Dru as a possibility for Spike had been a low blow—one she'd known to be impossible for reasons which had nothing to do with the insane vampire's tendency to shish kabob her former lovers.

The way Spike looked at her before she'd left him, Buffy had known he wouldn't go back to his crazy ex. He might not come after her for the sake of pride, but she'd known Drusilla would be at the very bottom of the last resorts.

And yet, she'd thrown that out there. She didn't know why.

Buffy sighed. Perhaps it was because an angry Spike was a less confusing force than the Spike who looked at her like she was, well, *everything*. She knew how to respond to anger, but responding to affection was too difficult right now.

"So..." Fred said, startling her out of her musings. "The vampire..."

Buffy wet her lips. Apparently, that whole *not asking questions* thing had run its course. "Yeah," she replied. "He's a vampire."

There was a slow nod as though Fred were carefully weighing the information. "And...you're the Slayer."

"This is very true."

"And...he's not slayed."

"No, he's not."

"He's Spike. The one who gave you money?"

She raised a hand to her throat and caressed the bite mark. "Yeah," she agreed. "He's the one who gave me money."

Fred wet her lips. "Okay...are you going to elaborate or are we gonna just go over the facts until one of us falls asleep?"

"I don't know what you want me to say," Buffy replied, shuffling uncomfortably. "Spike's a vampire. He...our relationship is complicated. And—"

"You said you were waiting for him."

"I was."

Fred frowned. "And you let him go? I thought...I don't know, you hadn't mentioned anything, but I got the impression that you were kinda looking for him." She swallowed hard and wiggled. "Not that I'd know, or anything. But the way you talked about him when you mentioned the money he left you...it wasn't much, but I...I thought you wanted him back."

The reaction was instinctive. "I do."

"And he went away?"

Buffy's eyes narrowed. "I know you heard what was said," she replied. "We weren't exactly quiet, and he wasn't—"

"He's angry."

Justifiably so, she thought with an inward sigh, but the words she said were, "It's complicated."

"He thought you were waiting for him, too."

"Again with the 'I was.'" Buffy shook her head, folding forward in despair. "I don't know. *I don't know.* We were enemies not too long ago."

Fred nodded sympathetically. "'Cause he's a vampire?"

The answer seemed more than obvious. "Well..." Buffy furrowed her brow. "Yeah. But more than...when we first met, he basically—no, not basically—he *told* me outright he was gonna kill me." A pause. "He didn't, obviously."

"Obviously."

"But...it got..." Angel's face floated to the forefront of her thoughts only to be shoved him down again. She didn't want to think about him any more than she already had, and though she suspected divulging her whole sordid history with Angel would give perspective to the complicated mess in which she'd entangled herself with Spike, she didn't want advice. Even with as unconditionally understanding as Fred was proving to be, Buffy was too gun-shy and jaded from experience to wade intentionally into deeper waters. She didn't want to be told where she'd gone wrong and where there was to go from here.

Namely because the option terrified her.

No matter their past, no matter what had brought them where they were, Buffy's wounded heart knew it could fall easily again. And she wasn't ready. She wasn't ready for anything permanent. Anything which would truly have her falling in love again. And she knew—she *knew*—if she allowed Spike to care for her, she would end up losing herself all over again.

Which meant she might one day be forced to do to Spike what she'd done to Angel. She didn't think she could kill someone she loved again, and it was insanely unfair of the PTB to get her into a situation where she might be asked to do just that.

Spike would never do anything intentionally to hurt her, but he might not have a choice. Angel had been harnessed with a soul; there was nothing harnessing Spike.

"Can I make a teeny observation?"

Buffy glanced up. Fred's timid expression had her both tightening with tension and bubbling with laughter. There was nothing to lose, she supposed, thus gave her friend the go ahead with a nod.

"That Spike guy...if...I don't know what any of the words he said meant, but it seems to be...something involving the both of you?"

Buffy swallowed hard and nodded. "Yeah. It is."

"Well...wouldn't it be better to figure it out together?" Fred suggested shyly, casting her eyes downward immediately. "If you try and do it separately, you might come to different conclusions and just open up the door to more trouble." She paused. "He's...ummm...vulgar, but there was a lot of hurt in his voice."

The vulgarity to which she referred likely referenced Spike's numerous descriptions of his night with Buffy as *fucking*—something which smarted but remained true to what had occurred. She hadn't allowed for anything other than fucking at first. "The vulgarity came from the anger," she said softly. "I hurt him. I didn't want to hurt him."

"So—"

"It's complicated."

"And it will continue to be complicated until you uncomplicate it."

Buffy glared. "You will not fool me with your logic."

"Well...you care about him. I care about you. By right of contrast, I guess..." Fred sighed. "I don't wanna step on your toes, but you seemed...different with him. Can vampires...feel? 'Cause I wouldn't've known he was a vampire if you hadn't said anything. He seemed to... *feel* a lot."

A shiver settled over Buffy's shoulders. "He does."

"And about you."

"He does."

And Buffy cared about Spike. A lot.

Too much.

Too fast. Too soon. Her heart couldn't take it. But there was nothing she could do about it. There was nowhere to hide.

And worst of all, Fred was right. Fred was absolutely right.

Space would bring peace. She and Spike needed to talk. She needed to understand what was happening. She needed him.

"Fred," Buffy whispered softly. "When Spike comes back...don't let me send him away, okay?"

"You—"

"Just don't. He makes me go crazy with confusion. But the second I get away from him, I want him back." She trembled and glanced up, worrying a lip between her teeth. "I left him and I've missed him. And then tonight...I just know I'm not ready for what he wants."

"What he wants?"

A pause. "I'm not ready for that. But maybe we can...just until..."

Her voice trailed off, taking words with it. Her mind blanked. There was no way to finish a thought when she hadn't yet decided how to proceed. How to go about the next day. And the day after. And the day after.

She needed Spike and she needed space. It was a classic Catch-22, and she didn't even know what that meant.

Perhaps she could be with Spike if he allowed her time to heal. If he was with her without confusing her with sex.

She didn't want to be without him in the interim. She just wanted time. So when she was ready to love him—truly—there would be no reservations.

She only hoped, when she tried to tell him, he would understand.

THOUGH SHE ANTICIPATED his arrival like nothing else, Buffy was strangely unsurprised when Spike failed to show up the following day. She'd felt his decision to stay away the second he had reached it—nothing revolutionary, more a sudden understanding. A sense of knowledge she couldn't explain but accepted as truth all the same.

She understood. After what had happened, she'd want to be away from herself as well.

Still, she couldn't deny it hurt.

"I spoke with Mr. Binns," Fred said over lunch. "This morning,

when I stepped out to get the paper, I saw him. The apartment's yours if you want it. He's taking some furniture, but he's willing to sell some to you."

"His furniture?"

"His wife's going to a home and he's moving into a much smaller apartment. He says he can leave you with the bed, one of his sofas, and the kitchen table." Fred shrugged and nibbled on the crust of her sandwich. "Not a dresser or a television, though. Or anything else. And he wants five hundred dollars."

"Five hundred dollars?"

Fred nodded. "For the bed and sofa...and the table. Which, really, all things considered, not too much. I mean, yeah, secondhand, and you'll have that old-person smell to get out, but for LA prices, it's not too shabby. How much of Spike's money do you have left?"

Buffy inhaled sharply. "Enough," she said. "He left me with...a lot. More than... Well, a lot."

"Where'd he get it, do you think?"

"I don't know and I don't wanna know. But he got it for me." Of this, she had no doubt. Just as the sun would rise and the moon would glow, she knew Spike had procured the cash for her sake. He'd done it so she wouldn't be left to herself when she walked out the door.

"And your landlord's okay with this?" Buffy asked softly, her heart racing. The notion of renting her own apartment was so far beyond her, and yet somehow it didn't seem strange to be sitting here, discussing it as though it was an actual possibility.

Namely because she knew it was.

She knew she was going to take it. She was going to be a grown up and sign a lease and everything. And the decision came so easily, Buffy knew she was going to be in Los Angeles for a while. A long while.

Time needed a chance to heal her heart. She was still broken from what had occurred in Sunnydale. Not only with Angel. A part of her felt so detached from it she wondered why he kept surfacing at all. And yet he did—the perpetual bad penny, Angel was the perfect mood-killer. If ever a party needed a pooper, one need look no further.

Perhaps Angel kept surfacing because he, alive or not, was the thing standing between her and Spike. Her permanent caution label.

Buffy had already seen the worst love between slayers and vampires could do. She wasn't eager to try again.

Not that warning herself did any good. The rest of her was thoroughly sickened with a need to see Spike. A need to throw herself into his arms and beg forgiveness for being so flighty and uncertain.

Right now—just right now—she needed to be friends. And if he understood that... God, she hoped he understood that.

"He's fine with it," Fred agreed, dragging Buffy from her cynical musings. "Really fine with it...as long as you can afford to give him two months' rent in advance."

"I can."

There was a skeptical pause. "I...I haven't even told you what the rent is."

"Believe me, I can afford it."

"Spike's money?"

Buffy swallowed hard, ignored the twinge, and nodded. "Spike's money."

"Wow...he gave you a lot, didn't he?"

That would be the understatement of the year.

It wasn't like she had anything to pack. In fact, the most strenuous part of moving into Mr. Binns's apartment came with signing the lease. It required two forms of photo identification and her birth-certificate; three things Buffy had left in her mother's possession. Her intermediate license, while had never been revoked, had been invalidated as she hadn't passed the driving test or...any test. But it still had her picture beside her name in a secure, governmental fashion.

And it was still in Sunnydale. Along with her student ID, her social security card, and her birth certificate. And everything else identifying her as Buffy Summers.

Fortunately for her, Fred's landlord was the sort who could be bought off. It cost a pretty penny, but thanks to the William the Bloody Foundation, she had money to spare.

Not a ton, but some.

So she had an apartment. An apartment she could hold for two months at least. An apartment, a bed, a couch, and a table. She'd need food and clothing and utilities. The sort of luxuries she'd taken for granted while under her mother's roof.

Fred had assured her a job at the library. A job meant money, which was good. Money meant budgets, which were bad, as Buffy was something of a shopaholic. Plus she and math were unmixy forces.

This being-an-adult thing was really going to suck.

But the suffocating pressure of living in the real world was worth the freedom of being her own provider.

And then there was Spike. Spike, who while angry with her, would never leave her alone.

At the first knock on her front door, a sense of underlying peace filled her.

Buffy inhaled sharply, her pounding heart betraying her nerves. Her bare feet padded across the worn carpet floor. She was at once startlingly aware of what little she owned. The rooms were practically empty. She had nothing to offer guests.

But Spike wasn't a guest. He was...she didn't know what he was, except hers.

She inhaled deeply before opening the door and smiled when her eyes crashed with the sea of tumultuous blue. The soft eagerness on his face took her breath away.

She leaned against the doorway.

"Come in, Spike."

24

SPIKE HAD ENVISIONED A THOUSAND THINGS UPON KNOCKING, BUT the soft, gentle promise of her smile had certainly not been among them. Nor had the lack of hesitation.

Thank *fuck*. Staying away as long as he had—giving her the extra time he'd been convinced she'd need—had all but killed him. Every second was plagued with doubts, overwrought with fears over the uncertain future.

"Just like that?" he softly asked, eyebrow quirked. Still, though, he quickly crossed the threshold before she could change her mind. Not that it mattered—once issued, the invitation could only be revoked one way, and Buffy was without her redheaded friend to cast any wonky mojo.

Though he wouldn't put it past the mousy bird Buffy'd shacked up with. The Slayer had a knack for surrounding herself with smarties. Little Fred seemed no exception.

"Yeah," Buffy agreed, stepping aside as he moved past her. She pushed the door closed with a heavy sigh. "Sorry about that."

"'Bout what?"

"The...I don't know. Lots of stuff, I guess." She scrunched up her nose and turned, gesturing to the laughably empty room. "I'd say make

yourself at home, but I'm without the essentials. Think I was lucky to get this much."

This much evidently consisted of a couch and a kitchen table, secondhand by the smell. "Well," Spike drawled, his hands worming awkwardly into the pockets of his duster. "Work with what you got."

"Yeah." A pause. "How'd you find me?"

He turned slowly on his heel, unable to mask his amusement. "Well, besides the fact you just moved down the hall, sweetness, a vamp's nose always knows. Couldn't hide from me if you tried."

"I wasn't trying."

"I know. Just getting that out there." He grinned at her grin, feeling slightly more at ease, or at least confident he wasn't about to be escorted through the door by the scruff of the collar. "And your little friend told me where to find you."

"Oh. So you didn't just come here immediately?"

"Well, I would've, but that would've been presumptive." Spike forced an awkward laugh, his shoulders tightening. Every inch of his body tugged him forward, imploring him to take her in his arms and pepper her face with kisses. Being this close was bloody intoxicating enough as it was. "This is okay, right?" he asked, swallowing hard. "My being here? You said you wanted a day—"

"Yeah. I'm sorry about that."

"'Bout wanting a day?"

"No—yeah. Ummm...all of the above?" Buffy held his gaze for a minute before slumping into a pout. "When did this become so weird?"

Spike frowned thoughtfully. "Think it's been weird a while, pet."

"Well, unweird it. I can't handle you all—normal and stuff." She paused. "That so didn't come out the way I intended."

"There's no bloody normal for me, Slayer. I'm just tryin' to keep on your good side so you don't kick me to the curb again."

Buffy shook her head. "There will be no kicking of you to the curb. I kinda regretted that the minute I did it. That and...all the stupid crap I said."

Spike tilted his head. She seemed hell-bent on surprising him. They might not have known each other long, but in the time in which they'd

been a part of each other's lives, he'd become rather privy to the fact that apologies and Buffy weren't concepts which went hand-in-hand.

It wasn't like he didn't know she was confused. There was only so much she could take. Fuck all, if he weren't so desperate in his need, he might be exactly where she was. Where she stood. Things for him were so much clearer since he knew he loved her. He knew the claim, while not planned, was something he now wanted more than anything. There was no future if Buffy wasn't at his side. He already felt he'd waded through the darkness for centuries in order to find her. Now that he stood before her—open, vulnerable, and thoroughly hers—it took all of him not to beg her never to let him out of her sight again.

Still, the eggshells he'd expected to walk across were mysteriously absent. He didn't take for granted the very real possibility that things could change at the drop of a pin, but for the moment, he allowed himself to fall complacent. "Mind clarifying for a bloke, love?" he asked. "You said quite a bit."

To his astonishment, she didn't object. Rather, the red in her cheeks deepened and she humbled him with a nod. "Mainly—urrr—the stuff about Dru."

"Going back to her, you mean."

"Right."

"When there's no way on bloody earth I—"

"Yeah, that'd be the thing. I was dumb."

"Bloody nuts," he agreed without shame or apology. "The bint—"

Buffy held up a hand. "I know. I know. I'm just... God, my mind's all over the place, you know? I start thinking one thing and then it gets all confused and I..." She trailed off with a hopeless sigh, meeting his eyes in a manner that begged for understanding. "I've figured some things out."

The certainty in her voice threw him. "Oh?"

"I'm not ready."

Spike willed his mouth to keep from running. No matter how his will cried at the calm firmness harbored in her tone, he would let her say her piece. "Right," he managed, only because saying nothing went against his nature. Words were his bread and butter.

To her credit, Buffy sensed his incredulity. "I know, right?" she said,

forcing a shrill laugh. "Big surprise. Big...whatever. Buffy's not ready. But at least I know, now." She paused and fortified herself with a deep breath. "Spike...my last relationship was the end of the world...literally."

"Slayer—"

"And I'm still... I'm gun-shy. I'm extremely, incredibly, one-hundred-percent gun-shy. And I know I really don't have a choice. With the..." She paused and raised a hand to her throat, her lethal but somehow delicate fingers tracing the bite he'd given her. "The forever thing. But I'm just not ready to be what...what you need."

A long, tempered beat passed. "And what," he said cautiously, "is it you think I need?"

"I'm not going to spout off a list," Buffy replied wisely, her eyes narrowing. "But sex. I can't do sex right now. Sex...complicates things. And my life is already complicated. If it was any *more* complicated, I'd need my own talk-show special."

Spike sniggered appreciatively. "'Slayers and the Vamps That Love Them'?" he suggested, only to backtrack in the thereafter and mentally curse himself for revealing so much.

If she picked up on his blunder, however, she didn't betray a thing. Instead, she offered a halfhearted chuckle and nodded.

"Something to that effect. But...point." She forced a smile. "I have one. A point."

"Always reassuring," Spike teased.

"And it's a good one."

"I have no doubt."

Buffy cast her gaze downward and inhaled sharply. "There are things I know but am not ready to...I dunno... I know that when you leave, a part of me goes with you. That when I left you, I regretted it... like I regretted sending you away the other night."

The darkness which had clouded his insides speared with growing rays of light. He knew, from her tone, not to grasp hope too tightly. Buffy's mind had a way of turning itself around the second she approached something that faintly resembled a decision. "Can't say it was a picnic for me."

"I'm just confused."

"Believe me, baby, I'm getting that."

"And I'm not ready."

He drew in a deep breath. "And you already said that."

"It's just as true now as it was two minutes ago." She flashed him an awkward smile without quite meeting his eyes. "But here's the thing... here's where it gets a little weird and complicated."

He snorted appreciatively. "Oh good. I was wonderin' when we'd hit that snag."

"I'm not ready to be *with* you with-you. I mean, *with* you like... like *that*. But I know I'll want it some day." Buffy huffed out a breath as though preparing for a marathon. "I have feelings for you."

It was truly a testament to his willpower that he didn't fall over in astonishment. While he knew it was the truth—there was nothing her kisses could keep from him—hearing the words actually breathe air was something he'd never thought to touch. And were it not for her guarded poise and the haunted look in her eyes, he would have lost any semblance of restraint and shoved her against the nearest flat surface: wall or table, it didn't matter to him. He just wanted her. Wanted her body against his and her mouth sucking his tongue. Wanted her pussy bucking against his hand as his fingers pried her swollen lips apart to explore her molten warmth. He wanted to take those feelings and mold them until they blossomed into love.

Until she loved him as desperately as he loved her.

"I need time," Buffy continued. "I need time to get over what happened in Sunnydale. I need to be ready. I know when I... when *we* start with the actual—when we're actually together, it's forever. And I'll want it to be forever. But I can't have this thing weighing me down. I need time to get to know you."

"You don't know me?"

She winced. "I didn't mean it like that."

There was a pause. She worried her lower lip between her teeth. He wondered how she would react if he offered to do that for her. "Since we met," she began cautiously, "our lives have been...well, not normal."

Spike perked a brow. "Sorry to point out the obvious, pet, but me vamp, you slayer. Survey says our lives are never gonna qualify as *normal*."

"Give me some credit."

"I think history shows I'm willing to give you whatever you want."

The red in her cheeks deepened, and he was satisfied when she didn't argue the point.

"Okay," she agreed softly, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. "Well...when we met, you threatened to kill me."

"And I suppose you're gonna be lordin' that over me for the rest of my days?"

She ignored him. "We didn't start until that night at Sunnydale High. And everything that happened after that was to defeat Angel and Dru. And after that..." She cleared her throat, her eyes fixing on a point on the wall behind him. "Well, you know everything I'm gonna say."

Spike hesitated, then nodded.

"My point is, every time we've... Ever since we became whatever it is we are, things have been crazy beyond crazy." At last, she looked directly at him, her open palm pressing hard against her brow. "I haven't had a chance to slow down and take things in at all. It's either been the end of the world or killing my first boyfriend or what happened with you in the hotel and now we're mated and I can't be with you because it's too much, but I can't be without you because it kills me."

"Buffy—"

"I'm only seventeen years old, Spike. How the hell am I supposed to be okay with forever? With having my future laid out for me more than it already was?" An ironic laugh tumbled from her lips and she gestured wildly at the room. "I'm supposed to be grateful I've made it this far as it is with my birthright chasing me down every alley. And now with you...I'm so muddled."

Spike sighed softly. "I know, precious."

"And I can't leap into just being with you with my head like this." Buffy ran a hand through her hair, a long sigh rolling off her shoulders. "It's not fair to you. And I can't start confusing my feelings for you with *everything* else that's happened in the last few weeks. When I'm with you, I want it to be because I know for sure that I'm ready. Not

because you're the only one I can have because you got all bitey and possessive."

"I—"

"I know," she said, holding up a hand. "I know. But even if you didn't mean to, that just proves my point. Everything's happened so fast. If we're going to be together, I want it to be real. I don't want it to be because you were mad at me for using you and made a snap decision. I want it to be because it's what I want. And I don't think that's too much to ask."

If her words didn't render him completely and thoroughly hers, the tears shining in her eyes certainly did. All at once, the weight that had seated itself upon his heart alleviated. The fears that had plagued him since he barraged his way back into her life had untangled. He didn't know how a period of just a few minutes could clear stormy skies. How he could go from being convinced he was doomed to a loveless life—to being perpetually the victim of unrequited affection—to surging with something he hesitated to call hope.

"It's not too much, love."

She attempted something that might charitably be called a smile. "I didn't think so."

"I hate being away from you," he heard himself say. "The distance thing bloody kills me."

"Me too," Buffy agreed. "But we won't be apart if you agree to my plan. It's kinda against the point."

"The point?"

"I can't become ready to be with you if you're not here. So...here's my incredibly bad plan for the moment, but work with me, it's the only one I got." Buffy puffed out a breath. "You move in."

Spike blinked. A floorboard creaked. A door slammed down the hall. He waited for his brain to kick in with a translation, but none came. Apparently, she meant it. "You want me to move in," he repeated. "You want us to...live together?"

"Yes."

"That's inviting danger, love, if space is what you need."

"No, it's not. Because this is important to you, too. I just need...can

we just be friends for a while?" She glanced down again. "If that's not something you think you can do, I understand, but—"

"Friends?"

A pause. She nodded. "Just until...until... This is the best I can do now, Spike. I want to be what you need, but I also need to do what's right for me. I know the being apart thing kills us both. But if we could just be together without the head games that comes with tossing me into another live-or-die relationship at the moment. I need a friend right now. I need to know you can be that for me, too, along with the other thing."

Spike blinked numbly and stared at her. He didn't realize, of course, that he was staring until she shuffled self-consciously.

"Well," she prompted softly. "Is that—"

"I'll do it."

It was her turn to stare. "You will?"

"Well, I'm not bloody well letting you outta my sight again, if that's the alternative." Spike sucked in his cheeks and gave the apartment a once-around. "Not that being with you and not touching you's gonna be a right treat for me, but sweetheart, I...I know things are buggered for you. Things are a little topsy for me, too...and if this is what it takes to be close, I'll do whatever you ask."

A small smile tickled her gorgeous face. "I keep forgetting this is also new for you."

"You're nothing if not self-centered."

She made a face. "Hey! At least you have some experience in this whole *forever* thing."

He snorted. "Right. A hundred years is a go at eternity. I forget you youngsters are rotten at math."

"You have more than seventeen years, at least," she shot back, though her eyes were dancing. The air fell to brief companionable silence. "But it's...it's something we can do? This...friends thing."

He tried to rein in his eagerness, but the hurried bob of his head refused to cooperate. "I'll do it," Spike promised. "I'll give you what you need, kitten. If this is it, then consider it yours."

"It won't be easy."

That was the bloody understatement of the year, but he wasn't

about to talk himself out of this. Now that he knew where he stood. Now that he knew how she felt. Now that he knew how she wanted to feel.

It wouldn't be easy, but he didn't mind. Nothing worth having ever came easy.

And for all her flaws and virtues, Buffy was the only thing in his world worth having.

25

"With the way you go through cash, I suppose one of us is gonna need a job."

Buffy perked an eyebrow, selecting a piece of cheese-drenched pepperoni pizza, and stared at him. "You know, I don't know you nearly as well as I should, considering you've seen me naked..."

Spike's eyes twinkled and his tongue did something to his lips that ought to have been downright sinful.

"...but somehow, I feel that you're the kettle and I'm the pot in this scenario."

"Just sayin'..." He lifted his bottle of beer to his lips and took a hard swig. Spike had officially been living in Buffy's apartment for an hour and a half, and they'd already done a run for junk food, beer, and placed an order for a fried Italian pie. "Eventually, I'm gonna be broke, and then what will you do?"

She shrugged easily. "Ask Fred to move in and mooch off her."

"Clever."

"Actually, Fred mentioned something about me, a job, and the library." She nodded when Spike's eyes narrowed skeptically. "I know. Me plus job is bad enough. And like I haven't spent enough time in libraries. But hey, it's a job...and you raise a reasonable point."

"Bugger that."

"Bugger what?"

He shrugged a shoulder. "I was just poking fun. I got cash, love. Lots more where this"—he gestured at the apartment with his pizza hand, ignoring the two globs of cheese which splattered against the already imperfect carpet—"came from."

A grateful smile tickled Buffy's lips. Things between them had been cordial, comfortable, since she'd put everything on the table. While the tension remained very palpable, she felt, for the first time in the past few weeks, that she could breathe. "I can't keep taking cash from you," she said softly. "It's not fair."

"Not fair?"

"You shouldn't have to fund me, Spike."

"Way I figure it, if we're mated for all eternity, you don't have much of a choice, kitten."

She arched a brow, shoving another bite of pizza into her mouth to buy time. The future was one topic she'd hoped to dance around a little while longer, even if she knew it was inevitable. There was no denying how comforted she was simply in knowing he was beside her. That he was with her at all. It was dangerous putting anything else on the table right now—even if her path was chosen for her, even if what lay ahead was inevitable, the lack of choice made her feel cold and isolated.

Made her life feel like nothing more than a stage play, and everyone save her got to write a part.

"I don't want...you shouldn't have to..."

"I take care of what's mine," he replied with a careless shrug. "Get used to it."

"Spike..."

He paused and glanced up. "Too fast?"

"You remember what we talked about?"

"The thing where I give you space 'cause you're not ready?"

She nodded. "That would be it."

"Yeah, but I don't remember you telling me I couldn't take care of you. Bein' *just friends* and not shagging you doesn't mean I can't provide." He gestured to the room. "You're letting me live here."

"Yes. I'm very gracious to offer you a room in the place your money provided."

Spike smiled softly. "Well, a good part about livin' forever is learning how to invest."

"You invest?"

"I could learn." He shrugged. "What I got now I have from playin' a mean hand of cards."

Buffy arched a brow.

"A few may end up my sleeve," he admitted with a gracious nod, earning a bubbly giggle from her. "I'll admit, the years have taught me a few tricks."

"You swindle."

"It's paying for the roof over your head, sweetheart. Wouldn't knock it."

Buffy smirked, raising her bottle of Diet Coke to her lips. "I guess I can't get ethical on the issue of demons stealing from demons."

He grinned devilishly. "Who said it was demons?" His eyes dropped from hers before she could get indignant—not that she was going to get indignant, rather she thought she should for appearances' sake—and took a long sweep of the rather empty room. "So the old bloke who let you have the place only left you with the table...the sofa..."

"And a bed."

"How much?"

"Five hundred. Fred loaned me some sheets and pillows and stuff... but...yeah." She shifted. "Five hundred."

He nodded stoically, betraying nothing. It was the response she wanted. Buffy had absolutely no idea what the market value was for old furniture. She'd simply found it easier to take the offer and have something immediately at her disposal than worry about acquiring a bed.

"We need a telly," Spike observed, his gaze fixed on a rather notable spot along the wall where the previous tenant's television had likely sat. "And a fridge for blood." He held up his bottle. "Blood and booze."

There was no reason to be surprised at his suggestion, yet Buffy couldn't help the way her breath caught in her throat. And before she could help herself, words had tumbled off her lips, "You're not biting people?"

Spike paused, capturing her eyes with his again. Dragging her into an endless abyss of blue and wonder, sending shivers across her body and making her feel—for a frozen second—as though he could touch her no matter how far apart they were. Continents could separate them and she would still feel his hands. "You know the answer, love," he said softly. "You saw the blood."

She nodded numbly. She'd never questioned it—not really. In the motel room back in Sunnydale, in the room where Drusilla had pinned him to the wall and waited for him to bleed out, there had been bagged blood. Blood that had, alongside hers, had saved his life. Blood that had fueled his emptying veins and given him the strength to face Angelus and Drusilla. Blood that had helped him save the world.

"I know," she agreed. Then, sheepishly, she added, "I just had to ask."

He grinned. "'Course you did. You're the Slayer, aren't you?"

"Now and forever."

The word made her shiver. *No.* She didn't want to think about that right now. She'd much rather get back to the game of all they needed to acquire to make the apartment livable. "We should get a dresser, too," Buffy said, her voice strained. She knew he heard it and was more than relieved when he neglected to tie her to a conversation she wasn't ready to have. The *forever* thing required major adjusting to and possibly more than one breakdown. It was all too much to digest in one simple night. "'Cause if we're going on this idea that I get to live on whatever you swindle from *demons*..."

Spike smirked at the word. "If they're fool enough to lose their money, they don't bloody deserve it," he reasoned. "Doesn't matter what sort've blood's pumpin', demon or not."

"I don't want to live off money that—"

"Buffy, this city's a haven for sinners. The blokes I play against aren't parishioners. Most of them drink so much they'd kill their mother if she looked at them funny." His brows pointed upward. "Not to mention, it's not becoming to favor one race above another. There's a word for that, pet."

She made a face at him. "Well, the Slayer can't afford to stop and be picky, now can she?"

"Absolutely not. We definitely wouldn't want her demonstrating reason."

"The point is, I'll want clothes."

He paused. "The point of your problem with demons is wanting clothes?"

"No, the point of money coming from you is that it's going to me to fund my wardrobe."

"A minute ago you were hesitant to take rent money from me."

Buffy shrugged and reached for another piece of pizza. She nibbled at the strings of melted cheese dribbling over the crust before taking a proper bite. "That was before you were swindling from demons."

"And the occasional—"

"Please, Spike, as long as it remains demons in my head, the happier we'll all be."

A soft smile crossed his face. "All right, love. Whatever you say. So you fancy a dresser for your frilly girly things. A fridge, a telly... You want a phone?"

She waved a hand. "That's just an extra bill. And the only person I know lives down the hall."

He was quiet for a second. "You don't feature yourself ringing your mum anytime soon, then?"

"No."

"Buff—"

"No. And if I had a phone in here, I'd just be tempted." Buffy shook her head firmly. "I'm too confused to even know what to tell myself, Spike. Imagine me trying to hold a conversation with my mom, who won't care why I went away so much as she cares when I come back. You're the only person in the world who understands what happened that night and why I needed...why I need to not be in Sunnydale." She paused. "And it's...it's not only because of what happened with Angel."

The flicker of pain in Spike's eyes nearly gutted her, but he masked it in a flash. "It's all right. You don't have to—"

"It's not only because of what happened with Angel," Buffy said again, firmer this time. "I'm having to deal with that, yes, but...Spike, my feelings for him were already kablooey when he got his soul back.

I'm confused as all get out over what happened...and you're...my feelings for *you* were all...and then *that* happened...and then what happened after that just made for a big happy mess in the head of Buffy. I can't go home until I clear this up. Until I reconcile what happened with how I feel about what happened. I know how I'm *supposed* to feel about killing Angel. I know part of me hurts but not enough. And then there's you." She smiled softly. "How I feel about you...well, that's going to be a jungle. And then there's the whole dealing with being of the mated and living forever... I can't have a phone here. If I cave and call Mom, she won't care about any of that, and then I'll never have it sorted. It'll be back to for me Sunnydale and I'll wind up under video surveillance for the rest of my life."

Spike was quiet for a long minute, his expression unreadable. "All right," he said, shifting. "So we need a telly and a dresser."

"Do we need another bed?"

"No."

Buffy's eyes narrowed. "One bed between the two of us? Do we need to go over the rules again?"

"It's a big bed," he reasoned. "I can be a gentleman when it's needed."

"But isn't it just—"

"Buffy..." His voice grew soft, his eyes heavy. And without warning, she felt her heart twist and invisible hands close around her throat. He had a way of changing the tone of conversations without trying. Of reminding her with a look how much was riding on this for him. "I can handle not touching you. Not kissing you. Not *feeling* you. But please... please, just let me sleep beside you. Please?"

If there was a beat of hesitation, she didn't feel it. The lump in her throat forced its way downwards and she nodded before she could help herself.

She didn't want to help herself. Not then.

"Okay," she whispered. "Okay. One bed."

With the way every molecule in her body trembled at his smile, she knew she was in trouble.

Not for want of his body. For want of *him*.

Anyone who could smile like that at the mere promise of sleeping

beside her was someone she could definitely love. And her bruised heart was too tired, too worn, too afraid. She wasn't ready for this yet.

And yet here she was—ready to leap with eyes closed and arms bound into the fire.

She just hoped this was one she could survive.

THE MATTRESS MIGHT AS WELL HAVE BEEN charted with mileage markers with the distance between them, but he felt every shift of her body as though she was pressed against him. For the first time in weeks, he felt completely at rest. The circumstances weren't ideal—he would much rather have her in his arms than across the bed—but he could see her. Touch her. If he inhaled, he would breathe her in.

There was no way he could have anticipated anything like this to come from tonight. He'd thought, at best, he'd get in a few words edgewise before she showed him the door. The soft smile on her face had floored him, as had the invitation.

As had her proposition. Friendship. No sex. Not right now. Not until she was ready.

A long breath rolled off his lips. In all honesty, Spike had fuck-all idea how he was going to be able to keep his paws to himself. The battle was over for him and he knew what he wanted. It seemed he'd found himself in love with her so long ago, regardless of what logic told him. From the first time their eyes had clashed in the alley outside the Bronze, he'd been hers. It had just taken him nine long months to realize he was a goner.

The last time they had shared a bed, his cock had been sheathed in her wet, molten flesh. Her body hadn't been closed to him then. No, she hadn't been closed, but she *had* been breaking. It was a miracle she hadn't shattered completely. And wonderful as it had been, sex hadn't helped matters.

No, sex had led to his fangs thinking for him.

Sex had led to the claim.

And while Spike would never begrudge having Buffy tied to him for eternity, there was no mistaking what it had done to her.

How he'd taken her from one prewritten destiny to another.

Still, in everything they'd discussed, her words gave him hope. She wasn't ready to be what he wanted her to be—she wasn't ready to be his. She wasn't ready to be touched like a lover. She wasn't ready for a relationship.

The promise resided in the words unspoken. *Not yet*. She might be one day—she sounded like she might be one day—but *not yet*. Not yet. Not with everything else.

And Spike could respect that.

He cast his treacherous cock a wary glance. It was his smaller head he'd have to look out. He'd been erect and ready to go from the moment Buffy showed him into the bedroom, and while it most certainly hadn't escaped her notice, she'd been good enough to trust him to behave. To respect her boundaries.

Buffy's trust was precious. He wasn't about to break it.

He, too, could be good. He could refrain from touching her.

It would be worth it in the end.

BUFFY WAS ACCUSTOMED to waking at all hours of the night, especially when sleeping in an unfamiliar place. She had no idea how long she'd slept, but it was still dark out when her dream faded to reality, and the fantasy monsters she fought dissolved into the soft blanket of tangible night.

She was in bed. In her apartment.

And she wasn't alone.

Something hard was poking her butt. Something hard but not unfamiliar. Having shared a bed with Spike before, Buffy had experienced his body's—ummm—enthusiasm firsthand and, to be honest, had anticipated waking up much closer to him than she'd been upon retiring. There was no questioning his proximity, the arm which had curled over her body, drawing her to his chest, or even the temptation of his erection as it nudged her ass. No questioning.

It had been a risk she'd taken willingly, knowing full well there was no way he'd ever platonically shared a bed with a woman in the

years since he'd been sired. Simply lying next to her was novel for him.

Novel for him. Dangerous for her.

Buffy sighed, shifted a bit, and closed her eyes. She'd been prepared for this. She'd been prepared for Spike to cuddle her, even craved it despite her self-imposed "hands off" rule.

Spike's hands on her reminded her she wasn't alone. His skin against hers enabled her to maintain connection she needed desperately, even if she wasn't ready to explore him again. Physical need was one thing. She was much too fragile, she knew, to indulge in sex while separating it from her emotions. She'd thought about this. A lot. She'd thought about it, shared her conclusions, and he'd agreed.

But she loved the way he felt. She loved the way his few breaths tickled her ear and drew wisps of hair across the back of her neck. She loved the way he mumbled and tugged her closer. She loved the way his cock felt against her. She loved everything.

And if she wasn't careful, it'd be very easy to forget herself and indulge in what he offered.

Go back to sleep. If this was going to work—this living arrangement—she'd need to get used to Spike and snuggling.

I get the one guy in the world who likes to cuddle and it's a problem.

The thought made her snort.

"Mmm..." Spike murmured, his fingers lazily gliding back and forth across her belly. "Buffy..."

Her heart thundered. Every nerve was suddenly ablaze.

"Buffy...oh god..."

"Okay," she said loudly, though evidently not loud enough to wake him. Buffy sighed and sat up, untangling herself from his embrace and kicking her legs over the side of the bed. "Yeah. This was definitely a dumb idea."

There was no way she was going to be able to sleep next to Spike and not jump his sexy bones. And that would be bad. That would be very much of the bad.

Her heart wasn't ready for the risk.

Thus, as quietly as possible, Buffy drew her pillow into her arms and padded out of the room.

No sense in bothering Spike with this.

She would simply sleep on the sofa. In the morning, they would come up with an alternate sleeping plan.

IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG for Spike to miss her heat.

He wasn't surprised to find himself alone. Not surprised, but a little hurt.

Still, there was no sodding way he was going to let his girl shiver in the next room while he had the comfy bed all to himself. He didn't feel cold like she did. Daft chit hadn't even taken a sodding blanket.

There would obviously be more conversation come morning. Though he wouldn't sleep nearly as well without her, he was comforted in knowing he'd done right by her.

After carrying the Slayer back to bed, Spike closed the blinds in the front room to ensure he didn't have a toasty morning, and assumed her place on the sofa.

The distance was going to be a bloody bitch.

But he knew, he trusted, it would be worth it in the end.

For Buffy, anything was.

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She was powerless to do anything but stare.

She hadn't felt the move. Hadn't felt Spike come into the living room, lift her in his arms and carry her back to bed. It had only taken a blink to fall asleep after lying down on the sofa. How long she'd actually slept in the other room, she didn't know. The only thing she knew was the living room wasn't where she awoke. She awoke in the bed she'd purchased from Mr. Binns—a bed she evidently had all to herself.

Spike had assumed the space on the sofa.

A frown depressed her lips, a long sigh rushing through her body. This wasn't the way she'd wanted to discuss the sleeping arrangements. At worst, she suspected Spike would be a little offended that she hadn't slept through the night at his side. He'd promised he would behave himself, and he had as well as he could. There was no sense in blaming his subconscious for acting like any man would in his situation. A man who didn't hide how much he wanted her and how he was determined to have her again, even if it meant waiting until she was ready to embrace a relationship of that magnitude.

He'd said *please* last night. He'd pleaded for the right to sleep beside her.

"I should've just woken him up," Buffy muttered as she circled the

sofa, irritated with herself. They had finally reached a point where she felt they understood each other. She was determined to work through whatever it was they had to work through, as long as she was allowed to tackle her own problems before addressing the issue of being claimed.

Lord knew what reasoning Spike had concocted to explain her leaving the bed.

Buffy wet her lips. She had nothing on except a *Slayer*-the-band T-shirt—on loan from Fred, though how Fred and *Slayer* mixed, she didn't know—and her cotton panties. It was the same attire she'd worn to bed, but she'd already been under the covers by the time Spike emerged from the bath in his jeans...his very—umm—crotch-bulgy jeans. He'd done little more than grin sheepishly, wave a dismissive hand at his predicament, and slip into bed beside her with a soft, "'Night, sweetheart." Not a peek under the covers.

Not that he would have seen anything novel. Nothing he hadn't thoroughly explored.

Her treacherous mind flashed to their passionate night in the motel: Spike perched between her legs, his tongue lapping at her pussy as she writhed against him. And without warning, heat rushed to her groin. Perhaps it would be to her benefit to put on some clothes.

Buffy sighed, deciding, for better or worse, against it. She was throwing herself into the metaphoric frying pan, but she didn't feel like being anyone but herself while in her own home. If she and Spike were expected to live together, platonically as it was, they would have to get used to seeing each other in various states of undress. It was the norm when two people occupied such small quarters.

It was the norm in a relationship.

She frowned and shook off that last thought. She very much wasn't ready to consider the ins and outs of their agreement. Relationship though they had, the implication of the word was too heavy to bear at the moment. She preferred to compartmentalize the situation.

Sometimes the difference was *all* the difference.

Spike was on his back, his left arm strewn over his eyes, his other curved over his bare chest, fingertips resting on his crotch. Unlike other vampires she'd known while sleeping—the one other vampire—

he indulged in oxygen every few minutes. There was no rhyme or rhythm to the breaths he stole. No pattern. It simply occurred. One second he was perfectly still—the next, his sculptured chest rose and fell, a cool sigh lifting off his lips.

It was the first time she'd ever stopped to simply look at him. For all they'd been through—all the fights, the bitterness, the kisses, the earth-shattering sex—she'd never paused to take him in. He was such a strange vampire. He defied convention, eradicating the norm of what she'd learned and replacing her knowledge with a new school of thought.

Physically, he was a work of art, though it didn't take serious contemplation to arrive at that conclusion. Buffy had always thought him to be sinfully gorgeous in a manner that struck her as thoroughly unfair. Right from the beginning of their twisted, complicated acquaintance, he'd presented himself as something above the understood. He hadn't lunged for her; he'd teased her. He hadn't fought her; he'd danced with her. And when he defied the unspoken boundary between slayer and slayee, he'd become a more powerful ally than any she'd had before.

He was everything she was supposed to hate. He'd killed with those hands. He'd maimed with that mouth. He'd looked at good people with cold indifference, destroyed them, and gone on with his business. It was his nature—it was who he was. It was what the world had taught him to be. And yet, he'd helped her when no one else would. He'd helped her in ways no one else *could* have.

Now he was in this apartment with her. Wanting her. Smiling at her. Feeding her pizza and discussing things like what furniture they should buy. Acting like he was something other than what he was.

Acting like he wasn't a vampire at all.

Spike was very strange.

Buffy wet her lips and shook her head. She couldn't do this now. Not now. They had things to discuss. Thus with a step forward, she lowered her hand to his pale shoulder and gave him a hard tap.

"Spike?"

Nothing. Not even a grunt.

Figured he would sleep like the dead. Buffy rolled her eyes and

edged closer. "Spike," she said again, her voice louder and accompanied with another hard prod against his shoulder. "Wakey wakey?"

This time she got a response. Granted, it was little more than a long, "Graaaaummmphh," but it was a definite improvement.

"Spike, I need you to wake up now."

He yawned loudly. "Well..." he murmured, not opening his eyes. "I need merry bushels of cash and one of those little fried onion things. I'll give you yours if you gimme mine."

"You have merry bushels of cash."

"No, I have a century of memorizing card tricks, some that turn into cash." Spike flashed her a sleepy grin, the muscles in his scrumptious body rippling like a big cat. "You learn how to play."

"You mean cheat."

"That too. But I'll learn the market. See if that's not easier."

"The market?" She only knew of one market. "Like..."

"Stock market. Wankers in New York can do it, so can I."

Buffy blinked. "I didn't know you were serious about that. Having trouble picturing you as a stock market kinda guy."

He shrugged easily. "What can I say, I'm a puzzle." His eyes fell to the scraggly writing splattered across her T-shirt. "Slayer?" he drawled, cocking a brow. "Cute."

"It's Fred's."

"It's appropriate."

Buffy shrugged. "I've never listened to the band. Are they any good?"

"Not really your cuppa, I'd imagine." Spike ran his fingers along his jaw. "You sleep well?"

"You didn't have to move me back."

"It's your bed, kitten. I'm just a houseguest."

"No, you're not," Buffy argued, frowning. "And it's not my bed. I bought it with your money."

"Money I gave you."

"Yes."

Spike stared at her for a minute, then waved a hand as though she was supposed to follow him to an obvious conclusion. "My giving it to you makes it yours, not mine."

"Spike—"

"I shouldn't've pushed you to sleep beside me, love. That was bloody stupid. I wanted it and I didn't care—"

"No, that's not—"

"—that it made you feel like you needed to...get away from me was—"

"I didn't. It was nice." A warm blush spread across her skin. "It was really nice. You just...in the middle of the night, you kinda got cuddly."

His endless eyes absorbed her. "Cuddly?" he asked, his voice slightly choked.

"Yeah," she replied. "Cuddly. And... there was some touching. Not much, and nowhere...umm...naughty, but touching. And you might've said my name."

The subject was having a notable physical effect on Spike. He ignored his swelling cock as apathetic parents might ignore their annoying child. His eyes remained locked on her. "I was having a very nice dream," he said softly.

The blush grew deeper. "Yeah."

"And I was...touching you."

"Cuddly-like."

"And that's bad."

No. "Yeah. Because we're not... You know, we're just doing the friends thing right now. Friends...no benefits. And this was our first night trying this. And..." She waved to roll over the words she didn't want to say. "We need a different thing. A different sleeping arrangement."

"Because you didn't like me dreaming and touching you at the same time."

"No, that's not it."

Spike's perked brow stretched higher. "Yeah?"

"It's because I really, really did...you know, like it...and I can't."

"You can't."

"I can't."

"Like it."

She nodded. "That's right."

A small, sweet smile tugged at Spike's lips. "You don't make a lick of sense, pet. You know this, right?"

"I had a hunch." Buffy licked her lips and heaved a sigh, her legs carrying her to the empty cushion beside him. It was likely very dangerous having this conversation while literally at his side—her naked legs rubbing against his jeans and his drool-worthy chest even closer for girly appraisal—but she didn't care. "It's going to be weird getting used to this."

"When all I wanna do is shag you silly?"

Her blush deepened. "Well, there's that."

"I didn't mean to touch you, kitten. I can't vouch for what happens when I dream. That being said, I love touching you." Spike's eyes warmed when she shyly ducked her head. "I always want to touch you. Always." He raised a hand as though to caress her shoulder, then thought the better of it. "But...this is important to me. You being comfortable with this thing we have."

There was a beat, and a long, hard sigh rolled off her back. "We need to come up with a new sleeping arrangement," she said again.

Spike shrugged. "I take the couch. End of story."

"No, not end of story."

"I told you, the cash stopped being mine the second I gave it to you."

"Yeah, but it's not an endless pit. Eventually, we're going to need to rely on your...umm...investment skills. And the swindling you do from demons."

"And if that's the case, I want my money spent the way *I* want it spent."

Buffy's eyes narrowed. "So basically, you get your way regardless."

"Now you're gettin' it!" Spike agreed with a broad grin. Then he sobered, his expression falling soft. "I take the couch, love. That's the way it goes."

A pause. Buffy sighed hard and rolled her shoulders. "Your strategy, then, is to be completely wonderful?"

He winked. "Hasn't failed yet."

"I'll bet." She shifted slightly, crossing her arms. "I am sorry. You

were so...ever since you got here last night, you've been unusually nice and understanding."

"Unusually?"

"Well, considering you're a vampire with a rap sheet longer than Mussolini's, you came in here, were nice to me, bought me food, said you wanted to sleep beside me, and then put me back in the bed after I..." She broke off, shaking with uncertainty. "I don't get you."

Spike shrugged. "Not much to get, from where I'm sittin'. Gimme a fridge with blood, a telly, a spot a violence, toss me a shag and I'm satisfied."

"But just a few weeks ago—"

"That was before, kitten. Bugger if I understand it." A beat settled between them, then he exhaled and met her eyes. "I'm not blind. I've been around for sodding ever, Buffy. I've gutted people for looking at me funny, and I enjoyed every ruby red moment. But since you, I've wanted...more. I've never wanted more until you. And yeah, that might be in part because of the claim...feeling more because of what we did, but it started before we shagged. It started back in that bloody school. When we first snogged. When I first got a taste of you. I didn't know it then but...it started, love, and I don't know where it's going, but I know I wanna follow it till we get there. So yeah, if it means shackin' up with you *as friends*... I can do it. Anything you give me is more than the whole of living the way I was until this. It's worth it to me."

Then, hesitating a beat, Spike's eyes fell to her lips before he leaned inward to caress her with a tender kiss.

While not a connoisseur of the art, Buffy had been kissed enough to tell the difference between a friend kiss and a lover's kiss. She and Spike had locked lips many times now, each more explosive than the last, each touch making her rattle with electricity. He'd loved her mouth thoroughly as his body rocked inside hers. He'd kissed her breathless in the shower of the motel. In the alley where he'd found her, he'd taken her in his arms and just about fucked her mouth with his. He'd never kissed her in a manner to indicate sex wasn't the objective.

Not until now.

The way his lips touched hers had her warming in places she never

thought she would again feel heat. The hollowed chambers of her heart that hadn't known anything but arctic cold since the Desoto had blasted out of Sunnydale and took her away from herself. His kiss was beautiful and chaste, and left her all but starving.

It wasn't meant to be anything more than a kiss, and yet she couldn't stop her tongue from pushing past his lips. She couldn't stop her hands from slipping up his bare arms. She couldn't keep herself from pulling him closer. Needing to taste him. Needing his tongue in her mouth and his hands on her. Needing so much. *So much.*

Needing things she'd told herself she couldn't have.

Stop.

Spike had caved without a fight, attacking her mouth with fervor. He gobbled her lips like a man who'd wandered forty years just for this. She was devoured. Consumed. She was lost, and in those few seconds, she didn't care to ever be found.

"Buffy," he moaned, fingers tunneling through her hair. "Slayer..."

Her head tilted back, her eyes rolling to the ceiling as his mouth began wandering down her throat.

"Christ, how I've missed you," Spike murmured as his teeth scraped the claim mark. "You taste like honey, you do. Need to feel you, kitten. Need to feel you under me. Surrounding me."

Somewhere in the back of her head, coherent thought was making a steady return. But god, how she wanted to ignore it. She wanted to lose herself. Now. Right now. With Spike's kisses burning her skin, his hands abandoning her hair to slowly scale down her arms until he had her clothed breasts cupped in each palm.

"So warm," he gasped. "Slayer..." His thumbs perched over her nipples, gently rubbing them back and forth. "My slayer."

It wasn't until one of his hands slipped between her legs that the coherent thought started screeching and loud. Realization slammed into her and before she could help herself, she'd braced her hands against his chest and shoved him back. Hard.

Then she was up. Up and moving. Moving fast. Moving because if she didn't put space between them, she would be in his lap, ripping at his jeans and impaling herself on his cock. And she couldn't do that. She *couldn't.* She refused to use Spike like that.

She refused to lose herself.

"I'm sorry," she babbled, unable to meet his eyes. "I'm so sorry, Spike. I shouldn't have done that."

"Buffy?"

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I just...I have to..." A moment of weakness. Their eyes clashed. He looked so lost. So confused. He sat bare-chested on the sofa, panting, his erection strained against his jeans, drinking her in with his eyes, not knowing what had happened or why.

"I'm sorry," Buffy said again, her eyes misting. Air thinned. Walls closed. She needed to get out. "Spike, god...I didn't mean...I'm sorry."

He swallowed hard. "I didn't mean to...I thought you...wanted... God, I buggered this up."

"No. No, you didn't, Spike. *I* did. I lost...but I can't. I *can't.* Not now."

And then she was moving again. She was moving fast, and she couldn't look back.

Couldn't stop. Couldn't risk meet his eyes a second time. Couldn't look at what she'd done to him.

Not lest she drown in shame.

She needed Fred. Now.

27

Let no one say Fred didn't have a knack for stating the obvious.

"You're not wearing pants."

Buffy wiggled, anxiously shifting her weight from one leg to another. "Let me in?"

"You have to pee?"

"No, I'm not wearing pants!"

Fred's eyes widened and she threw the door open without another beat. "Oh right," she said. "Why aren't you wearing pants?"

"Because I forgot to put them on," Buffy explained hurriedly, rushing over the threshold. "God, I've never been particularly modest, but I swear if Mrs. Hatfield saw me without pants, she'd give me another lecture against premarital sex."

Fred blinked.

"She saw me and Spike leaving last night for our junk food run and jumped to conclusions that were, while not incorrect, certainly presumptuous."

"See, this is why I always remember to put on pants before leaving the house."

"This isn't something that happens often."

"I'd certainly hope not."

"Fred?"

She smiled softly. "Want me to get you some pants?"

"That'd be nice."

Three minutes later, a very clothed Buffy was helping herself to a bowl of Frosted Flakes, trying to look as though she hadn't bolted down the hallway half-dressed and wholly panicked. She hadn't given much thought as to what she wanted to say before leaving Spike and the sinful temptation that was his mouth. All she'd known was she desperately needed perspective. She needed a female ear to bend.

"Either I need to lose weight or you need to gain weight," Buffy said, sucking in her stomach as she retrieved the milk from the refrigerator. "I always thought my baby fat was kinda cute."

Fred waved a hand, taking a seat at the counter by the kitchen. "I'm just really bony."

"Thank god these are elastic in the waist."

"They look fine." A pause. "Buffy...is everything okay? I didn't make a mistake by telling Spike where you were, did I? I really thought that was what you wanted. You told me not to let you send him away again, so when he showed up looking for you, I—"

"No," Buffy assured her quickly, "it was very good that you told Spike where I was."

Fred blinked. "Then why are you running around without pants?"

"That's a perfectly fair question." She cast her head downward and rubbed her arms. "Spike and I...we came to an understanding. We have an arrangement now."

"An arrangement?"

Buffy nodded. "We're living together."

A pause. "Wow." Fred blinked again. "Considering you shoved him out just a couple days ago, I'd consider that...well, either progress or slayers and vamps just have a way of moving really fast."

An appreciative grin tugged at the corners of Buffy's mouth. "I've been a little hormonal recently," she agreed. "Like a nonstop stretch of PMS."

Fred's nose wrinkled. "Okay."

"Believe me, I'm not normally this... Well, I'm not normally *this*."

"It's been rough on you."

Buffy rolled her eyes. "Like that's an excuse," she replied. "Spike's been nothing but wonderful and I treat him like... Well, he did want me dead a few months ago, but things are very different now."

"Your life is so strange."

She snickered. "You're telling me."

"What happened that sent you out of your apartment without pants?"

"You're really going to hammer on the 'Buffy has no pants' thing, aren't you?"

"It's just not something you see every day. And considering I live in Los Angeles, that's saying a lot."

Buffy swallowed hard and nodded, shoving a spoonful of Frosted Flakes into her mouth to buy herself at least thirty seconds during which to consider how best to phrase what she wanted to say. She knew she needed to talk, and if it were Willow rather than Fred, she knew exactly how she would begin. But Fred wasn't Willow, and it wouldn't be fair to either friend to utilize one in place of the other.

With Fred, she needed to start at the beginning. She needed to tell her everything.

The spoonful was chewed to the point of being liquefied. No more stalling. After swallowing hard and downing the sugary taste with a gulp of milk, Buffy sighed, nodded, and began with a quick confession. "Spike isn't the first vampire I've...had a relationship with."

Perhaps she was expecting an earthquake based on past experience. It didn't come. Not the judgmental eyes or the shocked expression or anything to suggest she was tainted by association. Fred did nothing but shrug and reach for the milk. "Okay," she said, shrugging. "Could you get me a glass?"

Buffy nodded blankly, moving around the kitchen in an almost robotic fashion. "His name was Angel," she continued. "I met him... god, a year and a half ago? It was...nothing at first. I thought he was cute but annoying. Just some random twenty-something who popped out of nowhere to tell me I was going to die some horrible death or the world was ending. He made with the extreme vague when I asked for

help, saved my butt a time or two, and when we kissed...it was fangs ahoy."

Fred didn't say anything until she had a glass of milk in hand. "You didn't know he was a vampire?"

"He didn't act like one."

"Spike doesn't act like one."

"Fred, you really don't know how vamps act."

The other girl shrugged. "I know those guys who attacked us the other night were very 'bite-first-ask-questions-later.'"

Buffy nodded, pointing at her as though catching a faux pas. "There you go."

"What?"

"Vamps very rarely ask questions later." She smirked, continuing, "Angel and I...we didn't really get together until about a year after first smoochies, and it was hard knowing if we were together or if we were patrolling-buddies-with benefits. He was...different, Angel was."

"Like Spike is?"

Buffy shook her head. "No. No, I...Spike doesn't have a soul. When you become a vampire, the soul leaves the body and a demon goes in instead. Spike is pure demon. Angel had a soul."

Fred paused, arching a brow. "How'd that work?"

"Something involving a curse with a really lame escape-hatch." Buffy exhaled. Despite however much she didn't want to discuss this, there was something undeniably liberating in getting the words out. "Angel had a soul, meaning he was just like a person but on an extremely limited diet and very much allergic to sunlight. Oh, and he'd live forever. But he didn't bite people. He didn't hurt anyone. He wasn't a conventional vampire." She grew quiet, her eyes focusing on a spot on the counter. "I loved him. He was...it happened so fast. We were just...and then I loved him. Then Spike and Dru came to town and everything changed."

"Dru?"

Buffy nodded. "You know...the girl I mentioned when Spike was here a couple nights ago?"

"I tried not to listen."

"We weren't quiet."

The look in Fred's eyes betrayed her efforts to not listen had been entirely in vain. "The woman who...umm...nailed him to the wall?"

"That'd be the one."

"She sounds...umm...nice."

Buffy snickered. "Yeah, a real prize. But Spike was totally about Dru. He came to town to make her get better. She was some vampire version of sick, and the Hellmouth could make her better."

"Hellmouth?"

"Sunnydale."

"Oh." Fred's brows perked. "There are better nicknames, you know. The City of Angels, for example. The Big Apple. The Windy City. But the Hellmouth?"

"Well, it's not so much a nickname as it is...what it is. The mouth to Hell. Or one of the many mouths to Hell."

"Ummm..."

"I know. Comforting." Buffy waved a hand. "Spike brought Dru there to heal her. Things happened. He tried to kill me, it didn't take. I tried to kill him, and he ended up in a wheelchair. Then Angel and I grew...umm...pelvic, and suddenly he wasn't Angel anymore." A pause. "That escape hatch I mentioned? It only activates if he gets happy. When we had sex, he got *really* happy, and the soul was ejected. And soulless Angel? Nothing like Spike. He was sadistic. Came after me through my friends...through my mother...he killed my watcher's—girl-friend. And he tried to end the world."

Fred just stared at her for a second. "Wow," she said. "And I thought my breakup with Pete was bad."

"Pete?"

"My last boyfriend."

"What happened?"

A beat. Fred glanced down, blushing. "Okay, so it was in high school. I told him I was going to LA for college and since he was still into Nirvana and pot, it was over. And he took it bad to the extreme of...toilet-papering my house. But in my hometown, that was like, front-page news."

Buffy bit the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing. "Oh man."

"Yeah. And we had some tall trees in our yard."

"I really wish my life was that simple at times. Other times I think I'd be bored." Buffy cast a wistful glance to the door. "But Angel turning the way he did, broke my heart. And Spike wasn't happy, either. With Angel back on the side of evil, Dru was on him like white on rice, forgetting how much Spike..." She paused at the bad taste in her mouth. It wasn't fair to be jealous of the past, but god save her, she couldn't help herself. "Spike came to me in very bizarre circumstances. Let's just say...we weren't ourselves. Kissage happened. And it threw us both. We teamed up to stop Angel from ending the world, only Angel got his soul back but I had to kill him anyway."

She paused for comments, but none were forthcoming. Likewise, it struck her as a good idea to ignore how easily it was to say those words. How much truth it brought to her own hypothesis. Sometime between Angel losing his soul and Spike coming to her aid, Buffy had fallen out of love with Angel. The little girl whose kisses he'd stolen, whose naiveté he'd taken for granted, had grown up. She wasn't that child anymore.

However, getting over Angel didn't mean she'd forgotten the hard-learned wisdom their relationship had imparted. Vampires and slayers were a messy, sloppy deal. She might have fallen out of love, but she hadn't forgotten the pain. The pain was still very much alive.

And killing him had killed her in ways she couldn't even explain to herself.

"Spike took me away when it was over," Buffy said softly. "I was so lost, but I needed to feel. And I...I jumped him in our motel room and we had sex. Hard, painful sex. But it was more to him than that. More to me, too, but I didn't want it to be. And then by accident claimage happened." Anticipating Fred's question, she pulled her hair back to reveal the bite mark on her throat. "Shorthand, we're linked now forever. And as it turns out, unless something kills me, I won't die. Ever."

Fred blinked. "Wow."

"Yeah."

"So you get to be seventeen forever? I can't decide if that's awful or terrible." She wrinkled her nose. "In my case, terrible."

Buffy forced a smile that she didn't feel. "This blood bondy thing is

why I was sick not too long ago. Since it's new, it needs time to develop. To be claimed basically means that we're one, therefore to be apart makes our connection spaz. It's also why we decided to try this living-together thing." She paused again. "The thing is, even if Angel and I are very much of the past, I'm just *not* ready to go from one emotional train wreck to whatever Spike and I are. I care about him a lot...really, it freaks me out, considering he has *no* soul whatsoever—except maybe he's sharing mine now, but the jury's still out on that—and whatever we have wouldn't be a rebound. It'd be another live-or-die relationship that I can *never* get out of. And god, all I wanna do is throw myself at him but I can't because if I start confusing...I don't even know him all that well. I mean, I do, but the circumstances have always been extreme and...well, they always will be but I can't control that and I rushed things with Angel and that killed me and if Spike and I fail at being claimed-people then there won't be anything left of me to kill 'cause I'll be devastated. I'm just not ready for that...and this alone is scaring me but I have no choice."

There was nothing for a long minute. Fred just looked at her, her hand wrapped around her barely-touched milk. Then, blinking, she shook her head as though forcing her thoughts to fall in place. "Wow," she said.

"Yeah," Buffy agreed dryly.

"You have a lot going on."

A beat, then Buffy laughed. Hard. "Now that," she said, covering her mouth, "is an understatement."

Fred grinned. "Well, it's...I do that. Why with the no pants again?"

"Spike and I were trying to sleep in the same bed. It didn't take. He got snuggly and then we played musical-sofas and this morning when we started talking about...stuff...he kissed me." Buffy held up a hand. "A friend kiss. I've kissed Spike a lot, and this was definitely a supportive *friend* kiss. I'm the one who turned all whorey on him. Massive lip-attack. And since I'm the one who put the boundaries...I just... I left him confused and I needed to get out."

The empathy in Fred's eyes grounded her completely. "I get that," the girl said. "And I'm betting, even with the confusion and stuff worse than confusion, that Spike will, too. This thing is...well, over my head,

but he cares about you. A lot. I'm just this bystander person and I can see that."

Buffy nodded, her heart clenching, her mind flashing back to the soft smile on his face and the way his words cascaded over her like a waterfall. He did care about her—more than she likely knew. Perhaps even more than he knew. And that was terrifying.

But not so much as the idea of facing him now—of facing him after what she'd done to him. After asking for space and then jumping his sexy bones, only to pull away when he began to lead one thing to another as any man—living or dead—would.

"You wanna go shopping?" Buffy asked suddenly. "Or...job hunting? I'll swing by the library and fill out an application, but we should probably hit other places. And I can get pants that don't make my ass look so big and...well, my cash is in my apartment, but I have enough that I can pay you back for—"

Fred held up a hand. "You need to get out?"

"Yes. I can't face him right now. Not after...that."

She shrugged. "Then we'll go shopping."

"You sure?"

"Absolutely." Fred smiled warmly. "We're friends, right? This is what friends do. They're there for the boy trouble and the shopping therapy. Or so I've heard. I never...had...you know, friends who weren't total geeks."

Buffy grinned, spontaneously leaning over the counter to throw her arms around Fred and hug her as best she could. "Well, all my friends *are,*" she said. "At least the ones I had before I left."

"Then you might have a decent chance at putting up with me."

"I definitely wouldn't rule it out."

"Oh my god."

"Calm down."

Buffy glanced up to aim at Fred a well-deserved glare, but she couldn't see for the mess of tears in her eyes. Nor could she trust her feet to walk, even if it meant closing a gap of no more than four feet.

The day had been going so well, too. Full of shoppage and girlish giggles and the unspoken hope that maybe, just maybe, things would work themselves out.

Two hours had passed since sunset, and Spike wasn't home.

Spike had left. No note. No explanation. No nothing. He was just gone.

Gone.

"I chased him away," Buffy said, wiping at her eyes. She couldn't stop crying. She'd been crying now for a half hour, pacing when she could trust her legs and doing her best to not let all the inner-crazy out, though with zero success. "I did. I was so...stupid. I was *so stupid.*"

Fred's hands were up, trying unsuccessfully to coax Buffy onto the sofa. "He probably just wanted to give you time," she said, her voice all too reasonable. "Maybe he needed time. You said he likes killing things. Maybe he went to...kill things."

Buffy shook her head. "He's gone. He left."

"This would be the non-stop PMS you were talking about earlier."

"Not. Helping."

"I just think you're jumping to conclusions."

"I never jump to conclusions!" Buffy paused, realizing belatedly the words had ridden out on a scream. She cast Fred an apologetic glance, then amended her statement with a softer, but no less tearful, "Except I sometimes do, but I'm not now. I'm *not.* I feel it. I feel it...I felt it earlier, but I thought it was just...nerves. I didn't...something's wrong. He left. He's *left.* He left because—"

"Buffy—"

"He's gone."

Three swift knocks to the front door stole whatever fruitless comfort Fred was about to offer right off the girl's tongue. They exchanged a quick glance before Buffy bolted to answer it.

"Oh god."

"See?" Fred replied calmly. "He just—"

"No."

"What?"

But there was nothing to say. No words to follow. Nothing that

could hope to explain what Buffy knew. The trepidation squeezing her stomach. The knowledge crashing against her chest.

"It's not him."

Fred frowned. "Don't be silly," she returned, though her voice was shaky.

Then she opened the door. And froze.

Buffy was right. It wasn't Spike.

It was Gunn.

28

It was suddenly very apparent to Buffy why Spike paced so frequently. Pacing kept her moving—kept her occupied. Pacing allowed her body to speed alongside her mind. Pacing made her feel like she was doing *something*, if only wearing down the floorboards beneath her feet.

"Again," she snapped mindlessly, not bothering to glance upward. "Tell me again."

Fred worried a lip between her teeth. "Buffy?"

"I need to hear it again." A long breath rolled off her shoulders. Her heels dug into the linoleum as she spun to aim her glare at Gunn. "Talk."

There was no hesitation. "We've been tailin' him for a few days...your boy. Briggs was convinced he was a vamp, and was none too thrilled about lettin' a vamp walk away like we did. We got a rep, see. Word gets out that we were outsmarted by a vamp and his woman, and shit hits the fan."

"Who the hell would we tell?" Buffy shouted. "We just wanted to be left alone!"

"I keep tellin' you, it was *Briggs,* not me."

"You can imagine how much that matters to me right now."

Gunn glared at her for a minute longer before ultimately releasing a long sigh and glancing down. "Look, I came here to help, okay? I came to tell you what I know, and what I know is my men grabbed your boy outside a bar outside a bar on Crenshaw. You weren't there to come up with some bull story 'bout him being a slayer and it didn't take much for him to flash some fang. So we—"

Buffy's eyes darkened dangerously. "What did you do to him?"

"I did nothin', I keep telling you! He was buyin' blood."

The revelation that Spike hadn't fed on a live person was surprisingly anticlimactic, and not only because he'd told her as much the day before. The alternative hadn't even occurred to Buffy until she noted the astonishment in Gunn's voice. If her vampire was out to get sustenance, it would be bagged. Spike had stopped hunting a long time ago. Spike had stopped hunting *for her,* and no matter what had happened earlier, no matter how she might have screwed up everything, he wouldn't do anything to hurt her now.

"So you decided to take out the world's only vampire who gets his supply from bags rather than necks." Buffy crossed her arms and barked out a derisive laugh. "You guys really couldn't leave well enough alone, could you?"

"You said you were both slayers," Gunn retorted, "and while you two definitely need to work on your act, I was willin' to buy it. *I* was willin' to leave well enough alone. You took out the vamps in the alley and you didn't look to be hurtin' nobody. Plus you got a tan. Not much of one, but more than a vamp. It wasn't me who decided to hunt ya'll down, all right?"

Buffy frowned and rubbed her arms self-consciously.

"I didn't get into this to be as bad as what's out there. I ain't seen a vamp worth saving yet, but I've seen a fucking lot, so I was willin' to let you walk. It's my gang." He paused. "It *was* my gang. Briggs thinks he'd be a better leader 'cause he doesn't use his head."

Fred's nose wrinkled. "Charming gang you've got there."

"On the streets, it's act before you think. If you don't, you could find yourself at the wrong end of some ugly's fangs," Gunn retorted shortly. "Briggs doesn't think. He just acts. And havin' a vamp walk

away had his shit all in a fury. It wasn't hard to track your boy down. We found and grabbed him, and now they're after you."

"Because I'm the Slayer and they think that's some sort of demon?"

Gunn grinned wryly. "No. They don't got no idea what a slayer is."

"And you do?"

"Let's just say I did my homework."

Buffy blinked in surprise. "You looked me up?"

Gunn favored her with a sideways glance. "Do I look like I got a library card?" he asked, spreading his arms. "No. I just talked up the few vamps I found between meeting you and grabbin' him. Said the Slayer was a girl—a few said her name was Buffy—"

Another surprised beat. She had no idea anyone out there—especially in the demon underground—knew her name. "What?"

The renegade demon hunter offered a lazy shrug. "Apparently, girl, you're all famous and shit. Word has it you took out somethin' called the Master...and while I got no idea what that is, it sounded like it needed taking out."

A small smile tugged at the corners of her mouth but she killed just as quickly.

"Also said," Gunn continued, "that you stopped some other asshole from endin' the world."

"They knew that?"

"Not all, but a few. Like I said, you're famous." He smiled grimly. "But your boy is not. Not as a slayer, anyway. Word is there can only be one at a time, and they never have dicks."

Buffy's surprise hardened into revulsion. "You're disgusting."

"Call it like I see it," Gunn retorted. "And as I've said, even if I ain't right 'bout all slayers bein' girls, there ain't no sense tellin' me your boy's a slayer. Slayers don't got fangs from what I've heard."

"I still don't understand why you guys even care about Spike," Fred offered before Buffy's growing outrage could pour into words. "If you knew what Buffy is, then why not leave this one vampire to her?"

"For the *thousandth* time, it wasn't me!" Gunn's eyes shifted back to Buffy. "I had it figured out that night. Briggs did, too, but he wasn't so calm about it, was he? We trailed your vamp, saw him buyin' blood, and got him to flash his uglies. I don't get it, but he

wasn't hurtin' nobody, so I figured he was on your leash." He paused. "Once again: you're the Slayer. Your vamp wasn't committing a crime. I guessed he was housetrained. Briggs thought differently."

"So he grabbed him."

"That's right."

"Spike is being held by a bunch of vampire hunters who are just waiting for *me* to do something stupid so they can stick something pointy in his chest."

"And you're here," Fred intervened, "'cause you think Briggs is wrong."

Gunn rolled his eyes. "I'm glad I'm finally getting through to you. Didn't realize I'd need a translator. I know I don't look it, but I'm pretty smart. The girl is what she says she is..." He waved generally at Buffy. "I figure if she says he's okay, then he's okay. And that, yet again, is why I'm here." A pause. "Spike told me where to find you."

Buffy nodded. "Yeah? And you know where to find him."

"He said he wants you to stay away. Don't wanna put you in danger and shit."

"Right," she agreed, rolling her eyes. "That's happening."

Gunn snickered. "He said you'd say that. He just wanted me to warn you. Briggs tossed me over officially before I left, using the cock idea that I ain't tough enough. He got backing 'cause he was right about blondie bein' a vamp. Letting you go cost me." He shifted. "So now they're all hot to string you up beside him. They just don't know where to look for you." A brief pause. "Your vamp hasn't told nobody but me where you are."

"Spike wouldn't give that information over lightly," Fred insisted, her voice shaking. "I mean, I don't know him well, but—"

"Yeah, he was stubborn as all hell," Gunn agreed, "but he also saw me and Briggs throwin' it down on what to do about her"—he pointed to Buffy—"if we saw her. Guess the vamp thought I was trustworthy, but he strictly said you ain't to come after him."

"Like *hell,*" Buffy all but growled. "Spike wanted you to warn me. Well, you did. Briggs or whoever can come at me with whatever he wants. I don't give a crap. Spike is *mine* and I am sure as hell *not* leaving

him there to be staked or tortured or god knows what else your men are doing to him."

"My men don't torture."

A placidly frightening smile split her lips. "Right now the fact that you know where Spike is and how many people stand between me and him is the only thing saving your ass from being thoroughly kicked, so let's not argue over semantics. You know I'm going after him."

Gunn glared at her for a long beat before breaking off with a nod. "Yeah."

"And if I find Briggs, I'll put him on life support."

"He's gonna have muscle."

"Wow. I'm terrified." Buffy shook her head hard, her legs breaking for the bedroom, her voice carrying into the living area as she began a frantic gathering of her limited resources. For a vampire slayer in a big city, she was low on stakes and even lower on assets so far as weaponry. There were a few stakes and a long carving knife she honestly had no recollection of owning—but it was there in her stash, and she would use it. "As you mentioned, I killed the Master. I've stopped the apocalypse—twice, I might add. And I lived on the mouth of Hell for two years. A few little boys with weapons—"

"Hey!"

"—are not going to intimidate me." Buffy stormed back into the living room with a bag of lethal goodies over her shoulder. She met Gunn's glare with a look of cold indifference.

"We're not *little boys*."

"Well, your friends sure as hell are acting like it," she snapped. "Spike wasn't hurting anyone—"

"And that's why I'm here!"

"And that's why you're going to take me to him." She drew to a sudden halt by the door, her hand diving into her jeans pocket to ensure she had her key. "Let's go, hotshot." She glanced to Fred, who stood eagerly by the place on the wall where the previous tenant's television had stood. "You're staying here."

"Buffy!"

Gunn nodded. "She's right. You ain't goin'."

"Ahab here is gonna take me to Spike. He knows where he is, and

while personally I could give a crap if I lose him, if I lost you, I'd be very upset."

"Anyone ever told you you're one hell of a people person?" Gunn grumbled, moving to open the door. "I didn't hafta come here at all, y'know. I'm doin' you a favor."

"And after Spike is back here—back home—I'm sure we'll be the bestest of friends. Right now, you're the guy I'd shove in front of a bus if it'd help me get to *my* vampire." Buffy plastered on a brilliant smile. "Lead the way, Ahab."

"I'm not gonna like you, am I?"

Buffy shrugged. "You gotta get to know me. Let's go! Fred..." She leveled a warning glare at her friend. "You follow us and—"

"No. No following. Staying. I'll...umm...I'll be here...though if you're not back by tomorrow, I will call the cops."

"Fair enough."

Buffy glanced back to Gunn, waiting for him to shuffle his way through the door. When he was a safe distance ahead of her, she turned to follow.

Watching him carefully with every step he took.

Hoping against hope they weren't too late.

IT WAS LARGELY rewarding to know he could still make grown men shake with fear simply by glaring, even if his yellow eyes were puffed and swollen. Briggs was a sadistic git, but he didn't like dealing with prey that could look at him. He wasn't the sort for long, drawn out torture sessions, even with creatures he considered subhuman. Several times already, he'd had to refrain from shoving a stake into Spike's chest. It was easier dealing with vamps when they were nothing but dust. When they were alive—or in a position to mimic life—they ran the risk of seeming human.

Honestly, Spike had gotten himself into hairier situations than this, and he always managed to escape. If not by cunning and wit, then most certainly by dumb luck. Last time, he'd had Buffy to draw the sword from his gut and thicken his blood with her rich taste.

Buffy.

She was coming after him. He knew it, of course. Knew telling her to stay away would fix her beautifully stubborn head to do the opposite. Knew because, even if she weren't linked to his blood, she cared for him. She cared deeply...even more than she realized.

The look in her eyes before she bolted down the hallway had told him as much. It was burning her from the inside—the need to touch and feel, to taste and savor. She wanted him. She wanted him desperately, but she feared getting hurt. She feared what would happen if she threw herself into the fray again. She feared him—not because of what he was, rather what he could do to her.

"Your girlfriend is comin', ain't she?"

Spike forced open his left eye, centering on the hazy form addressing him. "Not rightly soon enough," he drawled.

"You know what we're gonna do to her, don't you?"

There was no need to reply. Briggs was trying to bait him, and he wasn't going to allow the wanker the satisfaction.

Though if he went into gruesome detail of his plans involving Buffy, he might find himself with his brains leaking out of a smashed skull the second Spike was freed. But from where he was—strung up on the prongs of a forklift, held in place by handcuffs that had been dipped in holy water—there was little he could do. Every inch of his body ached. His jaw was sore from clenching and his gums tingled with the need to fasten around a nice, ripe, juicy human throat.

He knew he was in bad shape. A few broken bones. A few scars courtesy of lazy swings with rusty knives. Large knots and welts doctored his legs and arms, and his chest likely resembled a patchwork quilt. He hadn't screamed, though. Not once. While it hurt like a bitch, the children had done little more to him than Angelus had in the early days.

"I know what you think you're gonna do," Spike replied with a bloody, lopsided grin. "Gonna be fun to have a front-row seat."

Briggs's eyes narrowed. "She's gonna—"

"Be fuckin' fury in motion. And she's gonna kick every inch of your ass."

"No little girl ain't gonna get the better end of me."

"Call her that," Spike replied, breathing hard, "and you'll just make her angrier."

"Think that worries me?"

There was no sense in offering a retort. None at all. Not with Briggs's eyes filling with fear. Not with his pulse leaping, his heart thundering just a bit harder. Likewise, there was no sense in talking up Buffy's legend.

She would be here soon. She would.

And she would tear these walls apart.

29

"Slow down."

"Bite me."

Fingers skimmed her arm, and before she could help herself, Buffy had Gunn sprawled on cold pavement. She balked in surprise but didn't allow for apologies. As it was, she wasn't sorry.

She was pissed at the delay.

"Fuck, girl," Gunn grumbled, climbing to his feet. "Do I really gotta remind you *again* that I'm helping you?"

"Grabbing me is not helping," she spat, rolling her shoulders back and marching onward. "Getting me in and to Spike? That, on the other hand..."

"You can't just march in there and grab him."

"Yeah? Watch me."

"They're not dumb, you know!" Gunn snapped, jogging to catch up with her. "They know you're comin'."

"Good for them."

"You've heard of a trap before, haven't you? This one's not exactly subtle."

Buffy rolled her shoulders, a bitter smirk crossing her lips. "Neither am I."

"Yeah. Gettin' that." Gunn pounded out a deep breath, and out of her peripheral, Buffy saw him reach for her again. Only this time he seemed to think the better of it and withdrew his hand almost immediately.

The boy caught on quick—she'd give him that much credit.

"Problem is," Gunn continued, "Briggs ain't subtle, either. They know you're gonna try something and they know that something's probably gonna involve you bustin' in all John Wayne like."

At that, Buffy paused. She couldn't help herself. "John Wayne?" she repeated, favoring him with an arched eyebrow. "Really?"

"If John Wayne was young, hot, and had a thing for vamps, sure." Gunn took a step forward, his hands coming up in a semblance of surrender. "You do it like this and you give Briggs and the rest of 'em exactly what they want."

"Which is?"

"To kill you."

Buffy rolled her eyes at that. "Oh, if that's all." And she started forward again, shaking her head. "You had me worried there for a sec."

"Hold up! You didn't let me finish." Gunn jogged to catch up with her again. "They know you ain't no vamp. This slayer stuff is new."

"And?"

"And I know my boys. My boys are following Briggs 'cause to him, not being human's as good as being a demon."

Buffy came to a fierce halt at that and whirled on her heel. "Excuse me?" she snapped. "Who said anything about me not being human?"

Gunn paused, his brow furrowing. "I thought you were a slayer."

"Yeah. And slayers happen to be human, thank you very much."

"Really? You got them superpowers and you still get to play for the home team?" Gunn gave his head a shake. "That ain't fair."

"Not fair? Not fair is me being seventeen freaking years old and have the weight of the literal world on my shoulders." Buffy balled her hands into fists, willing herself not to launch at Gunn and beat the tar out of him. "Not fair is the fact that I've stopped the world from ending a tally of *two* times now, and the last time came at the expense of running my boyfriend through with a freaking sword."

"Okay. Okay." There was that gesture of surrender again. "My bad."

On some level, Buffy recognized what he was trying to do. She did. But she already knew that marching into an unknown situation with no plan and no weapons might not be the world's best plan. Reminders weren't of the needed.

Plus she hadn't asked for this—any of it. She'd thrown herself at Spike this morning when he was doing his damndest to give her the space she'd told him she needed.

If she'd been with him, he wouldn't have been grabbed. Instead she'd been wallowing in self-pity, bemoaning the fact that she had a gorgeous man essentially at her beck and call. A man who wasn't really a man, but who was trying to be one. For her.

Tears stung her eyes. Buffy inhaled a deep breath and shook her head. She couldn't go down this road now. There would be plenty of time for her to reflect later—mull over where she was now and where she wanted to go. Right now, she had to get Spike back.

"So," Buffy said, her jaw tightening, "do you have any better ideas?"

"Better ideas than guns a-blazin', you mean?" Gunn nodded. "Yeah. You come in as my prisoner."

She stared at him for a long moment, then rolled her eyes and shook her head.

"Look, Briggs don't know nothing about slayers and he wants to. You do your John Wayne thing and he'll feel cornered—feel like he's got no choice but to stake your boyfriend and put you down." Gunn held up a hand. "But he ain't dumb, either. He knows the only way to get to know what he wants to know is to make you think he's gonna let your boy live. If he dusts the vamp the second you show, he ain't gonna get shit."

"So your solution is..."

"To make it look like you've been caught too. Let him think he's in control. He won't be expectin' nothing."

Warning bells began blaring in her head, but Buffy did her best to quiet them. There was a chance—and she'd call it a good one—that Gunn was trying to pull one over on her. That this was his way to turn one captive into two, reassert his authority over the group of slayer wannabes. Hell, she had no guarantee that Spike was still alive at all.

Except she was certain she'd know if he'd been dusted. She'd have felt it.

Even if Gunn was trying to earn favor with his crew, that didn't make what he said wrong. Going in with a mind to put everyone who stood between her and Spike in the ground would only get them both killed. Plus, despite how piping mad she was, Buffy knew she'd never forgive herself if her actions claimed anyone's life.

Going in as Gunn's prisoner—whether for real or for show—was her best bet for getting Spike out of there.

Still, she wasn't about to go in with her eyes closed.

Buffy inhaled a deep breath. "Fine," she said and held up her wrists. "Take me to your leader."

Gunn blanched, but reached into his back pocket and withdrew a length of rope. The fact that he was this prepared should have been more alarming, but Buffy forced herself not to react. If he tried anything, she'd feed him to Spike herself.

"He ain't my leader, blondie."

"Yeah, save it for someone who cares." Buffy stood still, her heart thumping. Allowing herself to be tied up was new territory for her—the instinct to smash her leg into his gut then kick him in the head was so strong she worried her body might do so on autopilot.

After Gunn had her wrists tied, he stood back, his eyes wide and filled with enough reservation to make the part of her that worried this might be a trap take a figurative breath.

But she figured it was polite to warn him, anyway.

"Just to let you know," Buffy said matter-of-factly, "if we get in there and you have a change of heart, decide to give me to your friends, this smiling face"—she flashed a brief smile for emphasis—"will be the last thing you see."

Gunn snorted. "Yeah. Like I don't know that."

❧

NOTHING good ever happened at the docks.

"You guys couldn't come up with a place any more cliché, could you?" Buffy snapped as Gunn led her toward the warehouse-looking

building—something straight out of an 80s crime drama. The building seemed about three seconds from falling to the ground. "Seriously."

"Shut up," he hissed, prodding her forward with the blunt end of his stake.

Buffy inhaled a deep breath—one that tasted of salt and seaweed—and did her best to keep her head down. She hadn't anticipated, truly, just how much she'd hate having her wrists tied behind her back while approaching enemy territory until this moment. It had been a damn long time since she'd felt physically helpless, and while she didn't consider herself without options—being that she could totally kick her way to freedom if she needed to—being denied an extension of herself was a total pain.

Eyes on the prize, Summers.

And the prize was Spike.

"Showtime, blondie," Gunn murmured next to her ear. Then, without ceremony, he gave her a good shove.

Buffy stumbled a few steps forward and made a mental note to kick Gunn's ass after this was over.

"Yo!" Gunn called. "Anyone here order a slayer?"

A horrible sound rent the air—a long roar filled with fury and pain. Buffy's chest tightened and her heart began to race with a surge of adrenaline. Her legs twitched, the need to run overcoming her so fiercely she had to dig her heels into the dock area to keep herself from doing something stupid.

The door to the port building opened. "That you, Gunn?" someone called.

"Me and my plus one here," Gunn replied, shoving Buffy again. "Briggs in?"

Another one of those terrible roars tore through the air, this time punctuated by the unmistakable smack of flesh striking flesh.

"Briggs is busy," Gunn's anonymous friend answered.

Buffy was about to get real busy, herself. Busy kicking someone's face in.

As though sensing that thought, Gunn dug the butt of his stake into the small of her back and paraded her forward. In seconds, the pale face of their greeter came into view. Long nose. Prominent brow.

Greedy eyes. A mess of dirty blond hair. He grinned, revealing crooked yellow teeth.

"This the vamp's girlfriend?" he asked, eying Buffy up and down. And though his attention made her uncomfortable, there wasn't anything threatening behind it. No hint of sexual violence or thoughts that would *really* warrant the relocation of his teeth to his anus. Rather, he appraised her as she would a demon. A demon he was about to decapitate.

It wasn't a nice feeling.

"She don't look like no slayer."

"The fuck you know what a slayer looks like?" Gunn replied. "Shit, Jerry, you ain't even heard of one till the other night."

"Just sayin'. She don't look like much, does she?"

"Yeah, and how many vamps exactly have we dusted who didn't look like much?"

The lackey—Jerry—gave a jerky nod. "She's just so little. Sure she needs to be tied up?"

"She doesn't," Buffy agreed brightly. "If you'd do the honors—"

Gunn snorted gave her another push, and then she was inside the port building proper, where the stench from the outside met with the stink of sweat and neglect. She could barely draw in the will to breathe.

"She got spunk," Jerry said, laughing. "I'll give her that. Yeah, Briggs is interviewing her boyfriend."

"Alone? Where's everyone at?"

"Lookin' for you and our friend here." Jerry nudged his chin in Buffy's direction with another leer before turning his attention back to Gunn. "I knew you'd come around. Always. Told 'em that Charles Gunn does not go soft for no vamp. Or his pretty piece of ass."

"Fuckin' A," Gunn agreed with a tight nod. "Alonna? She out there?"

"Naw. Briggs grounded her. Precaution. Y'know."

Buffy did her best to keep her expression neutral while the rest of her sighed in relief. That had been the largest variable in Gunn's dumbass plan—whether or not his sister was out with the others or at home base. He'd speculated that Briggs wouldn't want Alonna on a

hunt because she'd be a wild card after what had happened earlier. It had been a gamble, but one that had paid off.

"Shit, she must be goin' nuts," Gunn replied, chuckling.

"You ain't wrong. Good to have you back, man."

"Back? Man, I never left. Just let a pretty face fuck with my head." He reached around and patted Buffy's cheeks and was fortunate, in her opinion, that he was able to pull away with all fingers intact. "Won't happen again."

"Can't say I blame you," Jerry said, and this time the look he gave Buffy *was* entirely sexual. "She does look tasty."

Buffy tensed, her body tightening in that familiar way that preceded issuing out a thorough ass-kicking. If he so much as sniffed her hair—

But Gunn broke through those thoughts, pressing the stake's point further into her spine. And then she remembered she couldn't do anything. Not yet—not if she wanted to get Spike out of here alive.

"Tasty and dying to see her boy toy," Gunn agreed, then jerked his chin to indicate a wall comprised of fencing and stacked boxes that gave way to a passage. "He this way?"

Jerry dipped his head and stood aside. "I'd get the tissues ready if I was you, sweetheart," he told Buffy, a twisted smile stretching his lips. "What you see back there ain't gonna be pretty."

The roar came again, and trapped within the confines of the walls, it seemed to go on forever. This time, it was followed by an awful hiss Buffy knew all too well, and the scent of cooking flesh thickened the air.

Okay, Gunn had exactly three minutes before she went John Wayne on his ass.

Fortunately, he seemed to know it. "Briggs!" he yelled. "Got somethin' you want."

Gunn walked her around the wall, where she got a good view of discarded bicycles and yard equipment. The second he navigated her around the corner, Buffy slammed her teeth into her tongue to keep herself from screaming.

Spike was strung up what looked to be a forklift, his wrists cuffed against either prong. A thick gash ran the length of one cheek and his

left eye had all but swollen shut. He was in full on game face, but his lip had been split and an angry, purplish mass consumed most of his right cheek. He'd also been stripped of clothing—completely—though it took her a moment to realize it because his skin was a patchwork of cuts and burns. His right side had discolored so dramatically that it seemed to blend into his surroundings, giving him the appearance of missing part of his body.

She remembered how he'd looked in the motel, run through with a sword courtesy of his crazy ex. He'd looked dead then—so much so she'd thought he might be. But even then, aside from the blood drenching his pale skin, he hadn't looked broken.

Not the way he did now.

Hot, angry tears stung her eyes, the adrenaline from before charging through her system so hard her bones trembled.

"What have you done to him?"

At her voice, Spike seemed to stir. He growled and jerked forward violently. Again the air crackled and hissed, and she realized that the cuffs that held him in place were smoking. Like they had been dipped in holy water.

A flame erupted in her gut and began to burn.

"No!" Spike snarled, his yellow eyes finding her as he strained against the cuffs, which gave an awful hiss and smoked harder still. "Slayer!"

"Well hot damn, Gunn. Didn't think you'd actually do it."

The guy Buffy recognized as Briggs strolled leisurely from around the back of the forklift. He held a bottle of liquor in one hand and nothing in the other, though from how his fingers twitched, it was obvious he had a weapon at the ready.

It took Buffy all of three seconds to decide she would start by kicking the asshole's self-satisfied smile off his ugly mug. If he had any teeth left after that, she'd knock them down his throat, then knee him in the gut so hard he threw them up again. Should he still be conscious at that point...

Well, she'd figure it out. Gotta leave some room for spontaneity.

"Yeah," Buffy drawled, "here's the thing about slayers..."

She flexed her wrists and felt the threads strain. In a second she

was free—*hallelujah*—and she had a human shield courtesy of the stranglehold she had on Gunn.

"We're kinda hard to wrangle."

The smirk faded from Briggs's face almost immediately. Pity. She'd been kinda looking forward to the *kicking it off him* thing.

"Fuck!" he yelled. "She's loose!"

"Shit!" Gunn gasped. A nice gasp. Full of fear and disbelief. If this hadn't been planned, she might have thought he was genuinely surprised.

Of course, she had his back bent toward her at an angle that couldn't be comfortable, forcing his long legs to stretch out farther, lest something valuable break. Maybe he didn't need to dig too far in his bank of acting chops to find the fear.

Footsteps echoed from behind. That had to be Jerry, coming to the rescue. Buffy dragged Gunn around like a limp doll. She released him for an instant—just barely a blink—twisted and greeted her new assailant with a hard kick to the chest. Jerry's eyes widened in shock, his mouth falling open and wheezing hard gasps of air between those yellow teeth. She reached back and let her fist fly, and the next instant he was on the ground, unconscious.

Then Gunn was against her again, her forearm pressed against his throat and the stake he'd held at her back poised and waiting at his heaving chest.

"Now," she said cheerily, "where were we?"

Spike made a sound that might have been a cough or a chuckle, but she didn't look at him. She couldn't afford to.

"Whoa!" Briggs said, holding up his hands, the bottle of beer shattering in an explosion of gas and amber liquid.

"Fuuuuck," Gunn wheezed, grasping her forearm. "Do you...gotta... do it...so tight?"

She didn't think he meant others to hear that, but she didn't care. She jerked back, applying just enough pressure on his windpipe to knock him out should the need arise. The result was a belly-deep gasp that made her own chest tingle with sympathy-pain.

"Now," she said, aiming a sweet smile at Briggs, "let me tell you what's going to happen. The vampire? You're going to release him.

Slowly. Then Charlie and I"—she tightened her hold on Gunn again, earning the theatrics of another gasping breath—"are gonna go for a walk. You try to stop us, follow us? You'll find out just how strong a seriously pissed off slayer really is." Buffy narrowed her eyes, tilting her head. "Questions?"

Briggs was still for a long moment—long enough to have uncertainty shoot down her spine and her heart start to jack-rabbit. But then he shook his head and stretched his hands into the air above him and nodded.

"All right," Briggs said, his eyes never leaving Buffy's. "I'm gonna back up now real slow like. No sudden movements, the full nine yards."

Buffy dug the tip of the stake into Gunn chest. Not hard enough to draw blood, but more than enough to earn another whimper. "No," she said. "I don't think so. Is there an Alonna in the house?"

Briggs's eyes flashed and at last, he looked away from her, shifting his attention to Gunn. "You told her about—"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Buffy drawled. "Can't tell you how many bad guys have been taken down due to over sharing. You guys should really work on that."

"We are *not* the bad guys," Briggs all but snarled, though his hands remained over his head. "You fuckin' fang-banging groupie."

"Not the bad guys? I don't remember *torture* showing up in the How to Be a Hero guidelines." Buffy nodded toward Spike but still refused to look at him again. Every inch of her body throbbed with awareness, with the need to rip heads from necks for what they had done to him. It was primal, bone-deep, and one good slip away from slipping out of her control. "So yeah. Gonna go with *bad guys.* But even bad guys have family, which is why Alonna will make sure that her hand doesn't slip when she's releasing my vampire."

Briggs's lips curled. "You're sick, lady."

"Pot, meet kettle." Buffy shifted her attention to the wall of black behind the forklift. "Alonna Gunn, come on down, unless you wanna be scraping bits of big brother off the pavement."

Briggs didn't say anything else, just glared daggers.

There was a beat of silence, then another, then a frightened face emerged from the shadows, her hands up, her wide brown eyes filled

with gritty determination. She looked to Buffy, then Gunn and then to Buffy again and her jaw hardened.

Buffy drew in a deep breath and willed herself not to falter now. Threatening the jackass that had been torturing her vampire was one thing—ransoming a girl's brother was something else entirely. But she couldn't blink. Not now. She was too damn close.

"Free Spike," she said. "Walk him over to me. Anything happens, and I break your brother's neck. Nod if you understand."

Alonna nodded, her eyes unblinking and shining with hatred.

"Good," Buffy said. "We all understand each other. Briggs, where are the keys to Spike's cuffs?"

"Pocket." He began to lower his hands.

"Umm, no." Buffy nodded to Alonna. "She can get them for you. Front or back?"

Briggs hesitated. "Front."

"You know what happens if you try anything."

"Yeah, message got."

"Good." Buffy nodded at Alonna again, this time to get moving. And the girl thankfully didn't need to be told twice. She moved forward, eyes never leaving Buffy, and dipped one hand into Briggs's front right pocket.

"Slowly," Buffy said. "Pull it out and show me."

Alonna sent her another glare but obliged. She put a space between her and Briggs, then lifted the keys into the air high enough for Buffy to see them.

"Good. We're almost there. Now for the big finish. You let Spike go and walk him over to me."

It seemed to take forever, and maybe it did. Now that they were so close to having the vampire back, Buffy would have sworn her heart was vying for freedom for the way it thundered against her chest. She knew Gunn could feel it, and a part of her thought Briggs might, too. Every nerve stood on edge, waiting, gambling for the moment when something went wrong. When Briggs made a move or Alonna decided to play the hero herself, but it didn't come.

Instead, Alonna uncuffed one wrist, then the next, and Spike fell to the ground with a hard thud.

Buffy's throat tightened. "Spike?"

"All good, Slayer."

He rose to his feet the next moment, and she couldn't help herself now. The need to see him, feel him, know that he was all right overpowered the part of her that knew better than to get distracted now, and her attention shifted.

Spike was a walking bruise. The marks she'd seen earlier were nothing but the highlight reel. The closer he got to her, the worse the picture became. Until the logical, plan-having Buffy side of her brain couldn't take it and the primal *mate* part started growling. Primal hunger bloomed in her chest, reared its head and gave a vicious roar.

They had hurt Spike. Her mate.

Impulse and instinct overpowered rationale, and in that moment, she wanted to taste blood.

Gunn must have felt her slip, as his body went tight. "Stay cool," he whispered. "Almost out."

Yes, that made sense.

So did impaling Briggs on one of the forks of the forklift.

The monster that lived in her chest purred at the thought. A hungry purr that stoked the fire pumping through her veins. Buffy blinked hard, trembling. The more distance Spike closed between them, the more she could see, the more that bloodthirsty voice screamed.

"Buffy," Gunn said, louder this time.

Loud enough that, behind Spike, Alonna stilled and the stony hatred in her eyes blinked into confusion.

Spike must have seen it, too, for he began to hurry toward her, wincing each time his feet—which she saw now were raw and bleeding—hit the ground.

"Stay cool, stay cool," Gunn urged.

"I'm...*trying*."

But the next thing she knew, she was no longer holding Gunn. He was holding her—or rather, holding her back. The line in her head separating instinct from logic had snapped and she needed blood. She needed to tear into Briggs. Put him down. She needed to dig her

fingers into his chest and rip and shred until every wound he'd dealt her vampire—her mate—was repaid tenfold.

"The fuck, Gunn!" Briggs was rushing forward now, a blade drawn in his hand, his face contorted in rage. "You motherfucking traitor!"

And Buffy saw what would happen if he got any nearer. Saw it unfold like a movie. Or a nightmare. She saw herself bursting free of Gunn, leaping over him and smashing her feet into Briggs's chest. She saw him thrown back on the ground, his eyes wide, the knife clattering beside him. She saw herself straddling his chest as her fists swung down in bloody arcs, hammering him into the cement floor until his face was nothing more than a mask of ripped skin and broken bone. Until her hands were drenched in red.

No, the part of her that was real—that was *Buffy*—cried out.

The wounded animal had no use for human sentiment. It just knew its mate had been hurt and the only way to make that better was to eliminate the person that had caused the pain.

Then she was free, bursting away from Gunn and tearing toward Briggs. Time to put that asshole in the ground.

"Buffy!" Gunn screamed. "Buff—"

Arms closed around her—strong arms, arms she knew. "Slayer," came a raspy, familiar voice. "I got you, love. Time to go."

But Buffy didn't want to go now. She wanted blood.

"Sweetheart," Spike murmured, lowering his head until his mouth was over the mark at her throat, "we gotta move."

Then she felt his tongue on her skin, and raging animal trapped in her body immediately calmed. The angry throb in her chest waned, her head cleared, and the world around her came back into view. She looked up then and met Spike's good eye. Whatever he'd done had done the trick. She felt completely in control again.

"Thanks," she said.

He blinked at her, but she didn't have time to explain, because Briggs was not going to let them go without a fight. And though she knew not to doubt Spike's strength, she also knew he'd need whatever he had left to get home.

However, when she swung around to deal with Briggs, she found he wasn't even gazing in their direction. He was too busy with Gunn,

looking at him like he didn't recognize him. "You put a vamp above family?" he said, holding up the blade. "What the fuck happened to you, man?"

"You know this ain't right," Gunn said, panting, shaking his head. "We go after killers. This girl wasn't a threat until you made her one. We got enough enemies around here without worrying about makin' new ones. You saw what she did to Jerry. She's not a vamp, bro. You mess with her and she's gonna take all of us down."

"One little girl ain't gonna take shit from me!"

Gunn looked at Buffy, who offered a weak smile.

"She ain't no little girl and she ain't no monster, either. And I dunno, but I think the only thing holding her back from killin' you now is the vamp you decided to string up and torture." Gunn spread his hands. "We're gonna let them go. We're not gonna follow and you're gonna let the others know that the Slayer and her honey vamp are off limits."

Briggs's eyebrows shot skyward. "Is that what's going to happen?"

"That's right."

"Interesting. Wanna hear how it's *actually* gonna happen?" Briggs nodded at the knife. "This? This here goes in your stomach. Spent too much time with that monster lover, brother. She rubbed off on you."

"So you're gonna kill me. Because I—"

"Because you side with monster lovers over your family. Over *us*. That makes you a monster." Briggs shook his head. "You wanna die for them? You start here. They'll get away, sure, but me and the boys'll hunt 'em down. And—"

A hard crack broke through the air, and Briggs collapsed to the ground in a heap. Behind him stood Alonna, her chest heaving, her eyes wide and wild, the piece of plank board she'd smacked over Briggs's skull still suspended above her. She stared at the tangle of limps sprawled before her, blinking rapidly, then slowly raised her gaze to Gunn.

"Is it just me," she said slowly, "or is he a little unbalanced?"

Gunn grinned and took his sister in a bear hug. "Nobody ever messes with the home team, little sis." He turned to Buffy, and she

winced when she saw the thick bruise swelling at his throat. "Promise is a promise, right?"

"I told you not to bring her here," Spike said, resting his hand on her shoulder. "Bloody—"

"Don't even try to tell me you didn't see this coming, dude." Gunn shook his head, grinning. "Couldn't keep her still if I tried."

"I gotta say," Alonna drawled, "next time you got a master plan like that, you need to tell me. I about had a heart attack when I came out here."

"Had to be real." Gunn shrugged, then turned his gaze back to Buffy. "Get your boy home, Slayer. We'll take it from here."

Buffy wet her lips and spared Spike a glance, that pang in her chest resurfacing when she took in his swollen and cut face. But the bloodlust didn't return—thank god—and she'd call that a win for the moment. Or at least until she could process what had come over her and figure out how she felt about it.

"What are you going to do?" she asked, looking back to Gunn. "I mean, he's just gonna come after us again."

"Gonna tie him up then give the boys a talkin' to. Remind them why we do what we do."

"You think that'll work?"

Gunn shrugged. "Dunno. We'll give it a shot."

Buffy pressed her lips together, her gaze falling to Briggs once more. "You know them better than I do, so maybe you're right and they will listen. But smart money says he won't. What happens when he comes looking to dish some payback?"

"He does and he's a dead man," Spike muttered. When she looked at him, he offered only a soft smile. "Not gonna hold back, love. Can't ask me to, especially if he's after you. Won't stand for it. He gets within ten feet of us again and I'm gonna rip out his sodding throat."

Buffy stared at him a long moment, her mind swimming, adrenaline fading in favor of relief and exhaustion. These were things she didn't want to think about just now. She didn't trust herself to make good decisions, or any decisions at all. Not without processing what had just happened—what she'd seen. What she'd nearly done herself.

So she turned it off, nodded, and filed it away for future consideration.

What mattered was Spike was alive. He was with her. Whatever conversations they needed to have would come later. Right now, she needed to get him home.

Everything else could wait until tomorrow.

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Buffy didn't know how she found her way back. The time between leaving the dock and entering her building was a blur. She was too consumed with the feel of Spike's arm around her shoulder, too aware of the limping steps he took, the hard grunts that spilled from his mouth whenever his wounded feet landed on something hard or sharp. She'd offered to carry him back, but he'd declined, saying it'd look too *bloody weird* and they didn't need to draw more attention to themselves.

Which she could appreciate, even if she didn't agree. The threshold for visual weirdness had already been passed, given Spike was a mess of purple and red, plus naked to boot. That on top of being in LA gave them more cushion for weird than they might have experienced elsewhere.

At any rate, they didn't have any trouble. Thank god for that. If anything kept her from getting Spike to safety, she might lose what tenuous hold she'd managed to maintain on her control.

"Almost there," Buffy said as she navigated Spike around the corner to their hallway. "Sure you don't want me to carry you the rest of the way?"

He snickered but tightened his arm around her shoulder. "Cart me

over the threshold and all? Not exactly a blushing bride." He shook his head. "I told you, I've had it worse."

"And that's supposed to make me feel better." Buffy shook her head and drew to a stop outside their apartment door, then frowned. "Uhh, do you think we'd get the security deposit back if I kick this open? I think I forgot my key."

He chuckled. The fact that he could laugh at all filled her with astonishment, never mind that the laugh turned into a hard cough. Spike had just had his body used as a knife sharpener, punching bag, and god knows what else, but he could crack jokes and freaking laugh.

She wished she knew how to do that. All she wanted to do was cry.

But before she could do anything, the door to her apartment swung open of its own accord, a very pale Fred on the other side.

"Thank god," her friend said, her face flooding with relief. That was until she shifted her attention to Spike. Then she looked like she might be sick. "Oh holy fish nuggets."

That seemed strangely appropriate.

"Explanations later," Buffy said, pushing inside. "I don't think wandering the halls naked and looking like you just lost a fight with a lawnmower is the best first impression to make to my landlord."

"Eep!" Fred said, slapping her hand over her eyes. "He *is* naked!"

"Bloody hell," Spike murmured with a wince. "She always this shrill?"

There was a brief pause. "Sorry. I...I just wasn't expecting nakedness."

"Vampires have very sensitive ears," Buffy said as she walked Spike to the sofa. The same one where she'd all but mauled him earlier that day, which felt roughly like a thousand years ago. "Might try to stick to our indoor voices."

Spike collapsed against the cushions with a hard sigh and rolled his head back. God, he looked even worse here. The winding trails of red that had been carved into his skin stood out against the overly bright light beaming from the overhead, but not nearly as much as the pattern of purplish-black bruises. The rage that had flooded her body earlier that night came roaring back with a vengeance.

If she ever saw Briggs again, she might just kill him.

And yes, that thought was in fact terrifying.

"Umm," Fred said. She remained by the door, staring at the back of the sofa and looking nearly as pale as Spike. "I think I might just...let you two... Unless there's something I can do?" A pause. "There's not, is there?"

Buffy shook her head. "No. I'll—"

"Yeah," Spike said suddenly, jolting forward so hard he winced. He started to turn to look over his shoulder, then seemed to think the better of it and focused his attention instead on Buffy. "There is, since you're offerin'. Gonna need to juice up before I start attacking the neighbors."

Fred wrinkled her nose and, as though remembering she *was* a neighbor, inched closer to the door. "Huh?"

"Blood," Spike said, eyes still on Buffy. "That's what I was—"

"Doing when Briggs n' friends decided to make you their personal piñata. I know. Gunn told me." Buffy pressed her lips together.

"Right," he agreed slowly, brow furrowing, which looked downright painful given the massive bruise that had swollen his eye shut. "So if your chum's offerin', I could use a pick-me-up."

Yes. That made sense. All kinds of sense. What didn't make sense was the way Buffy's throat went dry and her heart leaped. What didn't make sense was the burning sting of disappointment, or the need to shout at him that he had all the blood he needed right here. It was so quick, so natural that it scared her.

The mark on her throat twinged in agreement, and that scared her even more. Being pierced by vamp fang wasn't something she'd ever wanted—hell, up until Angel had redefined the word *nightmare,* her recurring bad dreams had all centered around being bitten or drained. Or worse, being turned. Yet Spike had bitten her twice and neither time had those old fears surfaced.

The first time, she'd been in shock.

The second time, she'd been...well, preoccupied. Those bites hadn't been planned bites and, aside from the oodles of post-claim pain that had followed bite number two; she hadn't given either much thought.

But Spike needed blood. And her first thought was *take mine.*

"Umm," Fred said, at last, breaking Buffy from her thoughts,

"you've been quiet a long time. A-and he just said he needed blood, but I don't particularly want to be dinner."

Buffy kept her gaze on Spike. "Drink me," she said.

Fred made another squeaking sound.

"No need," Spike replied, not breaking eye contact. "Might not be as filling, but pig's blood'll do the trick."

"Spike—"

"Is there a place to get blood?" Fred asked loudly, rushing forward, then turning away again with a blush. She must have forgotten Spike was naked.

"Spike, this is dumb. I'm standing right here with all this slayer blood and you know that'll do more for you than whatever—"

"Just bloody shut your gob. I'm not drinking from you, all right?"

"Why not?"

Spike didn't answer. He didn't even look at her. His gaze had dropped to the ground, and god, he looked so broken that her eyes were suddenly stinging and a wealth of things she had been quite keen on not thinking stormed her already overfilled mind.

"Fred," Buffy said hoarsely without looking away from her vampire, "you should be able to find blood at any butcher shop. Get a lot of it, okay? I'll—*we'll* pay you back."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Fred give an enthusiastic nod. "Blood. Butcher. Got it. Will you... Will you guys be okay until I get back?"

At that, Buffy couldn't help but shift her attention to her friend. Worry creased every line of Fred's face, and though she clearly felt uncomfortable, she was also hesitant to leave Buffy alone. Something Buffy would have appreciated had she not needed Fred to be somewhere else right now.

"We'll be fine," she replied and tried for a smile. "Thanks."

"All right." Fred pressed her lips together, nodded as though agreeing to an internal pep talk, then turned and bolted out the door without another word.

The second they were alone, Buffy turned back to Spike, crossing her arms. "Why?"

He stared at her, his one good eye unblinking. "Too much to hope you'd drop it, then."

"I'm serious. You look like..." Her jaw tightened and the tears she'd managed to fight back before returned with gusto. "Drinking from me would help, right?"

Spike swallowed but didn't respond.

"Did...did you not like my blood? Is that it?"

"Are you off your rocker?"

"Well—"

"I don't wanna drink from you because the last time I had my fangs in you it was nothing short of a sodding miracle that I stopped. Satisfied?"

Buffy frowned and felt her cheeks heat. That wasn't quite how she remembered it. "The last time..."

"Not talking about that," he replied, his voice having grown thick. She watched as he eyed the mark on her throat—the one that had tied them together. It seemed to burn under his scrutiny. "That was something else."

She shifted her weight between her feet, her skin prickling with awareness.

"When I bit you then," Spike continued, his gaze still on her throat, "it wasn't outta need. It was..." He trailed off, then shook his head and huffed. "Way my body needs it now, there's no tellin' if I'd have the sense to—"

"Stop."

"Right."

"No, *stop* with the excuses." Buffy uncrossed her arms, then crossed them again, trying to fight back the sting of hurt. "You won't hurt me. I know you won't."

"You can't—"

"Yes, I can. You won't drain me because, hello, mated." She indicated the bite mark on her throat. "If you didn't drain me after your ex decided to make you a human pin cushion, then you won't now because...well, see above, re: mated."

Spike stared at her a long moment, his throat working, his expression unreadable. At last, he sighed and looked down, shaking his head.

"It'll hurt, love," he said softly. "And that's one thing I don't wanna do. My bones'll mend just fine on their own. I don't need... *You* don't need to get yourself in a state over me. So thanks but no thanks. I'll wait for the bloody swine."

"So your excuses are you don't think you can stop, which is baloney, and that it'll hurt." Buffy narrowed her eyes. "Again, didn't really hurt the last time."

And that seemed to trigger something.

"The last time I bit you was in mid-fuck," Spike snapped, balling his hands into fists. "Of course it didn't hurt. You were on fire. It *doesn't* hurt then. If you're hot and burning like that, like you were, it feels bloody amazing. But if I did it now... Fuck, Summers, you remember what it felt like back in Sunnyhell, don't you?"

At that, she licked her lips, looked down. Truth of the matter was, she didn't really remember much about that night beyond finding Spike pinned to the wall and killing Angel. Well, remember much insofar as Sunnydale went, at least. The rest of it seemed divided into someone else's life—what had happened in that motel room. The way he'd pounded into her, whispering things that would make Tracy Lords blush. The way she'd bitten him back and...

Buffy shifted again. There had been so much wrong in the way they'd come together, but she'd be lying if she said the memory was unpleasant.

Spike inhaled a deep breath and the blue of his good eye darkened a shade. "Slayer," he said softly. "You gotta give me a bloody inch here. But if you look at me like that, if you *smell* like you want it, I'm gonna want to give it to you."

Oh god. How did he know she was turned on?

The question must have been all over her face because he grinned. "Briggs mighta fancied himself Picasso, but he didn't rearrange me so bad that I can't smell you." Spike lowered his gaze so that he was staring at her crotch. "You want me even like this? Beaten and bloody?"

"I... I was just thinking about the bite." Buffy looked away, her cheeks burning. "You're right. It was...uhh...I was..."

"It was brilliant," he murmured. "Can't say I regret it."

"E-even the claim?"

Spike lifted his head. "No. Can't say I regret that either. Maybe the way it happened. That you didn't know what it was and it got us in this mess. And even if you never..." He trailed off, his jaw tightening. "Slayer..."

"So *now* your main reason for not drinking from me is thinking it'll hurt." Buffy neared him on shaky legs, her mind screaming at her that this was a bad idea but the rest of her not really caring. "What if... What if I'm..."

Spike stared at her in that unnerving way of his. "This is gonna be one of those things we don't talk about tomorrow, isn't it?"

"I don't know." She worried a lip between her teeth. "Would that be so bad?"

He studied her for a long moment before looking away again, his nostrils flared and—yes—she let herself look, let herself see that the conversation was having a definitive effect on him. His cock was swollen, thick, curved toward the ceiling. Even amid all his injuries, he wanted her.

The knowledge made her tremble.

"Think I'd rather not," he said at last, still not looking at her.

"You say that, but..." She waited until he met her eyes, then nodded at his erection. "Seems like—"

"I can't do this back and forth with you, love," Spike said. "I want you so much it hurts. More than anything that wanker did to me. But getting you and not having you isn't gonna cut it. When I touch you, I don't wanna stop and I gotta. Because that's what you said you wanted."

And just like that, the spell lifted. Buffy gave her head a shake and stepped back, a swell of both remorse and guilt flooding her system. She pressed her lips together and nodded. "I'm sorry," she said. "You're right. That is a bad idea. And for the record, I wasn't suggesting anything...err, intense. Just enough to get me to a place where you can bite me without it hurting."

"With us, pet, it'll always be intense."

"At least let me help you clean up?"

He hesitated a moment, then nodded. "Yeah," he said, wincing and edging toward the end of the sofa. "All right."

Buffy released the breath she'd been holding and moved forward to help him to his feet. She was entirely too aware of him, even now. The weight of his arm over her shoulder, the feel of his skin against hers, the smell of him joined forces and stormed the beach that was her mind. He was right—it was weird that she wanted him like this. Weird and a little sick. And combined with what had happened earlier—the thing she was not yet thinking about—she could only hope that was the claim talking.

If it was the claim talking, she needed to figure out how to get it under control. Because beyond random and somewhat icky bouts of horniness, this wasn't fair to him. As much as she hadn't asked for what had happened, neither had he, really. And he was doing everything he could to give her what she needed as she adjusted.

She needed to give him what he needed in return.

She just hoped she could figure out what that was.

He was a stupid sod.

Spike gritted his teeth as he stepped under the water spray, doing his best to ignore the pounding in his veins and the primal roar in his chest. Fuck, even his fangs hurt. Saying no to Buffy's offer was the most bloody difficult thing he'd ever done, and with her so near and her scent flooding his nostrils, he was having a hell of a time remembering just why exactly it was a bad idea.

Except, no, he remembered her face that morning after they had pulled apart. How she'd looked after he'd been so ready to strip her panties down her legs and bury his face between her thighs. There had been a healthy dose of want there, but confusion as well. Confusion and self-loathing.

And yeah, that last thing had hurt. A lot. Almost enough to make a man say *sod it* and stalk out, except that wasn't exactly an option and even if it were, he'd never make it more than a few feet. He was in the love with the girl. He'd follow her until she loved him back or staked him nice and proper.

The worst of it was he knew he was being unfair. But she wasn't

playing fair, either. Snogging him, moaning into him, offering him her body and blood but knowing it couldn't be more than that right now.

The scent of tears brought him out of his head. He turned and saw a fully clothed Buffy sliding the shower door closed behind her, her gaze locked on his body. Yeah, he knew he looked like hell. Felt like it too. And he knew she wanted to help. He also knew she was shaken, and wouldn't forget how she'd almost gone feral on Briggs back there.

And that was how he was being unfair. So much of what Buffy was experiencing was tied to a fresh set of instincts he'd given her. Couldn't really expect a slayer to adapt to a vampire custom in a few days, especially one so old most modern vamps hadn't heard of it. If she'd felt anything like what he'd felt the moment he'd seen Gunn waltz her into view—even knowing that the bloke was on his side—then it was no wonder she was so turned around.

And now she was crying over him.

Fuck.

"I'm sorry if this stings," she said, her voice choked. She made no move to wipe her tears away, instead turned rather methodically to collect a bar of soap from the shelf. "But..."

"Buffy..."

"A...*human* did this." She shook her head, not looking at his face. "I can't..."

"It's all right, pet," he said, trying for a smile. "Had it worse, haven't I? Told you as much."

"That doesn't make it all right." She lathered up a washcloth then gently scrubbed at his aching skin. "I'm so sorry, Spike."

His chest twisted. "Huh?"

"For...earlier. This morning." Buffy met his eyes briefly before looking away again, her face flushing. "And for being Miss Insensitive a few minutes ago. I-if I hadn't done that, you wouldn't have—"

"Stop that."

"Why? It's true. We would've spent the day together like we'd planned." She barked a laugh, the hopeless kind of laugh, and he experienced another punch to the gut. "I would've gone with you to get blood. We could've mopped the floor with them."

"Or they could've nabbed us both and we'd be in a right pickle."

Buffy shook her head, her gaze following a stream of dirt and blood as it slid off his skin and circled the drain. "You don't believe that. We kick all kinds of ass together."

Spike couldn't help but grin. "One hot power couple, we are."

She met his eyes again. "I'm going to try to be better. I *was* trying to be better, but that kinda blew up in my face. And I know it's not fair to you. I know you didn't ask for this any more than I did—"

"Buffy—"

"And you're trying so hard to be what I said I needed and I still think I *do* need it, Spike. I need to figure out who I am and what happens from this point on and all that stuff." She swallowed and looked again to his chest. "But part of that is not being a total shit when I mess up. I shouldn't have run from you this morning. It just wigs me out—all these things I'm feeling that are new things and old things mixed with other stuff and it's not like the sitch in my head was the most stable place to be before this. But if we're gonna...*be* together in any way, the State of Buffy needs to be good enough to build something real on. And I'm totally babbling, aren't I?"

He felt the corner of his mouth kick up in a grin he couldn't help. "I like it when you babble."

Buffy looked at him with those wide, soulful eyes of hers. "I..." Her face began to crumble again. "I don't care if it hurts. I just want to make you better."

Spike drew in a breath, sucker-punched. "Buffy—"

"I don't care. *This* hurts more." Now those soulful eyes were swimming in tears again. Hard to tell through the shower water, but he knew the way those tears smelled and tasted, and fuck, he hated being the one that had put them there. "Please drink me."

He tipped his head back. "Bollocks."

"Spike—"

"We do this, we're gonna do it right." He looked back at her, then down the length of her sodden body. Her nipples were hard, poking through her T-shirt, which was plastered to her flat stomach. Further down, the fabric of her sweats clung to her legs. He swallowed, hard, then jutted his chin toward her waistband. "Slip your hand inside your pants, love."

He heard her inhale sharply, but she didn't protest. Barely hesitated. Just obeyed.

Fuck, he thought again.

"Cup yourself for me," he said, his chest even tighter now. Christ, this was going to be torture, but he wasn't sure he cared anymore. "Right. Tell me what you feel."

Buffy's gaze shot to his as though needing to make sure she'd heard right. Her cheeks flushed a pretty pink. "Uhh...hot."

Spike closed his good eye, forced his throat to work. "Yeah? That's good. Real good. Now run one of your fingers over that pussy for me. You feel wet?"

He knew she did. He could smell it. She was hot for him.

His cock pulsed angrily; his fangs began to tingle. He swore and braced a hand on the wall behind her head, trying to focus on the water hitting his skin, but fuck if he felt it. All he could feel was her, even like this. Not touching her, just watching as her lips went slack, those cheeks even redder, her eyes glossy with want.

Still, he wanted the words.

"Tell me, Slayer," he murmured, "do you feel how wet you are?"

She jerked as though coming out of a daze and offered a hard nod.

"No. I want the words." Because, apparently, he was a masochist. "Say, 'Spike gets me wet.' Let me know who does that to you."

Buffy inhaled and rolled her head back, bearing that luscious throat to him. "Spike...gets me...wet."

He growled, pounded the shower wall with one hand and fisted his cock with the other. "Now I want you to push a finger inside that pussy for me. Can you do that?"

She made a sound somewhere between a whimper and a moan, but nodded, her face still pointed at the ceiling.

That didn't sit well with him.

"Look at me."

Buffy released a trembling sigh but did as she was asked, her brilliant green eyes fixing on him.

"Tell me again," he said, his voice rough. He began pumping his cock in slow strokes—slow both to prolong and torment, because he

was ready to fucking blow. The second her blood hit his tongue he'd be a goner. "Tell me who gets you wet."

"You do."

Spike sighed and pressed his brow to hers. "Another finger. Stretch yourself as much as you can, all right?"

She dragged her teeth over her lower lip just to torture him—he was sure—but obeyed. He knew she obeyed, even if he couldn't see what was happening behind her slacks. The sounds she made were indication enough. Buffy reached with her free hand and seized his right biceps to steady herself, and fuck if her touch didn't make him burn.

"Now fuck that pussy for me, Slayer. Fuck it with your fingers."

"Oh god."

"Mmm," he agreed, his fist working furiously at his dick. "Tell me how it feels."

"Hot," she said, the word riding out on a gasp that he felt in his balls. "Slippery."

"Is it enough?"

Buffy pressed her lips together, then shook her head.

"I know. Not enough for me, either." Spike squeezed his erection at the base, changing tempo. Needing this to last because it might be a long bloody time before he got to see her like this again. So he made a show of it, dragging his hand up the length of his shaft, then down again. Then again and again until she had no choice but to look and watch what he was doing. The scent of her arousal intensified, a damp smell fragranced by the water spilling from the nozzle.

"Now," he continued, then dropped a kiss on her cheek before he could help himself. "Now, I want you to touch your clit. Keep your fingers doin' what they're doing, but press down on your clit with your thumb. Can you do that?"

Buffy whimpered but gave him yet another nod before a hard gasp road through her lips and her eyes squeezed shut.

"Again."

"Spike, I'm so—"

"I know," he replied and kissed her properly this time because fuck it. He missed kissing her. Missed every part of this—of her. The simple

pleasure of tasting her mouth with his. But it wasn't what she wanted, not really, so he pulled away before he could lose himself, and nudged her head. "Buffy...give me your throat."

It humbled him how quickly she did this. How there was no hesitation, no fear or second-guessing. In a flash, she had presented him with the creamy line of her neck, the area unmarred, save for the prominent mark he'd given her. The one that would never fade.

"Press down on your clit again," he murmured as his fangs slid into his mouth, the bones in his face shifting. The scent of her intensified, arousal now competing with the delicious rush of her blood. "And again. Keep doing it, love. As long as you can until those glorious legs of yours go out."

"Spike...*please*..."

He brushed his lips across her throat. The thought surfaced that now would be a good time to tell her he loved her—that was if it wasn't the first time he was saying it. While he was more or less certain Buffy knew how he felt about her, he didn't want to risk it now when so much was still up in the bloody air. Because no matter what happened in here, out there was the world set up by her rules, barmy or not. Throwing love at her now would just bollocks things up even more.

Still, he wanted her to have the words on the off chance she didn't know what she'd done to him. So she'd appreciate just how much this meant.

But he didn't say them. Instead, he kissed her skin again, then bit down and drank.

And Buffy shuddered hard, his name tumbling from her lips as her blood hit his tongue, and *holy fuck.* Spike growled and jerked her to him, his fangs sliding deeper into her neck, his dick throbbing and his head pounding and she tasted so fucking good. Hell, he could *feel* his muscles relax. Could feel the pain in his joints receding, the welts on his skin shrinking, the pain fading until it was nothing more than a dull buzz. His bad eye cleared and he could see her properly now. But beyond that, all he could feel was Buffy. Buffy's body pressed to his, her breaths at his ear, her heat and softness and purity and everything that made her his slayer.

Spike thought pulling away from her throat would be hard, but it

wasn't. He licked the bite mark once, twice, then dragged his head up so he could meet her eyes.

They were closed again.

"Buffy."

"Mmm?"

"Buffy..." Spike nudged her brow with his. "Baby, I need you." He thrust his hips forward, his still-hard cock desperate for attention. "Touch me. Just touch me. Just tonight. Please."

He thought she'd protest, but praise god, she didn't. The next second, her hot hand was around his cock, pulling, stroking, squeezing and making his legs tremble all over again. Then she dragged her fingers over the head—fingers that had just been inside her pussy—and he couldn't take it. He barked a curse and ejaculated, white ropes of semen hitting her stomach. And she didn't stop. She continued pumping his shaft until the tremors began to recede and the pounding in his veins calmed to a low hum.

At last, seconds, minutes, centuries later, Spike returned to himself. Buffy was pressed against him, her face buried in his shoulder, her hands balled into fists at her sides. Spike swore under his breath and switched off the shower, submerging them both into deafening quiet.

Then Buffy stiffened and started to draw back. "I keep doing the wrong thing, don't I?"

"Hush," he said, hesitated, then drew his arms around her to hold her to his chest. "Look, I haven't forgotten what we talked about. I know the last thing you need right now is to muck with all this. And I'm not gonna ask you to." He pressed his lips to her brow. "Knew this was a one off going in."

"But—"

"But nothin'." He clenched his jaw, then pulled back to meet her eyes. "Funny thing about being strung up by that bloke is it gives a fella time to think. Mind does wonky things when it thinks it might not be around come tomorrow."

"But in the living room... You said—"

"Sod what I said. I was a prat."

Buffy shook her head. "You were right. I keep going back and forth and everything makes sense when I think it but then I try to... It's like

I can't control myself. You're trying and I'm being a doofus. But tonight, and this morning... Something comes over me and I..."

"Part of you can't help it." Spike tucked a lock of her damp hair behind her ear. "Much as I'd like to think it's because I'm irresistible, I wager a lot of what you're feelin' is there because we put it there that night. Like the bloody stomach ache the both of us had when weren't together. And yeah, I'm ready to get to the part where we're shagging ourselves raw and sod the rest, but it's not as clear for you as it is for me. Forever doesn't scare me. I already got the wiring for it. Forever's a whole other bloody thing for you. Bleeding selfish of me to think you could..."

He didn't know how to finish that, so he fixed his gaze on the corner of the shower and swallowed.

"If it makes any difference," Buffy said a moment later, "I'd really like to be okay with it right now. But it's so big."

"I know, love. It's not for me 'cause it's in my blood already. Thinking the other way's what would blow me over." He paused, raised his gaze to hers again. "Goin' a little mad because some wanker is cutting up your mate's in my wiring too. And even though you didn't get to the sod, I know you wanted to. And I know that scares you."

She pressed her lips together and looked away. "I'm trying not to think about it."

"But you will is what I'm saying. Not thinkin' about it's gonna do you no good, either." Spike inhaled a lungful of her scent before forcing himself to put a space between them. "Reckon a slip here or there's gonna happen. Instincts, and what all."

"A slip that involves giving each other happies, you mean."

The corners of his mouth tugged. "Right. But I... You wanted to be what I needed tonight. I want to be what you need. Always. And for now, that means doing this all hands off like." Another beat. "Still like to sleep next to you, though. If you're up for tryin' that again. Can't promise my hands'll stay on my side of the bed but if they don't, just give me a good wallop and that oughta do the trick."

Buffy stared at him for a long moment, long enough for quiet that settled to feel endless all over again. Then a gentle smile spread across her lips.

"I want that too. Sleeping next to you, that is."

"Thank Christ." He barked a laugh and tore his hand through his wet hair. "The rest we'll suss out as we go, yeah?"

"Even if there are slip-ups."

"By god, we'll find some way to endure it."

Buffy laughed outright at that, and it reached her eyes, and he thought if he could get her to do that once a day for the rest of his years, he'd be a happy bloke.

He just had to wait until she was on the same page—body, mind, and that glorious soul of hers tossed in as well. Until he could have all three, he'd never really have her.

And she was worth the wait.

31

"Umm, why are you wet?"

Buffy skidded to a halt, blinking at Fred as her frazzled brain did its best to piece together why her friend was standing in her doorway. Said brain came up with nothing, being somewhat drunk thanks to the intensity of her orgasm. Hell, Buffy was amazed she could still feel her legs.

Thus, the best response she could come up with was a slightly drunken, "Huh?"

"You're wet."

That hardly seemed appropriate or any of Fred's business. Buffy scowled, then remembered her drenched clothes and felt herself flush. "Oh, I was in the shower."

"You shower without getting undressed? Is that a slayer thing?"

"Ahh, umm, knew I was forgetting something." Buffy pressed her lips together. "Uhh, what are you doing here?"

It was Fred's turn to look confused. She wrinkled her brow and held up her hands which, Buffy only just then saw, were wrapped around bags of blood. And the conversation they'd had before the shower she'd shared with Spike came rushing back, cutting through the fog that had settled around her mind.

Right.

"Everything okay?" Fred placed the blood bags on the counter. "You look a little..." Her gaze wandered south, then widened. "Oh! Umm, sorry. I should've...knocked?"

Buffy frowned and looked down...right at the telling spot where Spike had, err, unloaded. She hesitated for a moment and debated whether or not Fred would know what it was, decided that she would because—duh, Fred was an actual adult—and then pondered the virtues of throwing oneself out the nearest window.

"Well, that... I guess you guys are getting along now?" Fred said a moment later. "And...is that normal for vampires? To be all banged up and—"

"I'll wager a guess my takeout order's come in," came Spike's voice. "Would figure we don't have any ice to put it on for the mo'. Don't think I can swallow a drop now."

Buffy whirled around as Spike came out of the bathroom. Thankfully, he'd had the presence of mind to throw on a towel at the very least. He paused and looked at her before shifting his attention to Fred. "What?"

"I see you're...feeling better," Fred said.

"Uh, yeah. Thanks, pidge."

"Buffy..." Fred swallowed loud enough for the sound to echo through the small room. "Are...are you okay?"

Spike blinked, flicked his gaze back to Buffy. "Why wouldn't she be okay?"

Buffy fisted the material of her soaked tee and stretched out the stain, her cheeks on fire. It took a moment for understanding to flicker across Spike's face, and then he looked like he didn't know whether it was more appropriate to be abashed or pleased with himself.

"Guess nothin' gets passed your friend, does it?" he drawled, turning his eyes back to Fred. "She was just helping me."

"In the shower?"

"I washed him off," Buffy said lamely, forcing herself to turn around to face her friend again, her skin still on fire. "It's not what it looks like."

Spike snorted. "It's not?"

"Well..." Buffy looked down at the semen stain again. "Would you believe it was to get him to eat me?"

Spike barked a laugh at that.

Fred's eyes went wide.

Buffy whimpered and dropped her face into her hands. "I'm never talking again."

"You're cute when you blush, love," Spike murmured, still chuckling. Buffy heard him shuffle forward. "As for this..." He touched the place on her shirt where the stain had set. "Dunno about you, but I find the look rather fetching, myself."

Buffy dropped her hands to glare at him. "You're not funny."

"I don't mean," Fred said, "I mean, it's none of my business. Because, well, it's not. But Buffy, this morning, you were—"

"This morning was a million years ago," Buffy said. "But thank you for worrying. I'm good. We've...talked and there's an understanding and I'll fill you in on everything when he's not standing right here."

Spike chuckled again. "You gab to your girlfriends about me?"

He sounded way too pleased with that.

"Girlfriend in the singular sense," she replied. "And of course I do. I may be the Chosen One and I may be the mate of a vampire, but hello, still seventeen."

"No need to wait on my account then," he replied, crossing his arms and leaning against the hallway wall. "Think I oughta make sure you don't leave out the good stuff."

"No," Buffy and Fred chorused at the same time.

Spike pouted.

"Some things are sacred," Buffy continued, doing her best not to stare at his lips, which was difficult. Even more so because he seemed to know she was struggling. "Girl talk is among them." She turned back to Fred. "Thanks for getting the blood."

"It was a learning experience," Fred said, seemingly relieved for a reason to change the subject, her normally pale face burning with a bright blush. "I didn't even know blood could be ordered like that." She looked to Spike. "But I guess you don't need it as bad as you did before I left. You look...like, a lot better."

He threw his arm around Buffy and steered her into his side.

"Slayer wore me down," he said, casually brushing his fingers along the fresh bite mark on her throat, making Buffy shiver with awareness and more than awareness—more of what she'd left behind in the shower. "Shoulda known better than to try and say no to her."

Fred's gaze lingered on Buffy's throat for a long beat. "And...that made you all better?" She shook her head. "Sorry, I mean, you looked like a walking corpse before I left." She paused. "Well, I guess you *are* a walking corpse, but I mean a really dead-looking one."

"Thanks ever so."

"I mean—"

Spike held up his free hand. "Know what you meant, pet. Slayer blood's like the bloody elixir of life to my kind. Few swallows fixed me proper, but I'll need a pick-me-up tomorrow. Make sure the rest of my bones set right and the like."

"Except we don't have a place to put it," Buffy said, eyeing the spot along the wall in the kitchen where the refrigerator should be. "Fred, can you... Would it be okay if we store the blood in your fridge until tomorrow? Or until we get a fridge of our own? And then Spike really should get some rest. And I should change."

"Dunno," Spike replied, eyeing her up and down. "Rather the like the sight of you like this."

"You're gross."

"Just being honest."

"Sure," Fred replied and seized the blood bags off the counter again. "I'll, uhh, leave you guys to it."

Buffy arched an eyebrow. While she'd trusted that her friend wouldn't put up much of a fight, she'd expected at least a wrinkled nose or a moment of hesitation. After all, blood wasn't something one typically kept on hand and seeing it first thing in the morning next to a carton of OJ could be a little alarming. "You really don't mind just... keeping blood in your fridge?"

Fred shrugged. "I'm a scientist. Trust me, I've had weirder."

"And never tell me about that."

Spike chuckled again, and she felt it against her. His arm was still around her shoulder, and it felt so right—so natural—it was almost easy to forget this wasn't the way it was with them right now.

Except maybe it was. They were just on hold.

"Deal," Fred said at last. "All right. Goodnight. Buffy, tomorrow?"

"I'll fill you in," she promised. "And thanks."

The second she and Spike were alone once more, Buffy wasn't sure what to do with herself. And she wasn't sure she had the strength to worry at the moment. The intimacy they had shared in the shower had her mind running in circles, combined with the things he'd said and the other things she knew she needed to think about—the primal urges that might have claimed the life of another human being tonight being among them—but she hadn't been lying when she told Fred that her problems that morning seemed like forever ago. The Buffy that had been so concerned with over-analyzing kisses had been shoved side, and she wasn't too eager to bring her back.

It seemed dumb now. So much of the past few days seemed dumb to her.

"I really do need to change," Buffy said at last, meeting his gaze. "Aside from the fact that you Lewinsky'd my shirt, I am all soggy."

Spike smirked and gave the stain a pointed look. "Know I put up a fight, but I can't say I'm sorry that happened."

She offered a small smile. "I'm not, either. But—"

"I know, love. Meant what I said back there." He looked away then. "Still good with me sleepin' beside you? Could take the couch, I suppose, if you think it'll—"

"No. You're not taking the couch." Buffy inched forward a step. "If we're gonna take any good out of what happened to you tonight, it's that I'm all kinds of done with running away." She swallowed. "I have enough to work out without adding in angsting over sleeping arrangements."

Spike met her gaze again and smiled softly. "Then you best pop back and get changed," he said. "You look ready to bloody drop."

"It's been a long day," she agreed. "Are you even gonna be able to sleep? I mean, I think you should, but my blood's probably like coffee on steroids."

He chuckled. "Maybe if I hadn't had the stuffin' beat outta me earlier. Think a bit of kip is just what the doctor ordered."

"And kip is British for sleep, right?" She held her hands up when he

gave her a narrow look. "Hey. One of these days I'll understand you without needing a translator."

"English to English translation a thing now?"

"British English is not English, thank you very much."

"Kinda think it's the other way around, pet. You Yanks are the ones who butchered it."

"We'll have to agree to disagree." Buffy paused, considered, then lifted on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek before she could talk herself out of it. The touchy-feely phase would have to stop tomorrow, but for now—this moment—she could hold on.

Though the way he looked at her when she drew back, she wondered just how long she could stand it.

"I almost lost it when Gunn told me what happened tonight," she said softly, her throat suddenly tight. "Before I even saw... And maybe I did a little. Lose it, I mean. But I...I wanted you to know. That I feel things. Big things."

Spike inhaled, his nostrils flaring. "I know, love."

"Scary things, even."

"Scary?"

"There's little about what I'm feeling that doesn't scare the snot out of me." Buffy tried for a weak smile. "How much of that do you think is the claim?"

He held her gaze for a moment, his own unreadable. There was so much want in his eyes—furious want that only served to terrify her more, but also had her blood ablaze like little else she had experienced. And this was how Spike had always looked at her, she realized. Even before any of this had happened—from the moment he'd stepped out of the shadows at the Bronze, clapping at her performance, telling her that she had until Saturday to live. Granted, it hadn't been nearly as obvious then, and she'd lumped it in with bloodlust, but it had been there. Just as it had been the night she'd awakened in her body to find Spike pressed against her, his mouth fused to hers, confusion and arousal and anger and more confusion burning in every glare he aimed her way.

The attraction part had been there longer than the claim.

The claim had been born because of it.

"Think I knew what I was feelin' when I bit you the first time," he said at last. "Or I was on my way there, at least."

"On your way where?"

Spike hesitated. "To where I am now, I suppose."

Buffy swallowed, her heart thudding. There was something else there, she knew, something she might be able to uncover if she picked at it enough, but likewise knew she shouldn't. Because what good would it do her to hear the words *I love you* come from Spike's mouth now? He might have been on his way to love then—if that was what it was—but she hadn't been. She'd been knee-deep in thinking he was the most confusing, sexiest guy on two legs, but also swimming to her eyeballs in the apocalypse and killing Angel. That plus losing her mom, her friends, and the only home she'd ever felt at home. Spike had confused the crap out of her, sure, and while she'd been in deep lust, she hadn't been in the zip code of love. She hadn't had the emotional or mental capacity to dissect the way he made her feel. If what she felt was something, anything, more than her own loneliness and desperation combined with the first guy who had stoked feelings and sensations that weren't platonic since the night she'd turned her lover into a monster.

She'd liked Spike. Relied on him. Enjoyed kissing him—really enjoyed kissing him. There had been feelings, but they hadn't been love. They were too new to be love.

The way she felt now was different enough to wig her out, but how much of it was real? How much of it was there because she really felt it and not the byproduct of something she didn't understand? Buffy might not be learned in blood magic, but anything having to do with blood was powerful stuff.

After she and Spike settled in—got the fridge and everything else he needed to make the apartment habitable—she really needed to dive into research mode. Learn what she could about the claim and what influence it had, if any, on her emotions. She knew it had had an effect—from the stomach aches to the way she would have ripped Briggs to shreds. That hadn't been her—well, not all her. It had been true anger amplified beyond anything she'd experienced. So who was to say that the warm feelings she had for Spike were not similarly amplified?

Or worse, not real at all. What if the claim could fabricate feelings the way Xander had fabricated feelings with his stupid spell around Valentine's Day. After all, if magic could do that, couldn't a magical bond do the same?

"I told myself not to think tonight. Thinking can come tomorrow," Buffy said a moment later, caressing her brow. "Head hurty."

Spike slid an arm around her shoulders and steered her into his side. "Pop on back and change, love," he said. "I'll wait out here."

"I desperately need more clothes. My backpack didn't hold much and as hard as I am on them, whatever I have won't last long."

"We can get you new threads."

"And a fridge."

He nodded, gave her a little shove so she crossed the threshold into their bedroom solo. "And a fridge. And a telly. Can't forget that."

Buffy nodded and turned, catching his eyes before she closed the door. And she allowed herself a moment to look—really look. Not for the first time, she found herself astounded by the change her blood had provided. The scars that had mapped his chest were all but faded, and the bruises that had welted his skin were likewise little more than shadows. His face no longer looked like an abstractionist painting. Both eyes were open.

Yeah, blood was powerful. Especially in their world.

She just needed to know where the limit was. If a limit existed.

She needed to know that this was real.

He became aware of her touch at first. It was soft, light and tender. Her fingers roamed his arm before skating over the skin of his shoulder, then his throat. By the time she had funneled her way into his hair, Spike was fully awake and enjoying himself too damn much to end the charade.

Also somewhat convinced that he was imagining the whole bloody thing, because Buffy didn't touch him. Not like this.

"Spike," she prodded, and the way her voice formed his name informed him that it wasn't the first time she'd said it. "I'm not above punching you awake."

He snorted at that and cracked an eye open. "Gettin' some mixed signals here, love."

"Well, you sleep like the dead."

"I'll refrain from pointin' out the obvious there." He blinked and stifled a yawn, his bleary eyes taking her in. Weak sunlight filtered through the closed blinds—too weak for the hour to be late, which meant it was too early for him to be awake. Buffy too, given the last couple days they'd had.

Yet not only was she awake—she was dressed. Well, if one could call shorts and a tank top dressed. Not that Spike was complaining, as it gave him a fantastic view of her legs.

"I just wanted to tell you that I am not sneaking off to the couch. Or...sneaking anywhere, really." She graced him with a soft smile that had him thinking things he knew, for the sake of his sanity, he was better off not thinking. Things he also knew he couldn't help but think when she was around. Buffy licked her lips and continued, "I'm gonna go get some of the stuff we talked about last night."

Spike could barely remember last night beyond the pain and the feel of her hand around his cock, and a bunch of other foggy thoughts he didn't care to explore too closely. "Stuff?"

"Fridge, for one. Freakishly okay with it as Fred might be, I don't want her to worry about adding blood to her shopping list."

He eyed the sun-lit window again. "And this can't wait? Not gonna be in much of a state to help you, pet."

"I don't need help."

"You may be tough, but a bloody fridge is pushin' it. Also, don't you reckon it'll look a mite weird to anyone who sees tiny you hauling a massive appliance all by her lonesome?"

"No weirder than it looked carrying the bloody and bruised body that was you home last night."

Spike considered, then shook his head. "Definitely weirder."

"I'll get help if I need it. I just want to get a jump on these things.

I've been waiting around for people to do stuff for me and that's not fair." Buffy smiled softly. "Plus, you're still recovery-guy."

He sat up a bit, frowning. "Think you saw to it that I recovered right nicely last night."

A charming shade of pink colored her cheeks and the air thickened with a scent that was fast on its way to becoming his favorite. Spike inhaled a sharp breath and forced himself to bite back the impulsive need to make her blush darker. Make her remember just why last night had been so bloody good and see if she was ready for one of those slip-ups he'd mentioned.

Except no. That wasn't what he was doing. Not now.

"Err, well." Buffy sucked her luscious lower lip into her mouth. "I'm just...not ready for you to be...well, out there. Doing things."

Spike's brows shot skyward. "Is that a fact?"

"You scared the crap out of me yesterday."

"To be fair, you returned the favor."

"Well, I, for one, am looking forward to a quiet night in with no insane rescue missions or beaten up vampires. So I'm gonna go get the fridge for your blood now."

He bit back a grin. "Cozy evenin' in for two?"

"Is it too much to ask? Really?"

"You know I won't say no. 'Cept I think you're bein' a spot stubborn about this fridge business."

"It's broad daylight and I can bench press...well, I dunno how much 'cause I've never actually bench pressed anything, but let's just say I can take care of myself. Especially across human jerkwads who wanna mess with me." She paused and tucked a lock of blonde behind her ear. "Don't worry."

He wasn't worried, just a little baffled. "You sure this isn't a handy excuse to ignore what happened in the shower?"

At that, Buffy scowled. "I'm not ignoring what happened in the shower. Don't think I'd be suggesting a night in with just us if I wanted to ignore anything."

Fair point. Spike blew out another breath and dragged his hand through his hair. "Don't do anythin' I wouldn't, then."

"That's not a very impressive list."

"Right, so it should be easy to follow."

Buffy gave him a faint smile, then leaned in and, before he could register what had happened, brushed a light kiss across his lips. It was too brief to be passionate but with just enough *something* that his chest tightened with impossible hope.

"Stay inside," she said, straightening up again. "Don't open the door for strangers."

Spike grinned, feeling somewhat drunk. "Yes, Mum."

She poked her tongue out at him then rose to her feet. "Also, make sure you're fully clothed when Fred comes by to drop off blood. Think we mighta scarred her last night."

"I'll be a bloody choir boy."

"You have it in you?"

He hesitated, then decided that this honesty thing was a two-way street. "Ate one once. Coulda been catching."

He prepared for a frown or a look of outright disgust—or worse, a speech about the sanctity of human life and all that rot. What he received was an eye-roll and a light, playful punch to the shoulder. "And to that I say *eww*."

So it wasn't a ringing endorsement. Wasn't like he'd expected different. The fact that she'd said it with a grin still counted as a win in his bloody book.

❧

He awoke feeling about as rested as a bloke could get. Spike blinked at the ceiling for a few seconds as his brain kicked back online. He hadn't thought he'd get much sleep after Buffy left but his body had protested the thought of getting up, reminding him the sun was out and there wasn't a blessed lot he could do. Without Buffy here or a telly to keep him entertained, sleep was the best option. Would at least keep him from thinking things he ought not think—like how he'd noticed, day before last, that the lady down the hall had a particularly juicy-looking throat just begging to be bitten.

Actually, that was rather pleasant to think of, even if it made his fangs ache. It was better than the other stuff he'd put on the table last

night. The things he knew Buffy was probably thinking out there right now. Things she couldn't help but think because of what she'd done yesterday.

He didn't know if she'd tell him those thoughts—if she'd feel she could share. If he could understand how unsettling it had to be for her to go from protecting humankind to wanting to rip out some bloke's intestines. And hell, he wondered that too. If he could really be here for her while she sussed out everything that needed sussing, because there wasn't much to figure from where he was sitting. Everything made a clear, dangerous sort of sense. Such that he didn't even mind that he wasn't burying his fangs in the flabby neck of a tenant a few doors down. Sure, that'd taste sweeter than the stuff he got from the butcher's, but it wasn't worth the price. That much seemed easy enough to figure. Case bloody closed.

Maybe he owed it to the Slayer to do some research on his own. Wasn't like he was an endless source of information. If she asked him something about the claim, he couldn't say he'd know how to answer without making things up as he went along.

Spike dragged himself out of bed and to the shower, had a nice wank to memories of the previous night under the nozzle, then pulled on jeans and a tee so as not to disturb the Slayer's virtue when she returned. He wasn't sure what the time was, only that noon was at least an hour behind him. His stomach, spoiled thing that it was, what with the slayer blood from last night, gave a low growl. Probably time to toddle down to Fred's to raid her fridge before his fangs did the thinking for him.

Only when he went to open the door, he found Buffy on the other side, panting hard, golden tendrils of hair plastered to her sweat-soaked skin. She gave him a small smile and planted her hand on her side. "Anyone ever tell you that you have good timing?"

Spike blinked. He'd been trying hard not to stare at her tits, which were—yes, thank you—pressed against her tank top, nipples proud and erect. Had she gone outside looking like that? A growl climbed up his throat. Good thing he hadn't been with her—he'd have ripped the eyeballs out of any bloke who so much as twitched in her direction.

"Spike?" Buffy waved a hand in front of his face, then gestured to

the monstrosity parked in the hall beside her that he had somehow overlooked. He blamed her breasts. "Wanna give me a hand?"

He wanted to do something, all right. "What?"

"Help?" she prompted. "With the fridge?"

He blinked again then turned to the monstrosity. "How the bloody hell'd you get that thing up here?"

"Slayer muscles plus some well-timed flirtage." She fanned her face. "Bryan went to go get the dolly."

"Who the sodding hell is *Bryan?*"

"The guy who sold me the fridge." Buffy blinked slowly. "Come on. Help me get this thing in here before he thinks to ask how I got it up the stairs without him."

"Right," Spike snapped, an uncomfortable pressure making its presence known in the center of his chest. "Wouldn't wanna spook the strays you bring home."

Nevertheless, he moved forward and braced his hands against the beast of a refrigerator, then tipped it back to angle it into the apartment.

Buffy had the gall to roll her eyes at him. "I work with what I've got, all right? Besides, he knows about you."

"Ah huh. And what's it he knows about me?"

"Enough to not be a jerk but still think he has chance. How else was I supposed to get this thing back?"

Spike bit back a growl and lifted on his end.

"Are you seriously jealous of Bryan the Sales Boy?"

"Jealous of anyone who sees you lookin' the way you do right now," he replied, the angry beast in his chest roaring anew. On some level, he knew he was being a berk but the logical part of his noggin wasn't strong enough to overpower his mouth at the moment. All he knew was Buffy in any state of undress was for his bloody eyes only, and he wanted to rip the spine out of any wanker who'd been privy to what was his. "Fancy a bra the next time you go out?"

Buffy looked down. "Oh. Oh jeez."

"Think I figured out why he thinks he has a chance."

Buffy blinked at her boobs a moment longer, then snorted a laugh and rolled her eyes again. "Oh well. Got the job done, at least."

At that moment, the bloke who could only be *Bryan* turned the corner at the opposite end of the hall, a somewhat lost-puppy look about him. Still, Spike didn't miss the way the wanker's eyes darted to the Slayer's chest anymore than he did the whiff of horny human male. Another growl tickled his throat.

"Buffy!" Bryan called, waving as though the git could be missed and pulling a metal dolly with his free hand. "I thought I was losing my mind. How did you get this up..." He trailed off, his eyes finding Spike. "Umm, hello."

Buffy flashed a small smile. "This would be the boyfriend I mentioned."

"Oh." The light faded from Bryan's face almost immediately. Not before he could steal another peek of her nipples though.

Spike felt the slits in his mouth where his canines belonged start to tingle.

"Yeah. But thanks. I think we got it from here." Buffy delved a hand into her pocket, withdrew a ten, and slapped it into Bryan's hand. "Thanks for helping me get it home."

"I..." Bryan looked at Hamilton's portrait dully, then up again. "Okay."

It took every ounce of strength Spike had not to flash the kid some fang. "Yeah, *Bryan,*" he said slowly. "Piss off."

"Spike!" Buffy aimed a glare in his direction, but he couldn't be bothered to care. Instead, he turned his attention back to the fridge and pulled it over the threshold.

The beast in his chest recoiled a bit—but just a bit. Yes, he was a prat. Yes, there was no harm in requesting help from human gits in a pinch, no matter where their eyes wanted to land. Buffy hadn't done anything wrong. Neither had the walking blood bag she'd brought home with her.

But the part of him that had spent too many years pretending not to notice when Dru chatted up some demon for the fun of it refused to be muzzled. Jealousy had always been one of his vices, but never quite like this. Not as potent or demanding. He'd postured and made threats before—hell, he'd gutted assholes who had so much as looked at Dru in a way he hadn't liked, much to her enjoyment.

This was different and he didn't know why.

Except he did and that made it worse.

This guy had been there to help her when he couldn't. And yeah, that smarted. It smarted even more because it was a bloody ridiculous thought to have in the first place—the kind Angel might have entertained in some other world where he hadn't lost his soul.

Buffy had been scolding him for some minutes by the time his brain clued back into the conversation, and as always, she looked magnificent. Bright eyes. Heated cheeks. Fast-moving mouth. And fuck, he wanted to forget everything for a while—for right now—and press her against the sodding fridge and fuck her until she forgot there were other blokes in the world at all. Until the thought of her being in the sun where he couldn't follow, where she needed him, didn't make him want to roar himself hoarse.

"Are you even listening to me?" she demanded. "Spike—"

Then there was a knock at the door—several, hard pounding knocks that made the walls seem to shake.

Buffy broke off, looking at the door askance. She drew in a deep breath and gave her head a shake. "If that's Bryan, you're going to apologize."

It wasn't—he could tell from here—but that didn't stop his mouth. "The hell I am."

"Spike, I swear, I'm going to—"

But she didn't get around to telling him what she swore, because now the door was open and Gunn was on the other side. Only this wasn't the Gunn that Spike had met the day before, and that was enough to make his insides run cold.

"Oh," she said, deflating. "I, umm, come in? I didn't think we'd see..." Buffy paused, apparently seeing what Spike saw. "Gunn?"

There was nothing for a long moment. Then he shook his head, choked something close to a sob, and said, "It's Alonna. She's missing."

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The universe was not in the mood to hand out breaks. And despite having the rug yanked out from under her a few hundred times, Buffy didn't think she'd ever get used to the sensation of her stomach falling as her heart twisted and pumped her veins full of dread.

"She's missing?" she echoed, her voice sounding far away even to her.

Gunn nodded and pushed his way into the apartment without awaiting an invitation. He threw Spike a quick glance in greeting, blinked, then shook his head and fixed his attention back on Buffy. "Went out last night with the guys. They came back this mornin'. She didn't."

"These are the same guys who answer to the guy who your sister happened to attack with a two by four, right?"

"Believe me, I've already been there. You think somethin' I haven't thought of already and the world might just end."

"Not as unusual an occurrence as you might think, mate," Spike said, leaning against the fridge that now stood in the middle of their living room. "You let kid sis go out last night after everythin'?"

"You have any sisters, man?" Gunn all but growled. "*Let* isn't a word I'd use. Particularly with one that could kick your ass." He turned back to Buffy. "Callin' in a favor, Slayer. I did yours."

Buffy crossed her arms. "First you need to tell me everything that happened after we left last night."

"I ain't got that kinda time." He scrubbed a hand over his bald scalp and broke into a pace. "We tied Briggs up after you left and put him somewhere outta sight. The boys got back and I told them what went down, more or less."

Spike snorted. "There's your problem."

"Not like I could hide it, right?" Gunn fired back. "Briggs ain't gonna suddenly forget that I helped you escape. They could hear it from me or from him. I decided to get ahead of it. Said we don't torture, and while our policy on vamps ain't changin', we gotta respect those that have been claimed."

Buffy jerked, the word hitting her like a sucker punch. "That have been what?"

"You know, dibs or whatever." He motioned between her and Spike. "He's on your leash, ain't he?"

She swallowed and shifted her gaze to Spike, who, despite appearing annoyed at being described as on anyone's leash, said more with a simple look than most people said in a lifetime. He'd told her that he was hers a number of times, but it was moments like these, looks like these, that hammered it home. Spike might not love being reined in, but he did love her.

Or that's at least how it felt when he met her eyes. Her heart did that skippy thing again and her mind took her back to those blissful moments in the shower.

Does he love me?

"Yeah, mate," Spike said at last, not looking away from her. "I'm hers."

She felt those words all the way to her bones.

"Yeah," Gunn agreed with a nod, either missing or ignoring the charged nature behind that statement. "Anyway, I laid it down that this was the way things are. A few guys weren't happy but they're my boys.

They know I know what's what and they know Briggs ain't the leadin' type." He paused, a look of thorough disgust washing over his face. "Apparently I'm a bigger idiot than I thought."

Buffy placed a hand on his arm. "When was the last time you saw Alonna?"

"This morning before sunup," Gunn replied, his voice growing thick. "She and a few others—Smith, Jax, and Wynn—got a lead on a group of vamps we've been tracking for the past four months. Real nasty SOBs who are snatchin' up runaways and the homeless and the like and sellin' them off to the highest bidder."

Buffy blinked. "Selling them...?"

"Some vamps been around long enough to have real deep pockets."

"But..." She looked to Spike for help, expecting to see her disbelief mirrored in his eyes, but Spike didn't look confused, which only served to confuse her more. "Why would a vampire *buy* someone? Sense is not being made here."

"Blood, of course," Spike said.

"Which they can get pretty much anywhere, right?"

"Right, but a bloke can get choosey as he gets older, can't he?" he said. His expression was unreadable when she looked back at him—carefully neutral in a way she'd come to expect. A way that told her he was trying. "Number of reasons a fella might fancy keepin' an open tap close. Keeps the older vamps off the Slayer's radar."

"And ours," Gunn agreed, favoring Spike with a glower. "And any other vamp hunters in the city."

"Also, some of our kind gets lazy as they age," Spike said. If he noticed the look Gunn was giving him, he didn't acknowledge it. "Saves them the hunt if they have a living donor under their roof."

"Only they're not donors," Gunn said shortly. "They're blood slaves."

A pause. "Right."

"All in all," Buffy said, tearing her gaze from Spike and giving her head a shake, "sounds like some jerks who need to meet dust in a big ole way. And I'm guessing Alonna and friends never came back from the hunt?"

At that, Gunn's eyes darkened. "No. The others got back just fine. I..." He broke off, trembling. For the first time, Buffy saw just how close he was to losing his cool altogether. And hell, she couldn't blame him one bit. The fact that he'd held on this long was a miracle. "They left her there. Because of me." He stiffened and aimed a glare at Spike. "'Cause I put a vamp before the family."

Her spine went ramrod straight and her throat dried. "This isn't Spike's fault."

"Isn't it? Your boy's gotta mouth on him, Slayer. Maybe if he hadn't run it so hard he woulda flown under the fuckin' radar a bit more."

"Never much cared for layin' low," Spike replied. "Your men got a jump on me 'cause my guard wasn't up. Wager I could level the lot of you in a decent tussle."

Buffy rolled her eyes and shot him a glare. "Not helping."

"Didn't know I was supposed to."

"And fuck you," Gunn snarled, his nostrils flared and his eyes wide. "I stuck my neck out for you. I risked my *sister's* neck for you. The fuck was I thinking?"

"No one asked you to do that," Buffy shot back, though she heard the lie in her voice and knew Gunn could too. She hadn't asked him to help her save Spike from his men—she hadn't given him a choice. But Gunn hadn't put up a fight, either. He'd come to her on his own, knowing full well what he was getting himself in to.

"That's bull and you know it," he snapped. "You woulda put me in the fucking ground if I hadn't offered to help get your boy back."

"You're right," she replied hotly. "I would have burned down the whole damn city to find him. And I'm not going to apologize because I'm not sorry. But you already know that or you wouldn't be here."

"You owe me."

A low growl sounded from Spike, and though she couldn't be sure, Buffy figured smart money was on the bet he wouldn't be able to hold onto his control forever. She was kind of floored he'd managed this long.

"I never said I didn't owe you," Buffy threw back. "But let's get this straight—if you ask me to be sorry that Spike's standing here and not

being used as a vamp piñata, you're gonna be waiting a hell of a long time."

"She's my sister!"

"And he's my—" She caught herself and broke off, looking fleetingly to Spike and then away again. "He's *mine.* Whatever the hell that means, it's true. So back the hell off or I'm gonna be a whole lot less helpful."

Gunn eyed her up and down, an unpleasant sneer twisting his lips. "Some vamp slayer you turned out to be, huh? You always make a habit of bonin' the enemy?"

That remark cut to the quick. Buffy flinched and looked away, the fire in her bones dying almost immediately. But the next second she didn't have time to worry about hurt feelings—a roar she was becoming increasingly familiar with ripped through the air. And then Spike was in motion. In one fluid move, he had Gunn against the fridge.

"Seems someone needs an attitude adjustment," Spike snarled through his fangs, his yellow eyes blazing. "You wanna apologize to the lady?"

Buffy's stomach tightened into a ball. "Spike, no—"

"This git—"

"Is the reason you're alive. Let him go."

Spike threw her an exasperated look—another one she was becoming used to—but the bones in his face shifted back to normal and the tension in his muscles seemed to uncoil. "Fine," he said tersely, straightening with visible effort. But not before he leveled another glare at Gunn. "She's all that keeps me on that leash, you hear?"

To his credit, Gunn didn't so much as flinch, though he also didn't look nearly as cocky as he had just seconds ago. "I hear. Do you hear when I say I'm pretty damn good at puttin' your kind down? Don't even need super-strength. It's all me."

"And all *you* are doing is wasting time," Buffy snapped. "You came here for my help. I'm giving it to you." She looked back to Spike. "You wanna come with me?"

He smirked. "Just try to keep me here."

That smirk did things to her. "I meant—to the back. I need to

change and you are *so* staying here because..." She pointed to the window, where a steady stream of sun glistened in through the blinds. "Outside conditions may be hazardous to your health."

The smirk faded, as she'd known it would. "Slayer, you're not goin' out there on your own."

"Yes, I am. I am more than capable of handling myself. Besides, I won't be alone." She hitched a thumb in Gunn's direction without looking at him. "And you're certainly in no state to come with."

He spread his arms, inviting her to look. Which she did, because it was nice to look at him and nicer having an excuse. "All healed up, aren't I?"

"Yeah...how, exactly?" Gunn asked. "'Cause the last time I saw you, you were all but a walkin' corpse."

"None of your business," Buffy snapped.

Which, of course, was all but a written confession.

"You let him feed off you?" Gunn demanded. "Are you a special kinda crazy?"

"Obviously not. I'm fine, he's healed, and again with how much of your business this is not." Buffy shook her head and turned on her heel, seizing Spike by the wrist. "I'll be back in a moment."

By no small miracle, Spike managed to keep his mouth shut until there was a door between them and Gunn. Not that the door was soundproof or anything, but Buffy appreciated the illusion of privacy. The situation here had fast spiraled out of control and she was doing her best to keep up with it, but she knew she needed a moment. Just one. If she didn't get a breather between crisis hopping she might end up causing a crisis of her own.

The second the door was closed, though, Spike wasted no time laying into her.

"The fuck you're thinking going off with that prat," he snapped. "Have you forgotten I took a good chunk outta you yesterday?"

"Umm, who hauled the refrigerator up here? I drank my OJ and had a power bar. I'm good to go. Plus..." Buffy drew her tank top over her head, baring her breasts to him in a way all but guaranteed to get a guy's attention. Just as she predicted, Spike went quiet and his eyes round. "You can't make me stay here."

He didn't respond. He was too busy staring at her. "Slayer... What are you doing?"

"Getting changed. And may I add, duh." She ignored the flush of heat that bloomed over her body, even if she knew there was no way he could. He could also hear how hard her heart was thundering.

This was beyond poking the bear. This was poking the bear while drenched in honey.

But she was feeling braver today than she had yesterday or the day before. Something about waking up in bed with him had triggered a deeper need that she no longer felt comfortable ignoring. Maybe distance wasn't the answer if the result of distance was the maddening throb that had taken residence between her thighs. In the end, nothing changed. She was still mated to him for the rest of forever—what did it matter if they started fooling around now or later?

The only thing keeping her from putting that on the table was the knowledge that it wouldn't be fooling around for him and she wasn't sure she could say the same. Not yet.

There were still miles to go before she got that much sorted out.

Still, the part of her that was drawn to him was tired of being restrained by the rest of her. Something had snapped yesterday and again this morning. And right now, with the real world barging in on her solitude again, all she had was a plateful of reminder that her life would never be easier than it was right now.

Which, yes, depressing. But there was also power in that knowledge. Like if this was as simple as it got, she could take her cues and run with it.

Buffy pressed her lips together and pulled a sports bra out of her duffle. She pretended not to hear Spike's sigh as she covered her breasts again, just as she pretended not to see the hunger on his face or the way his jeans looked really tight in the crotch area. Aside from the fact that she wasn't ready to address it, she didn't have time right now.

"Do you know anything about these vamps?"

He was still staring at her chest. "Wuh'sat?"

"The vamps that nabbed Alonna." She slid on the *Slayer* T-shirt she'd borrowed from Fred what felt like a lifetime ago, then plucked yesterday's sweats off the floor. They were still a bit damp from the

shower, but would do in a pinch. "You know anything about them? Have the vamp 4-1-1? Anything that might be useful?"

Spike swallowed and shook his head. "No more than I told you. Most likely an older lot. They'll be strong, I'd wager, but outta practice. And if you wait—"

"Waiting equals nighttime equals more vampires equals bad news for Alonna. I got this."

"That git out there's not gonna have your back."

"He did just fine last night, and this is his sister."

"Precisely my point, Slayer. Last night it wasn't personal for him. It is now. Think he's going in with a clear head? That boy'll throw you under the sodding bus the second he gets a chance." Spike edged a step closer. "You know I'm right. It's what I'd do. If it was you out there."

Buffy released a long, ragged breath and shook her head. No, *no*, she couldn't afford to go there now. "But it's not. I kick all kinds of ass and believe me when I say I'm going to be on my guard."

"Buf—"

"This is part of the gig, Spike. You wanna be the Slayer's boyfriend? You gotta deal when I can't wait around for you to come with me. I don't get to wait for the sun to set."

His eyes softened. "Is that what I am, then?" he asked somewhat hoarsely.

Buffy paused and gulped inwardly. Not the best time for word vomit, but her mouth had no filter. "Conversations for when I get back. There's... I don't know yet. But I think I might soon." She paused, then stepped forward and pressed a quick kiss to his lips before she could change her mind. "Now, I gotta run. Damsels to save."

Spike exhaled slowly, nodded. "Watch your back, love."

"Always do." Buffy pulled back before she could do something stupid and more signal mixy—like kiss him again—and returned once more to her duffle bag for Mr. Pointy, which she slid between the waistband of her pants and the small of her back.

It was the first time she'd gone out with the intention of hunting vamps since leaving Sunnydale. And despite everything, despite the pain she still had to outrun and the ghosts of all she'd left behind,

haunting the peripheral of her new life, she couldn't deny this felt right.

At least when it came to her sacred duty, she knew where she stood.

"All right," she said loudly as she rejoined Gunn in the front living room. "Let's go see some vamps about a girl, shall we?"

33

If Gunn truly was in the vampire-hunting business, he had skipped the lesson on stealth. With the sounds he was making, he might as well have taken out advertisements to let these guys know he was coming.

And were an innocent girl's life not on the line, Buffy might not have cared. But there was, so she did, and no matter how much the man at her side aggravated her, she didn't want to see anything happen to his sister.

"You wanna dial it down a notch or twelve?" she barked as Gunn tore down yet another debris-littered sidewalk toward a destination he had yet to share with her. Thankfully, this stretch of LA seemed more or less abandoned now. She figured it'd be a different story come nightfall. "Or do I need to remind you that vamps have super hearing?"

"There ain't no way they're not gonna know I'm coming," he fired back, not bothering to look at her. "So naw, I'm not gonna dial it down."

"Sounds like a good way to end up nice and dead."

Gunn whipped his head around then, his eyes fixed into a glare. "Look, *Slayer*," he all but snarled. "If I want your opinion, you'll know. One, I'll ask. Two? Hell would be frozen solid. You're here for muscle."

Buffy opened her mouth to retort, then shook her head and decided to drop it. This was not the guy who had helped her last night, and aggravating as it was, she recognized it. She'd become the all-business-bitch when Spike had been the one in need of a rescue, and she'd fought plenty of times too outraged to see straight. And at the root of that was fear—the fear she knew Gunn wasn't voicing, the fear she knew informed every hard step he took.

And though it was the last topic in the world she felt like broaching, she knew he'd already had the thought so pretending neither of them were thinking it seemed dumb.

"What happens if she—"

"No," Gunn barked, not even flinching. "Don't say it."

Or there was denial. Yes, that seemed perfectly healthy, thanks for asking.

"Vampires aren't exactly known for their impulse control," she said, ignoring him when he resumed his glaring. "I need to know you can handle it."

"Handle what?"

"If we go in there and we don't find Alonna."

At last, Gunn came to a halt, tight with tension. He turned, locked his dark brown eyes on hers. "Then we keep lookin'."

"That's not what I mean and you know it."

"No. I don't. Tell me what you mean."

Buffy balled her fists and rolled her eyes. "I—"

"You mean if Alonna's there but it ain't Alonna, is that it?"

"If she's—"

"If she's suddenly like your boy, am I gonna be okay with you turnin' her to dust? That's what you're askin', right?"

Gunn took a step forward, and to anyone else, he would certainly look menacing. But Buffy wasn't anyone else, and she didn't blink.

"Yes," she said. "That's what I'm asking."

"So you bein' this slayer person means you get to pick who gets slayed and who gets laid, huh?"

It took every molecule in her body to keep from introducing her fist to his nose. Instead, she channeled all her anger into the mother of all glares and hoped it left a mark.

"If Alonna has turned, I'm taking her out," she said, fighting for control. "Even if I have to go through you to do it."

Gunn closed another space between them, his eyes flaring. "You just try it. I might not be a slayer, but I ain't some little boy, neither. You wanna put me down, you're gonna have a fight on your hands."

"I'm sure you believe that," Buffy replied. "But believe me when I say that will not end well for you. So stay out of my way, and we'll be peachy."

Gunn's upper lip curled and he drew his arm back, but his punch didn't go far. The second his fist curved toward her head, she caught it and gave it a twist that sent him to his knees, a yowl tearing from his lips.

"I didn't want to say *I told you so* but, well, that." She smirked and shoved him back. "So again, if your sister is all fangy, I'll shove something sharp and pointy into her chest. You wanna try and stop me? Be prepared to become real familiar with pain."

Buffy stepped back to give him room to climb to his feet, tense and ready for another swing to head her way, because things were rarely that simple. With or without the practical demonstration, Gunn didn't seem the type to let something go.

As it was, be it pride or that brain of his had finally kicked on, he didn't say a word, just aimed another glare at her before turning and resuming his hard stride. And hey, if he didn't want to talk, that was more than okay with her. They were burning daylight as it was.

At last, Gunn drew to a halt and pointed—with, she saw, a rather swollen hand—at a rundown warehouse-looking building across the street. "That's it," he said. "I'll go in and check—"

Buffy rolled her eyes and stomped past him. A few wooden crates were stacked along the building's side, and that was her first destination. It was a thoughtful group of bloodsuckers that left handy-dandy stake-making supplies out for their friendly neighborhood slayer. She had Mr. Pointy, yes, but a girl could never have too many weapons.

"Hey—"

"I'm not going to stake everything that moves. Believe it or not, I'm hoping for a happy ending here." She picked up a crate, then lobbed it against the side of the building. The result was a lot of

useless splinters, but two or three pieces she could reasonably shove into a vamp's chest. Buffy gathered as much as she could before turning to face Gunn, who was staring at her in a different way now—a way she was less comfortable with, but had known to expect.

"Just how strong are you?" he asked.

"Pretty damn," she replied dryly. "And if you're impressed because I can smash things, you have a stupid low bar."

She didn't wait for a response, rather whirled on her feet, marched to the door, and kicked it open. The resulting *bang* echoed through what sounded like endlessly empty halls.

"So loud noises are cool when you do it, huh?" Gunn drawled, coming up behind her.

He had a point there, but she chose to not acknowledge it. Instead, she aimed her focus on the room ahead of her. Not that there was much to see. The weak daylight filtering in through the windows lit upon a table shoved against the far wall and a pattern of dust on the ground that suggested they had just missed the occupants. Well, dust plus darkened splotches of blood, which she forced herself not to take as a bad sign.

On the table sat a cardboard box, overflowing with something that, unwittingly, had Buffy fighting back a pang of homesickness.

Books. Specifically, old books. The kind of *old* that would make Giles downright giddy and extra British.

A long sigh rattled through her body. "Looks like they took this party elsewhere."

"It's still daylight out," Gunn barked, storming past her. "Where they gonna go, huh?"

"You'd be surprised. Some vamps are really inventive when it comes to moving while the sun's out."

"Vamps like your boy?"

Buffy turned and leveled a glare at him. "Wanna try focusing a little less on Spike and more on your sister?"

Though it was clear he was itching for another fight, it seemed Gunn had learned his lesson the first time. He pulled his gaze from her, glowering, and stalked toward the right. The warehouse's layout was open, so pretty much every corner of the adjoining room was visi-

ble. Buffy turned her attention to the door on the left, which she bet housed the smaller offices—ideal hiding spots for any lingering bloodsuckers.

Yet though she intended to go straight there, something had her pointing her feet toward the box on the table.

The book resting on top carried a very familiar title—the same one Giles had pulled out from under the desk the first day she'd set foot in the Sunnydale High library.

Vampyr.

Buffy's breath caught, and she shivered despite the humidity. If she were the kind of person who believed in signs...

Well, maybe she should.

She swallowed, set her makeshift stake on the table, then gingerly lifted the book from the box. It looked older than Giles's copy—or perhaps more worn. And she'd never so much as thumbed through it before, or relied on any of the infinite amount of information Giles had at his disposal to learn more about the creatures she'd been nominated by the PTB to make her life's mission. All she needed to know, after all, was how to kill them. Not even after she and Angel had gotten serious had she bothered to commit any time to book learning. After all, Angel was *different*. *Special.* He was a human trapped in a vampire's body, so he practically didn't count.

And now...

Now she was mated to a vampire. A very soulless, not-humany vampire, who had not once acted the way a vampire should. Even when he'd hated her, the way they'd fought had been...different. That he'd come to her at all, offered to team up in the first place, was supposed to be counter to his nature.

Now he was sleeping beside her, worrying about her, telling people he belonged to her, and looking at her as though she was...well, she didn't know. No one had ever looked at her the way Spike did.

Buffy tossed a glance over her shoulder. Gunn hadn't returned, and she didn't hear anything out of the ordinary—at least, nothing to suggest he'd found a nest of something that needed exterminating. She turned her attention back to the book and cracked it open—not at the start, but somewhere in the middle.

There were times when the universe seemed to be on her side, or at the very least reading her mind. It didn't happen often, but when it did, it scared the crap out of her.

The words heading the page read: *The Vampyr and His Mate*.

Buffy sucked in a deep breath, her heart skipping.

No. Way.

But it was there—right there in front of her in black and white. A bunch of tiny words smushed together on the page, none of which made sense because her gaze kept roaming and jumping all over the place.

Footstep sounded behind her, dragging her attention from the blocks of paragraphs. This was not the place to discover her inner book nerd. She flipped to the next page, then the next, then stopped when she encountered a new header.

"Nothin' back there," Gunn said. "You?"

Buffy didn't let herself think. She fisted the pages she needed then ripped them from the binding.

The footsteps slowed. "What the fuck was that?"

"Nothing," she replied, folding the newly-liberated sheets and stuffing them into the waistband of her pants. She whipped around just as Gunn came into view, and did her best not to look guilty.

Though why she should feel guilty, she didn't know. Giles was the only one who'd give her grief about ruining an old book. Well, Giles and Willow.

There was that pang again.

Gunn narrowed his eyes. "You haven't even checked, have you? This ain't no library. What—"

"Enough." Buffy held up her hands, shoving the lingering feelings of guilt to the back of her mind. "You want to argue or do you want to see what's behind Door Number One?"

He glowered a moment longer before stalking toward the office. Buffy released a deep breath and snatched her makeshift stake off the table, then turned to follow.

The second the door opened, she knew they'd hit paydirt. Large slabs of cardboard had been propped against the windows, and the air stank of the unwashed undead. There was a desk in the middle of the

room, a few file cabinets along the walls, and another door that led to what she could only assume was a bathroom. But she kept her gaze focused on the desk—the chair behind it wobbled just enough to tell her it had recently been disturbed.

She glanced at Gunn before stalking forward with intent. She braced her hands on the edge of the desk, waited a beat, then thrust upward. The wood whined against the concrete floor as it tipped back and crashed in a glorious cacophony of sound and scattered papers. The vampire who had been cowering under it gave a yelp and covered his face, shaking like a fledgling.

"P-p-please don't k-kill me. I didn't do nothing!"

A snarling sound tore through Gunn's throat. "Where the fuck's my sister, you piece of—"

"Hold your horses," Buffy said, holding up her stake hand. "We're doing this my way."

"The fuck—"

She rolled her eyes, fisted the material of whiny-vamp's shirt, and lifted him a good five inches off the ground. "You," she said, staring into the yellow, panic-filled eyes and bringing up her stake. "Talk. Now."

"What do you wanna know?" he asked quickly, hands still in front of his face. Which left his heart all kinds of wide open.

Yeah, this guy had been a vampire all of five minutes. Not a good five minutes, either.

"Seems my friend has misplaced his sister," Buffy said. "We're trying to find her."

"I haven't seen her," cried the fledgling, honest tears welling in his eyes. "I haven't been outside this room."

She arched an eyebrow. "Ever? That doesn't seem likely."

"Slayer," Gunn all but growled. "Speed this up before I lose my patience."

"You had patience? News to me." Buffy didn't take her eyes off the fledgling. "Why don't you describe your sister for my friend?"

But something changed the next moment. Newbie the Wonder Vamp finally looked to Gunn, and a hard squeak pealed through his fanged mouth. "You're Charles, aren't you?"

Gunn stormed forward so fast the building seemed to shake. He fisted the fledgling's shirt and tried to jerk him into his own custody. His eyes widened when Buffy's grip proved too firm to break, but he shook off his shock fast and fixed the vamp with a glare that could stake.

"My sister been here?" he snarled. "What did you do to her?"

"Nothin'!" the fledgling wailed, waving his arms. "I did nothin'. Man, I fuckin' *hid* from that crazy bitch."

Buffy winced. "Not the best choice of words, buddy."

"What the—"

"She tore the place apart, man. One second I was on the ground and the next, people were screaming and there was so much dust, and that bitch was laughing the entire time." The fledgling fixed his stricken eyes on Buffy again. "I haven't been a vamp all that long—"

"You're *kidding*," Buffy drawled.

"But I've seen them turn. And they've never been like that." He rolled his head back. "I am so not cut out for this life. I took cover the first chance I got and... Well, it went quiet and I wasn't sure if it was safe to come out so I just...bunked up in here."

Buffy swallowed, the flicker of hope she knew she'd been foolish to hold onto officially blinking out. She turned her gaze to Gunn, whose face was a stoic mask. "It sounds like—"

"I know what it sounds like," he snapped, not looking at her. His cold, steely eyes remained pinned on the fledgling. "You catch where she was goin'?"

"N-no."

"Then you're officially of no use to us." He pulled a stake out of his back pocket and plunged it into the newbie's chest before Buffy could register the action. The poor baby vamp gasped and fixed her with a haunting, pleading look before his face melted into a cloud of dust.

Buffy hopped back, wiping her hands and trying to ignore the odd lurch in her chest. "Dammit," she snapped. "You didn't have to do that."

"You miss the fangs, Slayer? I just did your job for you."

"He was terrified."

"He was a fuckin' monster. And here I thought you just went baby soft for the blonds."

Somehow she managed to stifle the urge to punch Gunn through a wall or three, but only just. She wasn't even sure why the fledgling's dusty ending had unnerved her, only that the adrenaline rush that typically accompanied a good staking hadn't come. Instead, she found herself staring at the debris that had been their witness, and wondering how far removed he had been from the human who had once lived under his skin.

"You comin' or what?" Gunn yelled, and she realized with a start that he was halfway out the door.

"Where are we going?"

"Only one place Alonna would go if she busted outta here. Back to home base."

34

She knew before they stepped onto the dock what they would find. The air was thick with the smell of the sea, yes, but tinged with another scent she knew all too well. From the way Gunn picked up the pace, she figured he knew it too.

"She's in there," he said. "I know she is."

"Look, you heard what that vamp said—"

"Vamps say a lot of things when they know they're about to be dust."

"Yeah. And if they're trying to get someone to not stick them with something pointy, they're more likely to go with things you want to hear."

Gunn threw her a scathing look but didn't slow down. "Can't say I'd know, Slayer. I never let them get too chummy before you came into my life."

They were at the entrance now, the smell of blood hanging heavy in the air like a physical thing. Every one of Buffy's slayer instincts was on high alert, screaming at her to push the civilian out of the way so she could fulfill her duty. But the part of her that she was desperate to understand begged for patience—told her that he needed to see what was on the other side of the door before she took out the threat.

Otherwise, she'd have a different problem on her hands, and one she was far less thrilled about addressing.

Slaying a vamped girl was one thing—dealing with her grieving human brother was something else entirely.

"You know how this is going to end," she said. "I'm so sorry, Gunn, but—"

"Fuck you." He bumped her shoulder as he passed.

Buffy stood still for a long moment, then released a long breath, and turned to follow.

Her imagination had painted a truly terrible picture of what they would find inside. The reality, though, was worse.

The bodies were fanned across the ground in a deceptively artful way—bloodied limbs stretched and positioned into unnatural angles, so each dead man was touching his equally dead neighbor. Buffy could see that it formed some sort of pattern—the type best viewed from above, like a macabre flower composed of human remains. Alonna Gunn stood in the center of her creation, her eyes blazing and her mouth pulled into a delighted smile. It was clear she had been waiting.

"Big brother!" the Alonna-thing bellowed in welcome. "I've missed you."

Buffy didn't look at Gunn—she didn't think she could. The ring of his strangled cry was bad enough.

"Alonna... God..."

"God? Where?" Alonna made a show of looking over her shoulder. "He wasn't on the invite list, but I am nothing if not adaptable." She flashed her brother another fangy grin and stretched her arms. "As you can see. Not bad, huh?"

"Alonna, I'm so sor—"

"Stop. Just stop right there. What is there to be sorry for?" The smile on her face lost some of its menace, and she started forward, carefully navigating around her human collateral. "Charles, I feel amazing. Ah-mazing. We had this so backwards. This is such a rush."

"You stay right there," Gunn said. "Don't come any closer."

Alonna didn't so much as blink, rather kept moving toward him with slow, methodical steps. "Don't worry. I get it. I really, really get it.

It's weird, seeing me like this, but I promise it's okay. Hell, it's awesome. And I want to share that with you."

Gunn moaned—a pitiful sound that hurt the ears. And that was all Buffy could take. She stepped forward, pulling Mr. Pointy out of the waistband of her sweats. "All right. You really gonna make me do this in front of your brother?"

"What?" Gunn inhaled sharply. "No, wait."

Alonna just perked an eyebrow. "Really?" she asked dryly, motioning at the stake. "That's gratitude for ya. Wasn't it just last night big bro and I were busting your boyfriend outta here?"

"Slayer, don't." Footsteps, then Gunn had his hand around Buffy's upper arm and whirled her around to look at him.

"Are you crazy?" Buffy jerked out of his grip. "You know what she is."

"I knew what your boy was too. She's right. We gave him a pass."

Buffy gritted her teeth, irritation warring with unease. Putting down Alonna without Gunn's help was going to be difficult enough, but if he really was going to be fool enough to fight her, she couldn't guarantee he'd make it to the other side—not with her instincts askew. Last night she had tried to rip Briggs apart when she'd seen the extent of Spike's injuries, and while Spike wasn't here, she wasn't sure how much she wanted to gamble that these new impulses were tied to him alone.

"Gunn," she said, trying hard to hold onto her patience. "We talked about this."

"Yeah. And I seem to remember telling you that you gotta go through me. I wasn't bluffin'."

Buffy stared at him, doing her best to keep an eye on Alonna out of her periphery. This kind of chaos was what got smart people killed around vampires, and Alonna wasn't your average fledgling. This was a monster who had been hunting monsters for years. She knew how to seize a tactical advantage.

"That is not your sister," Buffy said, her voice low and final. "Your sister died in that warehouse."

"How can you say that? How can you say that with who you chose to keep your bed warm?"

"Spike is different," she replied, her heart speeding up. It was part truth, part wish, and part lie. Spike was a very different sort of vampire from any other vampire she'd encountered, but she couldn't forget what he was. If she allowed herself to fall the rest of the way, it needed to be with all parts of him. "Spike is mine."

"And Alonna's mine."

"No. Spike is mine." She tossed Alonna a glance, then reached up with her free hand and tugged down the collar of her shirt. "We're bonded by blood. And he's not killing anymore."

"Anymore," Gunn repeated, snorting. "Like that matters."

"Of course it matters! Do you have any idea what a vampire's hunger is like?"

"Do you?"

"Yes!" Buffy spat, and was darkly satisfied when surprised flashed across Gunn's face. "Got sucked into a kid's nightmarescape last year and turned all fangy."

"What the huh?"

"Our worst nightmares—everyone's started coming true. Guess what the vampire slayer's worst nightmare was?" She didn't wait. "All of my friends smelled like dinner. I thought I might lose control and..." Buffy broke off, gave her head a shake. "But to your point, yes, I know what a vampire's hunger is like. And Alonna—"

"Owes big bro a massive thank you for getting you on that tangent."

Buffy jerked around, or rather, tried to, but Alonna was already on her, knocking her off her feet and sending Mr. Pointy across the dusty concrete floor. Damn, damn, damn, she'd known that was going to happen—she'd known but she'd let Gunn suck her in anyway. If she didn't need to keep her wits about her, she'd give herself a thorough mental scolding.

"Whoa, Alonna." Gunn raised his hands. "No, no. It doesn't need to go this way."

"Who are you kidding?" Alonna tilted her head and pulled Buffy tighter against her chest. "There's only one way this goes, and it involves me opening one of her veins and drinking every ruby red drop. Did you know slayer blood is apparently a bag of chips and then some?

Found that out when I was having my own throat torn out. And I gotta tell you..." She lowered her mouth to Buffy's neck and drew in an exaggerated breath. "You smell...delicious."

Buffy hissed and made to headbutt her way to freedom, but Alonna was smarter than the average newb and jerked her head to the side.

"Ah ah ah, blondie. Not nice."

"Alonna..." Gunn was breathing hard. "Please. I'm begging you."

"I know. You'd think this would be a little weird for me, but it's not. It feels right."

"Gunn." Buffy waited until she had his eyes. "You know what I'm going to have to do. Okay? I'm sorry but I have to."

A delighted cackle pealed through the air. "Well, someone has an ego on her."

"Someone has experience on her." Buffy pounded her foot on top of Alonna's, and this move the vampire hadn't anticipated. Her grip went slack and then Buffy was free, snatching Mr. Pointy off the floor and regaining her balance. Gunn started screaming again but Buffy wasn't listening. She couldn't. She just needed one good shot.

Except Gunn was there, his arms spread and his eyes wild, standing between her and Alonna. "Please," he was saying, his eyes sparkling with tears. "Please. Why shouldn't she get a chance? The same chance he got?"

Buffy opened her mouth to scream at him—then didn't. The tension coiled through her body gave way without warning. It wasn't until he was close enough for her to smell that she understood why.

Spike.

"You gotta want it, mate. And I can tell you just lookin' at her. Kid sis doesn't want it."

Gunn jumped. "The hell—"

Spike drew up beside Buffy, and it took everything in her power not to turn and look at him. "I thought I told you to stay home."

"Sun went down. Bloke's gotta eat."

"There's literally a fridge full of blood in our apartment."

"Not quite full yet, love. Besides, you couldn't really expect me to miss the fun."

"Fuck you!" Gunn spat, spittle flying everywhere. "You think this is fun?"

Spike rocked on his heels. "Yeah, actually. My kinda fun. And it's hers, too. Think that's the point." He shifted his gaze to Alonna. "What do you say, ducks? You havin' fun?"

Alonna favored him with a grin, then shook her head and allowed her bumpies to emerge. Again, Gunn released a sound somewhere between a moan and a cry, as though a part of him had been holding out hope that this was some elaborate prank. But those were real yellow eyes shining out of her face and real fangs protruding from her smiling mouth. And in a few seconds, she'd be a very real pile of dust.

Though Buffy really hoped she didn't have to be the one to make her so. Gunn would never forgive her, and she didn't think it would do her any favors to have a pissed off demon hunter dogging her every step. He might have lost the manpower he'd had when they'd first met, but that didn't mean he wouldn't be a threat. A very human threat.

"Gotta say, bro. He's right." Alonna shrugged. "This is the most fun I've had in ages. It'll be even more fun when it's you and me. Think about it, Charles. We can rule this town. Demons were afraid of us before—wait until they get a load of us now. I want that for you."

Gunn shook his head, tears spilling down his cheeks. "I can't let you. I'm sorry."

"What else are you gonna do?" Alonna replied. "Kill me? We both know you don't wanna do that."

"He won't have to," Buffy said calmly, flicking her gaze to Gunn. "This can be over real fast."

"She can be like him." A pleading note hit Gunn's voice. He jerked his head toward Spike. "We can make her like him. She's not like the others—she woulda killed me by now if she was. Don't tell me there ain't a chance."

Buffy glanced to Spike, whose face was—for once—rather closed off. And she thought of the newbie vamp Gunn had dusted before they'd come this way, how he'd also seemed extra human to her. How she'd felt watching him disintegrate.

But god, that was dangerous thinking. Way dangerous. Practically a blueprint for people who were looking to end up dead.

Spike spoke at last, his voice measured. "Like I said, she's gotta want it. She's gotta have a reason." He met Buffy's eyes briefly before looking back to Gunn. "It's not natural, what I've done. Goes against every bloody instinct I've got. I wanna keep in line for her, so I will. Be the kinda bloke who won't hurt her. But it's a struggle every day, you hear. Every sodding day. You can't make someone want that."

Buffy didn't realize her own eyes had filled with tears until she sniffed, but this was so not the time or place to make with the emotional outbursts. Or to really unpack everything Spike had just said and all the things he wasn't saying. Another thing added to the mountain of thinking she needed to do, and sooner rather than later.

But when Gunn spoke, it was clear he hadn't heard a word.

"She has me." He kept his gaze steadfast on Alonna. "Let me be your reason."

"This is so sweet, I think I might throw up." Alonna sighed and regarded her brother with a long look. "This one's pussy-whipped and for the wrong pussy."

At that, Spike growled and stepped forward, then stopped when Buffy put a hand on his arm.

"See what I mean?" Alonna asked, waving at them. "Well. Probably not now, but you will here in a bit."

Buffy had known it was coming, of course. There was only one way this could end. Alonna became a blur of motion, pouncing onto Gunn with a snarl, her legs going around his waist and her face into the crook of his neck. Gunn sputtered a startled cry as he fell back and landed amid the bodies of his former friends. Then the cry became a scream, and Buffy was moving—running toward the struggling heap, her gaze fixed on the bullseye on Alonna's back where she needed to bury her stake. Spike was moving too, circling in the opposite direction. And she understood—he would pull Gunn away when she yanked Alonna off him. He'd—

But then there was an explosion of dust, and Alonna disappeared, Gunn coughing and sobbing from where he'd fallen, his own stake still positioned where her heart had been.

Buffy forced herself to a stop, panting, though not from exertion. She met Spike's eyes again and motioned him back before he could

also get within staking distance. Gunn must have seen it, because the next second he was on his feet and in her face, cold hatred shining in his eyes.

"Get him," he said, his voice shaking, "and get the fuck outta here. I see either one of you again and I'm putting you in the ground."

Buffy held up a hand to Spike to show she was fine. He'd started growling again.

"I'm sorry, Gunn," she replied calmly. "Let me know if you need anything. You know where to find us."

"I said get the fuck out!"

It surprised her, how little his animosity hurt. She'd always understood it, on some intellectual level, when survivors turned their anger on her, but a part of her had also resented it. But not now. Not this time.

In fact, as she fell into step alongside Spike, she wondered if that could be attributed to the claim, too. If it meant she was indifferent or perhaps she was just growing up.

She didn't want to know what it meant that she found neither prospect particularly frightening.

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When she didn't immediately lay into him on the walk home, Spike figured he could expect an explosion the second they were over the threshold. That was fine, he told himself. He had a nice list of counterarguments at the ready. Things she needed to hear and he needed to say, because fuck it, he wouldn't be waiting around at home again. He'd never been the type of bloke to watch from the sidelines.

Still, he could do without another argument, especially since he wasn't sure if Buffy was open to his brand of making up. The past forty-eight hours had been a sodding roller coaster.

Spike stopped at their flat and began fiddling with the lock, but Buffy stalked right on past him and knocked on Fred's door. A second later, the door cracked open, but only as far as the chain would allow, and Fred's face appeared in the gap.

"Hey," Buffy said in one of those maddeningly unreadable tones. "You have the blood?"

Fred tossed Spike an uncertain look, but nodded. "I thought you'd be over earlier."

"A lot of things happened."

"Again?"

At that, Buffy barked a laugh and shook her head. "Welcome to what it's like being friends with the Slayer. Never a dull moment."

"I'm seeing that." Fred closed the door again to unlatch the chain lock before opening it in earnest. "Come on in. I was just about to order some Chinese."

"Actually, and I hate to do this again, but this is gonna be one of those grab-and-go things." Buffy offered an apologetic smile and leaned against the doorframe. "Today was supposed to be a mellow day and I'm feeling all kinds of antisocial."

She still hadn't looked at him. Spike wasn't sure what to make of that.

"Oh, okay."

The disappointment on the girl's face was hard to miss, and for a moment, Spike thought Buffy might change her mind. She pressed her lips together, but said nothing as Fred disappeared back into the apartment or when she returned a few seconds later, plastic bag in tow.

"You realize I'm going to have even more questions," Fred said as she handed it over.

"I figured. Hopefully, I can sneak in a few hours of sleep without having to run out and resolve another crisis between now and tomorrow."

Spike cleared his throat. "With your luck, pet, I wouldn't hold your breath."

Buffy flicked her gaze to him at last but didn't respond. That couldn't be a good sign. She turned back to Fred. "Long day. I'll catch you up tomorrow."

"You keep saying that," Fred replied, but she was smiling. "I'll see you tomorrow then."

Buffy nodded and muttered a quick good night, then turned back to him. It wasn't until she was practically on top of him that Spike remembered he had yet to unlock the door, and hurried to do so. He got it open just as she reached him and stepped aside, hoping to catch her eyes, but she didn't look at him. Rather, she strode by without a word, marched with intent toward the fridge she'd hauled up here on her lonesome and deposited the grocery sack full of blood bags on one of its empty shelves.

Well, bugger. Might as well get this part over with.

"So, you gonna let me have it, then?"

Buffy stiffened, then straightened, a bag of blood in hand. He could practically see the wheels in her head turning, feel the sparks of argument in the air between them. He drew the strongest of his counterarguments to the surface and waited for her to let loose.

Instead, Buffy turned and popped the blood bag into the microwave. "How long should I set this for?"

"Huh?"

"I assume if I leave it in there too long, it'll burn, and then I'll spend the night gagging because of the smell."

Spike blinked. "Why aren't you screamin' at me?"

Buffy glanced over her shoulder, meeting his eyes at last. "Should I be?"

"Come on, Slayer. I know it's comin'. Just get on with it."

"Get on with it. Why exactly do you want me to scream at you?"

"Sun was down. You weren't home. I wasn't gonna just wait around like some bloody housewife," he blurted. Apparently, his mind had skipped right on past the point of trying to get her to admit her upset and proceeded as though she had, in fact, just given him a verbal undressing. "That's not who I am and never will be."

She stared at him with the most maddeningly unreadable look on her face. Again, Spike braced for an explosion.

Again, she surprised him.

"I know."

He blinked. "You...know."

Buffy nodded, turned and tossed the bag of blood in the microwave. "I'm going to do a minute. Does that sound good?"

"Pidge, I'll smell it before it has a chance to burn. What do you mean you know?"

"Just that," she replied, punching in the numbers.

There were times Spike reckoned he could fill entire notebooks writing verses about how beautiful she was when she moved. Right now, though, every move was bloody difficult to read. A bit like she was trying to lure him into a false sense of calm before letting the hammer drop.

Then she turned back to him, crossed her arms, and leaned that gorgeous ass of hers against the counter.

"Was I annoyed that you showed up? Yeah, a bit." She lifted a shoulder as though she couldn't possibly be less bothered. "But then I thought...about what I'd do in that situation. About yesterday, when Gunn told me that you said not to come. You knew there was no way in hell I'd listen to that."

He felt his mouth quirk into a grin. "'Course not. Knew you'd knock the bloody place down if you had to."

"Right." Buffy nodded and offered a smile of her own—a tired but genuine smile that lit up her eyes. "And I figure if this is gonna work, then we're going to need to get used to each other not listening when we tell them not to do something."

Spike drew in a sharp breath before edging forward a step. "Is that something you want, then? For this to work?" He paused, then nodded at the microwave. "It's ready."

Buffy whirled around without a word and stopped the countdown. He watched her play hot-potato with the bag until it found a place on the counter before she turned and opened the nearest cabinet. What she was looking for, he couldn't say, because they hadn't purchased flatware or the like. A conclusion Buffy seemed to reach the next second when her shoulders slumped.

"I keep thinking we have everything and then I find we've missed something obvious." She didn't turn around, rather rested her brow against the cabinet door. "I am so not cut out to be a grown-up."

"Slayer—"

"And yes," she said, spinning to face him, "of course I want this to work. I want my thoughts to become magically clear and everything that has happened to stop playing on repeat in my head." Buffy sighed and let said head fall into her waiting hand. "I haven't had the chance to take a breath. But I wouldn't have agreed to this..." She gestured to the apartment. "With you if I didn't want it. I told you last night in the shower..."

At that, her cheeks went beet red and she looked away.

"Had a right old time, myself."

"Yeah. That was...intense." She scrunched up her face in a look that was so thoroughly Buffy it made his chest ache.

"It was more than intense." And he'd told himself then that the wait to have her, however long it was, was worth it. But then she'd mucked with his head earlier—flashing her tits when she'd changed before going out with Gunn, leaving him with a kiss. Neither of those things by themselves meant anything, but a fella couldn't help but want to ask if he had it wrong.

But Buffy wasn't the type to feel something and not make it known in one way or another. And for something as important as what they were to each other, she wouldn't leave that to interpretation.

"Yeah." She released a deep breath, crossed her arms and nodded at the bag of blood. "Until we get glasses, are you good just—"

The bones in his face shifted as he snatched the bag off the countertop. He had his fangs in it before she could finish her thought. Spike watched her as he drained it—the way her nose wrinkled, her wince of disgust—and felt something within him clench. She was trying, bless her. She was really trying. And without waiting for his permission, his mind dragged him back to those moments in the shower, when she'd stared at the wounds on his body, tears in her eyes, begging him to bite her even if it hurt because she hated seeing him in pain.

That wasn't the claim. That had been her. All her.

"Still need a telly, too," Spike said, tossing the drained bag onto the counter and wiping his mouth.

"We'll get a TV."

"You know you promised me a night at home, all quiet-like."

"I'm sure we'll have one of those eventually." Buffy sighed and leaned against the back counter again. "Do you think Gunn is okay?"

The question lent him pause. She was too clever to be asking something with such an obvious answer.

"Think what you mean is did we make the right call back there," he replied softly. "You think you mighta gotten it wrong, that the girl could've turned it around all on her own."

To her credit, Buffy didn't respond immediately. She stared at the empty blood bag, her lips pressed into a line. "I never thought

vampires could be like you and here you are. Drinking bagged stuff just for me. Living in a freaking apartment for me. We need dishes and a television and probably a bunch of other stuff that I'm forgetting—and if you weren't with me, you'd probably be off with Drusilla somewhere, stealing and killing and doing whatever else it is vampires do for fun."

Spike swallowed. "Forgettin' Dru tried to make me a wall ornament."

"And that kind of stuff isn't foreplay to you guys?"

"Not sayin' it can't be—she gets off on it." He shook his head. "I'd play the role, do the dance, but it wasn't really my thing, real torture. Don't much have the patience for it. I've forgiven her for a lot over the years, but I've never fancied being a kabob." A pause. "Don't have the answer, either. It's not like I saw you coming. Woulda run hard the other way if I had. I've been all over the sodding world, love. Met every kinda vamp you can imagine. A few were softer types, but all with a yen for making big, bloody messes. Can't say I've ever met one who decided to go off the good stuff. I figure that girl would've killed ole Charlie if he hadn't done her in first. That's the way it usually goes."

"So...I shouldn't feel guilty about not starting a Rehab for Bloodsuckers support group."

Spike barked a laugh. "Don't see that goin' over too well."

"The only reason you're here is because of me. Not because...of anything else."

There it was again—a question disguised as a statement, and with two answers. The truth and the thing she wanted to hear. It was so bloody tempting to go with the latter, but he knew, even before he opened his mouth, that he couldn't lie. They needed to be honest, whatever else they were.

"For you," he agreed. "Just for you. And that's the problem, isn't it? That I don't want it for myself?"

"It's not a problem, but it would be easier for me if you did." She hugged herself, not meeting his gaze. "Because what you're telling me is that I'm your conscience. And that...is a lot to put on a person. You can go through the motions but you don't get why they're important."

"I know why they're important to you. That makes them important to me."

"But it doesn't. They're not important to you if they can change on the fly depending on my mood."

Spike opened his mouth to reply, but words weren't forthcoming. He wasn't entirely sure how they'd gotten here in the first place—it seemed less stable ground than what he'd stood on just a few moments ago. At length, he thought fuck it and decided to go from his gut. Might not be wise, but it was better than silence.

"I love you."

Buffy whipped her head up, her eyes going wide. "What?"

Well, he was in it now. Couldn't stop.

"I love you," he said again, trying to keep his tone measured. "You're more than a mood, Slayer. You're bright and good and everything. And despite what this buggered world has thrown at you, you care about everythin' and everyone. And I love you, so I love that. I love every crazy thing about you, even the stuff I don't understand. So yeah, it's important to me. The things that make you you are important to me. Without you, they wouldn't be. But there's no without you for me anymore, no matter what happens."

The scent of salt stung the air. Buffy's eyes were glistening. He wasn't sure how to interpret that, but his throat suddenly felt tight. He knew what he wanted—to leap over the counter and pull her into him—but that didn't seem the wisest move with the tug-and-pull they'd done over the past couple of days. Still, a bloke couldn't help but feel exposed after such a declaration.

Never in his life had he imagined saying those words to anyone but Dru. Yet here he was, standing with the Slayer in the apartment they shared, and she was looking at him like—

A succession of three knocks exploded through the room, making both of them jump.

Spike snarled and whipped his head toward the door. "What bloody now?"

"Slayer, it's Gunn," came a familiar voice. He sounded the way Spike felt—lost and vulnerable.

And maybe he was a bastard, but Spike wanted to scream at him to sod off. This was one moment that no man should interrupt.

But it was too late. Buffy was someone who would always answer the bloody door, no matter what. She'd put herself last until it killed her. Drawing in a long breath, she favored Spike an apologetic look, then exited the kitchen and crossed the room to greet their guest.

The man on the other side was a ghost of the one they'd left in that warehouse. The area around his eyes was puffy and swollen, tear tracks visible on his dark brown skin. All of the piss and vinegar that had been there before was gone, though. Every inch of him looked weighted down, as though gravity itself was trying to drive him into the ground.

"I'll be quick," Gunn said, his gaze on the floor. "I know I...wasn't at my best today."

"Gunn, your sister—"

"Alonna died tryin' to bust up some sicko vamp trafficking ring. They took her away from me, so I wanna bring the pain to them." He drew his eyes upward, and Spike saw they were bloodshot. "I can't do that shit alone."

"You haven't had any time to process what happened."

"I know. Fuck process. I want to send these fuckers back to Hell. Accordin' to what your boy said, they're vamps. Sounds like your territory."

Buffy didn't move for a long moment, but she didn't need to. Spike knew what her answer would be—what her answer would always be. And since he'd just told her he loved her for it, he knew what his answer would be too.

"Spike?" she said at last.

"You're not leavin' me behind, love."

"No. If we do this, we do it as a team."

Gunn nodded, his eyes welling with tears again. If he noticed the same on Buffy's face, he didn't say anything. "There's a contact Alonna had just made," he replied hoarsely. "I only met him once, but if anyone would know anythin', it'd be him."

Buffy nodded. "Sounds like a place to start."

"Thank you. I know you don't have to do it, but—"

"But she does, mate," Spike said, coming up behind Buffy and placing a hand at the small of her back. "That's the thing about the Slayer—she's always in for a good fight."

She nodded, not looking at him. "And Spike's with me."

Hopefully, she was a bit closer to understanding exactly what that meant.

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SPIKE LOVED HER.

Spike loved her.

Holy cow.

Buffy shook her head and tried, for the fourth or fifth time, to focus on the conversation occurring around her, but it had progressed light-years beyond the last thing she remembered talking about. Right now, Fred—who had insisted upon tagging along—was talking animatedly with the demon Gunn had introduced them to.

Though the jury was still out on whether one could technically be introduced to someone that had practically run them over in the library, leaving nothing but a sparkly portal behind. Granted, Buffy's memory of that time, recent as it was, was all kinds of foggy. The only thing she remembered clearly was the pain ratcheting through her body, tackling Fred so she didn't go on a magical mystery tour, and a flash of green.

The green was a guy. A guy who was super friendly, insofar as demons went, and all kinds of jazzed to see them.

"From the library!" he'd bellowed upon seeing Fred, right before pulling her into a monstrous hug. "I'd recognize your pretty little face anywhere."

Fred, unaccustomed as she was to interacting with demons, had given Buffy a bewildered look. One matching Spike and Gunn's.

"There was a portal," she'd said, waving dismissively. "That's how I met Fred."

"She kept me from being sucked in," Fred had agreed, beaming.

The green guy, who had introduced himself as The Host with the Most in lieu of an actual name, had released a low whistle. "And tootles, let me tell you. They say there's no place like home, and boy oh boy do I ever hope they're right. Because the world doesn't need more Pylea."

The Host had ushered them inside what looked to be a nightclub—or something that would resemble a nightclub once the renovations were finished—given them the nickel tour, poured a round of drinks, then finally led them to the only table in the joint.

"It's not much," the Host said as they all settled. "I hope to get her up and running sometime next month, but chil'en, I won't lie—there's a lot of work to do."

Buffy gave the room a dubious look, thinking a lot of work was being rather generous. The place looked one inspection way from being condemned. Aside from the vague stage-shaped thing against the far wall and fully stocked bar, the inside yielded nothing remotely recognizable as a functional business. The floor was littered with various debris and the odd over-turned chair, and the table at which they sat seemed to be of the card-variety.

But what did she know? She was just the Slayer, living with a vampire who was in love with her, attempting to figure out the tangle of emotions that had plagued her since she'd slain her ex-boyfriend.

She swallowed and stole a glance at Spike. Though he didn't look at her, his jaw ticked in such a way she was certain he felt her eyes on him.

"And it'll be a...bar?" Fred asked the Host, dragging Buffy back to the present.

"A sanctuary," the Host said, nodding. "With a strict no-violence policy. Door's open to all creatures so long as they play nice."

"How you gonna manage that?" Spike drawled, lighting a cigarette

and ignoring the scowl he earned as a result. "Some sorts can't so much as sniff each other without declarin' war."

"Two words, my platinum poodle. Transuding Furies." The Host sat back with what could only be called a smug grin. "Contract's signed and the deposit has been made. Once they work their mojo, no demon will be able to so much as throw a dirty look in this place."

"Sounds dull," Spike replied bluntly. "No point in gettin' sloshed if a bloke can't even get in a decent bar fight."

The Host favored him with a narrow look. "You. You're the sort who'd do well in Pylea."

"Am I supposed to know what Pylea is?" Fred asked. "That's the second time you've mentioned it."

"Pardon my rudeness, buttercup." He placed a hand on his chest and fluttered his eyes. "Pylea would be my home world. Also the last place anyone would want to build a summer home."

And just like that, the conversation went off the rails again. Fred, learning of the existence of another world, launched into uber-geek mode, intent on learning as much as she could about the Host's native land.

Which was fine, Buffy supposed, seeing as she couldn't focus on the conversation long enough to be of any use. Not with Spike sitting so close to her, acting as normal as she imagined he got, even after having dropped the bombshell news that he loved her.

Okay, so maybe it wasn't a bombshell. Maybe she'd felt the words in the air between them, just waiting to be given life. That didn't mean hearing them hadn't rattled her. Love unspoken was a different beast from love spoken. It made her heart do funky things, though it whined in protest, still too sore from the last time it had tangled with emotions that significant.

"Fascinatin' though this is," Spike said, startling Buffy out of her thoughts, "think we might outta get to the reason we're here?"

Fred's cheeks flushed pink and she cast her gaze down. "Sorry," she said. "I'm just...still so new to all of this."

Buffy shook her head, giving herself a mental slap. Spike was right —this was so not the time for tangents, verbal or otherwise. "So, you

knew Alonna," she said to the Host, careful not to look at Gunn, who had been staring at a spot at the table since making the introductions.

The Host's affable grin faded, and he offered a somber nod. "Not well. Haven't been in the neighborhood long, but she was a nice kid." He sighed and threw back the rest of his drink, then gestured at their surroundings. "Little thing wandered in here last week. Heard me going at the karaoke and, what can I say, the girl had an ear for good music. Might've been what kept me alive, actually. Guess she figured anyone with a set of pipes like mine couldn't be all bad."

Gunn sniffed but didn't say anything.

"That's what you do, then? Sing?" Spike asked, snuffing out the last of his cigarette.

"Blondie, in this big bad beautiful world, I can do whatever I like." He grinned and stood. "Including getting another drink. Anyone else?"

Spike nodded and waved at Gunn. "Spot of whiskey would do us both fine."

"I don't need no whiskey," Gunn said without looking up. "Don't need karaoke. What I do need is to ash those motherfuckers who vamped my sister." At that, he raised his head and aimed a glare at the Host. "So if you and Little Miss Gabby are through braidin' each other's hair, could we get to the reason we're here?"

The cheery expression on Fred's face fell without ceremony, and her cheeks went red. "Sorry," she said, casting her gaze to the table. "I... I got over-excited." She hesitated, then raised her eyes to Buffy's and mouthed the word, "Sorry," again.

"Don't apologize, babykins," the Host said, scowling at Gunn. "Some people just have no tact."

"Some people just wanna get to the fucking point," Gunn snapped. "Why don't you tell us what you know?"

The Host glared a moment longer, then sighed and sank back into his seat. "Listen, gumshoe, I only know what I've heard and that isn't much. No one shares with the new guy in town more than he needs to know, and I told your sister the same."

Spike snickered. "Considerin' how that shook out, gotta figure you know more than you think."

"Or just enough to get people killed," Gunn said. "Either way. Talk."

The Host looked between the two of them. "You know the highlights already—human trafficking ring for lazy bloodsuckers who can't find the energy to do their own hunting. They move product through a few warehouses around town, but word on the street is the base of operations is a little joint called Dusk."

Fred released an inelegant squeak.

The green demon favored her with a nod. "I take it you know the place?"

"I-it's a popular night club." The red in Fred's cheeks burned a bit brighter. "I've been once, but it... I didn't like the vibe."

"That'd be your survival instinct," the Host said dryly. "You've been? Sweetie-pie, do you have any idea how lucky you are to be alive right now? That club is a vamp free-for-all."

"A vamp only club?" Buffy wrinkled her brow and looked to Spike. "Have you ever heard of anything like this?"

"A few in Europe. Dru and me popped into one once, but she didn't take a shine to it. Half the fun's in the hunt." He shifted, ignoring the daggers Gunn glared at him. "It's what I said before, love. Older vamps who don't relish the chase anymore. Blokes aimin' to keep outta your crosshairs. The club's a front. Real business goes on downstairs, I'd wager."

Buffy swallowed, not sure she wanted to know. "The real...business?"

"The auction," the Host said. "For the fresh blood the club lures in. Once bought, they're packed off to one of the warehouses to be shipped to their new owner."

"Meals on wheels," Spike muttered.

It took a moment to unpack what was being said. Once she did, though, it seemed likely she was going to be sick. In her experience, vampires were nuisances—murderous, yes, but not much with the grand schemes. The Master's plan had been rather straightforward—escape and be evil. Same for Angel, except he'd had more apocalyptic aspirations. But an honest-to-god slave trade? That seemed bigger for some reason, and almost worse than ending the world.

"So we go to this club," she said at last, her voice scratchy. "And shut them down. Then we hit the other warehouses."

The Host gave a loud, harsh laugh. "You say that like it's easy, sister."

Buffy glanced to Spike, and he flashed her a slight, knowing grin. One that filled her with confidence.

"It might not be easy," she agreed. "But it won't be hard."

"You have a lot of experience in this sort of thing, then?" The Host snickered again, tossing Fred an incredulous look with which she was clearly supposed to commiserate. "I'd heard Caesar was short, but I thought he'd be at least a little butch."

Spike outright laughed at that. "Better watch what you say, mate. If there's one thing the Slayer knows how to do, it's bollix up some honest vamp's idea of a good time."

It was hard to tell, being that he was green and all, but the Host seemed to pale a bit at that. His eyes definitely grew wider—enough so that Buffy knew he was familiar with what a slayer was. Hell, for a guy who'd only been in this dimension a handful of days, he was rather industrious. Like a big green sponge with plans and a budget. And an ear for pop-culture. Los Angeles was truly the perfect place for him.

"The Slayer," the Host said. "Y-you're the Slayer." He whipped his head to Gunn. "Funny how that didn't come up during the introduction portion of the evening."

Gunn didn't so much as blink. "You really thought I was gonna take on the bastards who got my sister killed with a vampire, a cheerleader, and a librarian? What the fuck do you take me for, man?"

Buffy scowled. "Hey!"

"Don't even try to tell me you wasn't a cheerleader, blondie," Gunn said without looking at her.

"I-I didn't know," the Host said, his hands coming up in a placating gesture. "I just thought you had interesting...friends." He paused, then frowned at Spike. "You're a vampire and you're paling around with a slayer. Color me intrigued."

"Fun story for another time," Gunn snapped. "You know we got the muscle now. You gonna help out or what?"

The Host looked from him to Buffy, to Spike, then to Gunn again.

At length, he released a long sigh and turned to Fred, plastering on a great, fake smile. "I don't suppose you're a lion, a witch, or a wardrobe, are you, poodle? I'll take any or all."

"Sorry," Fred replied with a wince. "Just a librarian."

"She can be bait," Gunn said simply.

Buffy whipped her head to face him. "What? Are you crazy?"

"Naw. Practical."

"Practical. You want to get Fred killed?"

He shrugged. "Trust you to do your job. Done all you can to keep your boy from becomin' some kid's hay fever. Think you can manage for a neighbor."

"Can I say I really, really don't like the idea of being bait?" Fred's voice shook a little. "I want to help, but...come on. I'm a bit boney to appeal to a hungry vamp, aren't I?"

"You got blood, pidge," Spike replied. "Doesn't matter how much meat's on the bone. And I'd wager these wankers do more than just eat their nosh. Some like to play with their food."

Buffy wrinkled her nose and tried really hard not to think about Spike being one of those vampires, though some part of her didn't need to be convinced. A side-by-side with Spike and a soulless Angel had been more than she'd needed to illustrate the many ways her ex-boyfriend had been epically more monstrous than any of the other vamps she'd slain. And Spike wasn't like that anymore—or she was desperate to believe.

Because he loved her and he was her future.

Which dragged her mind back to the pages that remained folded up in her pocket. She hadn't had time to think about them since she'd ripped them from the book's binding. Maybe one day her life would slow down.

"Buffy?"

She shook her head and forced herself out of her thoughts. Fred was staring at her with wide, pleading eyes.

Right. Priorities.

"Exnay on the ait-bay," Buffy said, leveling a glare at Gunn. "We don't know what kind of numbers we'll be against and we can't promise to keep her safe. I didn't save her life just to get her killed. Okay?"

Gunn appeared unmoved and glared right back at her. "You got any bright ideas then, Slayer?"

"Yes," she replied, more out of defiance than truth. But then she was used to thinking herself out of tough places, and pulling attack plans out of her ass, so she wasn't surprised when her mind provided her an answer. "Me. I'm the bait."

Spike jerked his head toward her, his eyes narrowing. "Huss'at?"

"There's no better blood than Slayer's blood, right? What better way to get directly to the ringleader?" She looked to Spike and arched her eyebrows. "You'll be with me. No, even better, you're the one who brings me in."

"You're off your rocker. I'm not gonna parade you into the bleeding lion's den."

"So in your version of me handling this, I sit on the sidelines. A minute ago you understood that I'm an army of one."

"A minute ago you weren't bait."

"How does my being bait change anything? And you know I can take care of myself and will wipe the floor with their asses."

"Operation like this isn't gonna be small, love. Place'll be crawlin' with vamps. One thing to fight your way in. Fighting out's a horse of a different color. You won't have an exit at your back. They'll swarm you."

Yeah, that sounded all kinds of not cool, but it did bupkis to change her mind. "All the more for Mr. Pointy to stake, my dear."

Spike scowled. "How you wager this plays out, then?"

"You're known for being weirdly obsessed with slayers. You decided to use me to cash in."

"No one who knows me would figure I'd just hand over a slayer for cash."

"Are we banking that these vamps have taken a crash course on William the Bloody?" Buffy fired back. "'Cause I'm not. At most, they know your name, know you have a history with slayers, and don't have a reason to ask more questions than that."

"What history with slayers?" Gunn asked.

She ignored him, keeping her focus on Spike. "Tell me I'm wrong."

"You're wrong," he fired back. "These vamps don't get to a point

where they can be served hand and foot by bein' thick. Anyone claims to have a slayer trussed up's gonna be given the third bloody degree, 'specially before they let you meet the gits."

"So you insist on staying with me until the transaction is complete. Have me drugged or something—tell them you roofied my soda."

"Not my style," Spike gritted through his teeth.

"Well, dammit, Spike, you're just being difficult."

"Right shame, that."

Buffy rolled her eyes and rolled to her feet. "Look, I'm doing this with you or without you. We need to get someone in there and it's not going to be Fred. You know as well as I do that the demons responsible for this aren't going to be impressed by some rando off the street." She hesitated, then threw Fred an apologetic glance. "No offense."

Fred shook her head. "None taken. But I don't like this idea, either."

"I can handle myself." She turned back to Spike, crossing her arms. "Something the boyfriend of the Slayer should get over right the hell now, because this? This is my life. This is what it means to be with me. I don't stop doing and survey says I never will. That's just the way it is. It's what loving me means. So get with the program or prepare for a really uncomfortable eternity."

Okay, so that contained a bit more verbal diarrhea than she'd intended, but there was no taking back the words now that they were out. As it was, the fight seemed to leave Spike, his face falling slack. And she wondered, not for the first time, if she would ever become accustomed to those soft, awestruck looks he favored her with. The sort that had the power to zap the strength from her legs and make her heart do funky back-flips.

"Whoa nelly," the Host said, holding up his hands before pointing between her and Spike. "You two are a thing? How very Shakespearean of you."

"Not a bloke known for his happy endings, mate," Spike said, not taking his eyes off her. "So you'll understand if I'm not so keen on that comparison."

Buffy squirmed, crossing her arms as her cheeks flamed. "We good, then? You understand?"

A pause, then he nodded, looking like he was fighting off a grin. "We're good, love."

That should have ended the conversation, but it didn't. Not the one out loud, at least. The ongoing dialogue she'd had with herself since sneaking out on him reached decibel levels she hadn't known could exist, and the silence that existed outside of her head didn't help matters either. No one said anything after that, and she so needed them to. Needed anyone to give her a reason to drag her gaze from his, because it so wasn't doing it on its own. And the longer he looked at her...

Focus, dammit.

"Well," the Host drew out the word, "is it hot in here or is it just those two?"

"Slayer," Gunn snapped. "The plan?"

At last, Buffy blinked and jerked her focus back to where it belonged. "Yeah, a plan," she agreed, her voice all breathy like she'd just run a marathon. She was certain if she looked his way, she'd find Spike with a satisfied smirk, but she wasn't falling for that again. "Host...guy. Is there anything else we can call you?"

The Host's affable expression melted into a grimace, and it was his turn to shift. "Krevlornswath of the Deathwok Clan is my actual name."

"Krevla-what?"

"Exactly. Which is why the Host is easier." He paused. "Or Lorne. But I'm telling you—"

"Ha! Like Lorne Green!" Fred said brightly, clapping.

The Host—Lorne—lifted a hand and favored her with a patient smile. "Yeah. My first day here, I heard about a million of those jokes. All equally bad."

The smile of Fred's face faded just as quickly. "Sorry. But come on, how easy is that to remember?"

"I'm going to regret telling you that, aren't I?"

"Lorne," Buffy said, her voice carrying enough authority that everyone looked at her. "You're going to take Gunn prisoner."

"I'm what?" Lorne echoed.

"He's what?" Gunn demanded at the same time.

"There's no other way to get you in," Buffy said, shrugging. "Lorne already said these vamps have it out for him for directing your sister their way. So he brings you as a peace offering. Spike brings me as his meal-ticket into the joint. We Trojan their asses."

Gunn's eyes went so wide they nearly consumed his whole face. "We do what now?"

"Horse," Spike said on a laugh. "Trojan Horse."

"What did I say?"

"You left off the horse."

Lorne raised his hand. "I haven't been in this dimension long enough to follow. Are you saying we're going to use horse condoms? Because that's where this demon draws the line."

Buffy narrowed her eyes. "You already know every pop culture reference under the sun, but you don't know about the Trojan Horse?"

"Don't expect perfection, doll."

"Whatever." She sighed, shook her head, and looked back to Gunn, preparing for a fight and having none of the energy for it. "Make sense to you? Or is this going to be a problem?"

To her surprise and relief, he didn't respond by snapping her head off. Instead, he gave a thoughtful nod. "Yeah. That could work. Won't see either of us comin'." He flicked a glance to Spike. "How you gonna say you bested the Slayer?"

"Wouldn't be the first time," Spike replied. Then, when she glared at him, sat up a bit straighter. "My ex had some wonky mental powers and the like. Anyone asks, I'll say I picked a bit of that up myself. Slayer'll pretend to be under my thrall." He spared Buffy another glance. "That work, love?"

Yeah. It would. Except now she was thinking about him and Dru, and wasn't sure her stomach could handle it.

The claim would become more manageable with time, he'd said. Well, she was ready for it.

The pages she'd stuffed in her back pocket seemed to heat up at that. Buffy jolted and nodded, making a snap decision. "All right. So, that's figured out. You guys decide when we move. I need to talk to Fred."

She didn't wait around to see if there were any objections, rather bolted from her seat and stalked toward where she presumed the ladies room would be when and if this place ever became an actual business.

Thankfully, Fred was not so socially awkward that she hadn't recognized the need for girl talk. When she turned the corner, her expression was furtive and concerned. "What's up?" she whispered.

Buffy reached behind her and drew out the papers. "I found this at the warehouse," she whispered back. "Information from a book on vampires and...claims." A pause. "Can you look into this for me?"

Fred frowned and squinted at the tiny print. "Oh, my prescription needs to be adjusted. What are you hoping to find?"

"Anything. Maybe nothing. I dunno, but...it can't hurt, can it?"

"I'm so not the person to ask." Fred brought the page closer, scrunching up her face as though that would help. "But...yeah. I'll give it a look. Not sure I'll know what any of it means or understand it, but homework is this girl's specialty."

Another pang hit, this one of profound homesickness, but dammit, Buffy wouldn't cry. She'd had reason to leave Sunnydale—her mother had kicked her out of the house, for one. She didn't have a home to return to. And as much as she liked Fred, she missed Willow so much it was almost a physical ache. Willow and Xander and Giles and everyone who had helped her navigate two of the worst years of her life. The people who had helped her discover who she was.

Going back wasn't in the cards. Not now, at least. How could she return when she still didn't understand what had happened to her?

How could she expect her friends to accept that Spike was in her life, for better or worse, forever? They'd barely tolerated Angel. Returning with the announcement that she had a new vampire boyfriend, this one sans soul, and hey, it was forever because he'd gotten possessive and bitten her during sex?

God, she might not have friends to return to if that truth came out.

But if she discovered something about herself, about the new existence she led, something they couldn't argue with, maybe there was hope of going home after all.

"Thank you," Buffy said, plastering on a smile so fake it hurt. "I appreciate it, Fred."

"And I appreciate not being bait," Fred replied. "Happy to help."

Buffy nodded and released a long, steady breath. Then turned and to rejoin the demon, the hunter, and the vampire who loved her.

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When they were a block away from the entrance to Dusk, Spike gave up the fight, locked an arm around Buffy's waist, and tugged her into an alley. She didn't resist—couldn't much without drawing attention to herself. Plus, he'd cuffed her wrists before they'd left. The Slayer, all trussed up and ready to enter the sodding lion's den. Trusting him to get her in and to help fight their way out.

Once they were on the other side of this barmy plan, he'd take a moment to appreciate what that meant for him. For them.

"Just checkin' this," he said, pulling on the chain that linked her wrists together.

"Checking for what?" Buffy asked, laughter in her voice. That was all well and good for her. Add *find this amusing* to his list of things to do after.

"Just checking," he replied. "Make sure it's convincing."

"Convincing. A thing that you're not."

"Forgive a guy for worrying."

"I'm going to be fine."

"Right, well, I wanna see you do it again. Look at me, love." When she raised her green eyes to his, he felt his chest tighten on reflex. "Let's see it, the stare. Like I said. Outta focus, yeah? Try not to blink."

Buffy arched an eyebrow and blinked.

"Slayer, they won't buy you're under anyone's thrall if you look even halfway alert."

"Spike."

"Yeah?"

"I think I'm as ready as I'm going to be."

He released a hard breath, nodding and tugging on the cuffs again. "You're gonna see a lot at the first, if this joint is anythin' like the one I..." He paused, swallowing. "Can't react to any of it, you hear? They see life behind your eyes and that's the bloody game."

She gave him one of those nods that spoke plainly for just how much she didn't truly understand the world they were about to enter. There was one thing his Slayer didn't have, and that was a poker face. They'd gone over this a time or twenty before leaving—what she'd see when he paraded her over the threshold, what to expect. The club itself would be fine, probably, just window-dressing. But once she saw the humans being trafficked... Well, the plan could go belly-up right quick if she so much as flinched.

Spike cleared his throat, running a finger along one of the cuffs. "You sure you can snap these? Don't wanna find out at the wrong time that they're stronger than they look."

"I'd show you but then we'd be out a pair of cuffs."

He raised his gaze to hers, unable to stop his grin. "Right shame, that. We mighta had some fun with these, given enough time."

The delicate blush that lit her cheeks was enough to make a bloke forget his heart hadn't beat in more than a century. Buffy pressed her lips together and looked away. "Spike..."

"I know, I know." He stole a kiss before she could berate him again, then pressed his brow to hers. "Have I mentioned how much I hate this plan?"

"A time or two," Buffy replied. "You have Mr. Pointy?"

He grinned in spite of himself. "Mhmm," he said, and thrust his hips forward, reveling in the small sigh that tore off her lips. "And you can have him anytime you fancy."

"Spike—"

"Sorry, love. It's the cuffs. Gives a bloke ideas." He stepped back

and pulled his duster open so she could see where he'd hung her trusty stake on his belt. "Got another in my pocket just in case."

She nodded, her gaze lingering on the stake for a moment before she met his eyes again. "I know you're worried that I'm going to... I dunno, scream, 'I'm the Slayer' at the top of my lungs the second we get in there. But I know what's riding on this. I'll be fine."

"Easy to say now. You haven't been to a place like this. Unless your Watcher was less button-up than I thought."

A small, sad smile played across her lips at that, and some of the light in her eyes dimmed. The girl was getting homesick, whether she knew it or not. And though Spike had known to expect it, he couldn't help the rush of irritation that he had to notice it now when he didn't have the luxury of time to explore it properly. The number of conversations they needed to have was already intimidating enough.

"I'll be fine," Buffy promised, then tipped up to brush a soft kiss against his lips. "But thank you for worrying."

Yeah, moments like that were happening more often too. He ached to ask what they meant, especially since she now knew that he loved her.

"Right," Spike said, straightening his shoulders. "Then let's get this bloody show on the bloody road, shall we?"

Like any decent nightclub, Dusk had a line that curved around the block, jammed full of blokes trying not to be overly obvious as they salivated over the girls who wore practically nothing. Spike remembered marveling at the simplicity of the set-up when he'd visited the joint in Europe—how bloodsuckers had gamed the system and tricked their prey into begging to be victimized. It had struck him as funny then, but now, it just left him feeling hollow and anxious, and he wasn't sure how much of that was the Slayer's influence and how much was him turning into a docile housecat.

Though the bloke posing as a bouncer could pass as human, Spike's nose told him he wasn't. He steeled himself and approached, tugging the Slayer along like a piece of luggage, and shoved his way to the front of the line without bothering to acknowledge the complaints that arose from behind him.

The bouncer favored him with a narrow, unreadable look but didn't

say anything. Then he shifted his attention to Buffy, and Spike had to kill the urge to rip the git's eyes right out of his sodding head for how they lit up.

"Got me some primo merchandise here," Spike said low enough for any decent demon to hear. He jostled the cuffs. "Heard this might be the right place to shop her around."

The demon hadn't removed his gaze from Buffy, the greed on his face unmistakable. At length, he leaned forward and replied in a low undertone, "What is she?"

He felt Buffy tense, but thankfully she didn't otherwise react. If they got out of this alive, he could look forward to an earful about that remark.

Spike plastered on a cocky grin and threw an arm around the Slayer's shoulders. "I'll tell you, but information's not free." When the demon responded to this with a scowl, Spike threw up his free hand and steered Buffy back a step. "Perfectly happy to take my goods elsewhere, mate. Though I wager your boss might just lop your head off when he learns what he missed out on."

The demon's lip curled and his eyes flashed red. Spike answered with a growl of his own, letting his fangs partially descend. While he didn't think he'd have to throw any punches, the key to skating by in these places was to always be ready to brawl.

A second later, the demon backed down and jerked his head to the club. "Bar," he grunted. "Ask for Dareth."

Spike held his gaze a moment longer before nodding. "Come on, pet," he said, steering the Slayer to the entrance. "Let's go make a bloody deal."

YEAH, this was harder than she'd anticipated. Staring straight ahead when every instinct in her body screamed *danger* and her extra slayer-granted spidey-senses were on full blast. The air itself seemed to pulse with otherworldly energy, the sort she was best at smashing to pieces, and she couldn't so much as steal a glance at what sort of baddies might have her surrounded.

Spike didn't glance at her until he reached the bar, though his movements were stiff and she could tell how tense he was. His expression remained casual, perhaps a bit impatient, but his eyes burned with concern when they met hers.

"All right, Slayer?" that look said.

But she couldn't respond. There was no telling who might be watching.

Spike knew this, of course. He gave a clipped nod and turned to wave down the bartender. "Oi! Got some business with a bloke called Dareth. Mind pointin' a fella in the right direction?"

From her peripheral, she saw the bartender aim a glare their way, his posture unnaturally rigid. After a moment, he slung a dishrag over his shoulder and shuffled over. Buffy concentrated on keeping her expression slack and hoped to whatever was out there that this guy couldn't hear her heart thundering.

"No one comes in here and demands to see Dareth," the guy snarled in a low undertone. "Not unless he has a death wish."

"Guess today's a day for the books then, innit?" Spike replied, unconcerned. He struck a match and lit a cigarette, drew in a puff, and blew a line of smoke into the bartender's face. "Got him somethin' he's gonna want to see. Wager she'll fetch a pretty price, but I promise she'll be worth every penny."

Buffy tried not to bristle when she felt the bartender's gaze roam over her. She'd dressed provocatively on purpose—Spike's jaw had probably left a mark in the floor from where he'd dropped it. Fred had loaned her a criminally short skirt, even by Buffy's standards, and a see-through mesh top that might as well have been painted on. The point had been to attract attention, but at the moment, she felt little more than naked.

"We don't discuss business up here," the bartender said at last. "And you don't decide what Dareth wants. Dareth decides. Your hot piece ain't any hotter than the ones we get for free."

Spike rocked on his heels. "That so? So you get slayers in here on the regular?"

The bartender was silent for a moment. When he spoke again, his voice was an octave lower than before, trembling. "What'd you say?"

Her vampire leaned in. "This here's the Slayer. Chosen bird. She who makes life a right nuisance for blokes like you and me."

"You brought the Vampire Slayer into—"

"Ah, ah, ah." Spike held up his hands, flashing a winning grin. "No need to draw attention. We're just talking, you and I."

"If she's the one I've heard about, then you got more than a death wish, buddy."

"It's a sorry state of things when just mentioning the bloody Slayer gets otherwise respectable gents wetting their britches. She look threatenin' to you?" Spike turned to her and snapped his fingers in front of her face. Then lowered those fingers and pinched her nipple through her top. It took every ounce of willpower not to squirm. Or sigh. Or smack him. Or all of the above. "See?" he said, turning back to the bartender. "Safe as houses."

The bartender coughed. "You drugged the Slayer?"

"Oi. Not that kinda guy."

"Then how—"

"You gonna get me Dareth or what? I got night to burn and don't fancy spendin' it making my sale's pitch to the help."

The bartender's lip curled and he leaned forward. "What say I lop off that shiny head of yours and keep the Slayer for myself, huh?"

"Try it, mate," Spike replied calmly. "See what happens when yours truly isn't around to keep her under. I'll laugh myself all the way to Hell."

"You really think she'd make it out alive?"

"Maybe not, but you definitely wouldn't."

There was a long, tense beat in which the bartender just glared, and a jolt of panic shot through Buffy's system. She knew Spike sensed it, for he curled his fist around the handcuff chain, but otherwise didn't take his gaze off the man in front of him.

At last, the bartender inclined his head, the movement so subtle she almost missed it. Then he straightened and said, "There's a door by the johns that says staff only. Shave and a haircut. Tell 'em you talked to Pink."

If that was supposed to make sense, well, she was in trouble. But Spike nodded and steered her away all the same.

A few seconds later, they were at the door in question. Spike raised his fist and rapped his knuckles against it in a familiar *rat-tatat-tat-tat.*

Oh, right. Shave and a haircut.

The door opened by a sliver, a blood-red eye taking up the gap.

"Pink sent me over to see if Dareth was in the market for a slayer," Spike drawled.

The eye widened. "The Vampire Slayer?"

"You know of any other?"

The eye disappeared, then the door opened fully to reveal a gnarly-faced demon with slate-gray skin, two narrow slits for nostrils, and a head full of tentacles.

"Is that really the Slayer?" it rasped in a deep, greedy voice.

"If the price is right," Spike replied, running a hand down her bare arm, making her skin tingle and perhaps the most poorly timed thrill of arousal twinge inside her. He must have sensed that too, for he dropped that hand to her ass and gave it a squeeze.

The demon's eyes went saucer-shaped and he nodded his big ugly head. "Follow me."

It wasn't until Buffy had been led down a third flight of stairs that the hard second-thoughts started to hit. Followed by the third and fourth thoughts. She inhaled deeply, sweat beginning to gather at her temples and her pulse suddenly thumping. She'd never thought of herself as claustrophobic, but the farther she got from the world above, the tighter her skin seemed, as though she might burst out of it.

"You understand," the demon ahead said to Spike, "that a demonstration will be in order to prove she is what you say she is before I let you meet the committee."

The demonstration part they'd prepared for—had a nice little routine choreographed and everything.

"I try to make it a point not to do business with complete berks, so I'd bloody well hope so," Spike replied. "Who all's on this committee?"

The demon glanced over his shoulder. "How much do you know about our operation?"

"Enough to know you lot would appreciate what I have to offer."

"We are the only operation of this size on the west coast," the demon agreed, leading them around another corner. "Merchandise is typically

filtered through a quality control system, then priced and auctioned accordingly. But for premium product, the committee is allowed first right of refusal. It's possible the Slayer won't leave the building."

"Ever had a slayer before?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Then she won't."

The demon hummed low in his throat. "How did you catch her?"

"Hunting slayers is what I do, mate," Spike replied. "Usually don't have much wiggle left to them once I'm done, but something about this one's too feisty to kill without having a spot of fun first."

A hard chill shot down Buffy's spine, her heart beginning a mad pound against her chest and her vision went a bit sideways. Those words, just a short time ago, would have been entirely true rather than just mostly. While it seemed like a lifetime had passed since she'd left Sunnydale for everything that had happened since, it had been a handful of days at best. Since Angel had attempted to awaken Acathla, and she'd been forced to run him through with a sword. And before that, she and Spike had been enemies in every sense. Bitter enemies.

"I'd rather be fightin' you, anyway," he'd told her the night she'd broken his back. And she'd seen it in his eyes—the rush, the urgency, the thrill of the hunt. He'd wanted her dead, yes, but it had never been personal. Just another bragging right. Spike, the slayer of Slayers, bagging number three.

He'd killed and enjoyed it. And he'd stopped because he loved her.

"All right," the demon said, leading them into a small, empty room. "Let's see what she can do, shall we?"

Spike nodded and dragged her around so she was in front of him, then lowered his head just a fraction to catch her eyes. "Slayer," he murmured, and in spite of everything, the low rumble of his voice made her body react. "Be in my eyes. Look at me."

This man who had wanted her dead now looked at her with worry and love.

"Now wake up."

Buffy jerked her head back, her body singing with relief at being allowed to move. She forced her face into a sneer and smashed her leg

into his gut, sending him across the room in a blur of black leather, before turning her attention to the demon by the door, who looked both delighted and terrified.

"It *is* the Slayer!" the thing cried.

"Wanna demo?" Buffy spat, then flipped toward them—a feat she'd never attempted while handcuffed and was grateful to discover she could in fact pull it off. She delivered another hard kick and he joined Spike on the floor with a hard crash.

"Control her!" he yelped. "Before she—"

Spike snarled and tackled her to the ground, then chuckled when she squirmed beneath him. "Oh, baby," he purred in her ear. "Harder. Just like that."

"Control her, you maniac!"

He flipped her over so her back was pressed to the floor, and damn, she didn't know what it said about her that the sight of him above her, fangs out, made her clit throb. Spike snagged her flailing hands and lowered his head so they were eye-to-eye.

"Look at me now, dove."

Buffy bucked again and started when she felt his cock pressing down against her. His eyes flashed and a look of pure want stormed over his face.

"Be in me," he murmured, holding her gaze. Again, she seemed to feel the words down to her bones. "Be in my eyes."

He'd told her to do it slow to make it believable. That most people struggled when they went under—at least, the strong ones did. So for a few seconds, she put up a modicum of resistance telegraphed through increasingly sluggish jerks of her arms and rolls of her hips. By the time she fell completely still, he was panting and staring at her in a way that made her feel stripped bare.

"There's a good love," he murmured, then leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her brow. "Nice and easy."

He nipped at her lips before lifting his head again, and she wasn't sure if that was for her benefit or their audience.

"That's incredible," the demon said, also breathless though likely for very different reasons. "Are you a hypnotist?"

Spike chuckled, rising to his feet and pulling Buffy to hers. "Somethin' like that."

"Can you teach others to do what you just did?"

"Can, but they got to have a bit of the touch for it to work."

"The touch?"

He tapped his head. "My lady sees things. Things that have happened or will soon. That's how she found me, point of fact. The dollies she talks to told her the best thing in her unlife would be in some miserable alley one night. Get wonky visions myself sometimes. It's what brought us together."

The heat that had suffused her just seconds ago was chased away by sudden cold. It was such a dumb, small thing to focus on, but her brain hiccupped upon hearing Spike refer to Drusilla like they were still a thing. Except it was more than a hiccup—it was a feeling. An ache in her gut that clenched and squeezed before spreading outward, through her arms and legs until she thought she might burst if she didn't get to move. Not just move—scream. Lash out. Seize Spike by the shoulders and sink her teeth into his throat. The impulse, the need, startled her so much she might have fallen over had he not steadied a hand around her waist.

"And you can do"—the demon dragged his eyes up and down her body—"anything to her when she's like this?"

"Yeah," Spike said, and unless she was imagining things, his voice sounded tenser than it had before. "Wanna see?"

The demon nodded, and Spike whirled around again, and the roar inside her became a purr when their eyes locked.

"Spread your legs, Slayer."

Her heart performed another somersault. He couldn't be serious.

He arched an eyebrow. Crap, he was.

Buffy parted her legs and widened her stance, forcing herself to swallow a gasp when he moved into her space. Then he was everywhere, overpowering her senses in a way that angry, primal part of her liked very, very much.

"Wider," Spike murmured and slipped a hand under the hem of her skirt. "She won't move a muscle unless I want her to," he said loudly, eyes burning into hers. "I'll show you."

This hadn't been part of the plan. Buffy took advantage of the fact that Spike was blocking the demon's line of sight and let out a small sigh and arched an eyebrow at him. The corners of his mouth tugged up in a smirk but fell again and he scowled back in warning. Then his fingers edged under the fabric at her crotch and drew a line up the seam of her slick pussy. It took every ounce of willpower not to twitch or gasp, her legs beginning to shake.

Spike inhaled deeply and leaned close. "Naughty," he breathed.

Buffy wasn't sure if he was referring to the fact that she was turned on right now or what he was doing. And she didn't get much time to wonder before he dipped his index and middle finger inside of her.

"See how still she is," Spike said as the pad of his thumb settled over her clit. "Could bring her out now. Make her scream for you. Make her do anything you fancy. She's bloody helpless."

Good god, she was so going to let him have it when this was over.

The demon released a long sigh. "That is...umm. Good. Yes, very good. Please wait here. The committee is currently overseeing another matter, but they will definitely want to talk with you. I'll return shortly."

A door opened and closed, and then they were alone.

Buffy parted her lips to say something, though she had no idea what. Either to snap at him for taking advantage of the situation or demand he finish what he'd started. Spike then covered her mouth with his, and the part of her gearing up to fight surrendered. Her heart hadn't been in it anyway—not after the last few minutes. The soft touches, stolen looks, and grinding they'd done during their mock-fight had decided the battle for her.

She was tired of fighting him and herself. What did it matter if she didn't know how she felt? So many things in this world were uncertain, but that she wanted Spike was not one of them.

"Buffy," Spike growled against her lips, thrusting his fingers into her harder, faster. "Fuck, I'd forgotten how tight you are." He grinned when she gasped, twisting his wrist and pressing down on something inside of her. "You can't scream, love. They'll hear you."

White hot heat shot through her at lightning-speed, racing toward an explosion. "Spike—"

"So bite your tongue when you come, all right?" And without waiting for a reply, he sank to his knees, hiked one of her legs over his shoulder, and sucked her clit between his lips.

Buffy bit her tongue so hard blood filled her mouth. Spike growled, the bones in his face shifting, and tongued her clit as she spasmed around his fingers. He waited until the tremors began to subside before pulling back and lapping at her drenched flesh with throaty groans that nearly had her tumbling over the edge again.

"Fuck, I love you," he whispered against her. "Buffy..."

If he expected a reply, she had none to give him. She could barely string two words together in her head, let alone attempt to voice the jumble of emotion she hadn't yet named. But the moment passed and he didn't press her. Instead, he hooked his hand under the leg on his shoulder and guided her foot back to the ground. Then he rose to his feet, yellow eyes still blazing, and claimed her mouth again.

They didn't have time, so Buffy gave up trying to frame her thoughts into words. Instead, she seized him by the lapels of his duster and poured every confused thought into her kiss. And, god yes, she'd missed this. Missed the way he felt against her, how he threw himself into every move and stroke. How he seemed to need this like she needed air. It was intense and inconvenient and a lot of other things, but it was theirs, and she hadn't realized how much she'd missed it until that moment.

How much she'd missed him.

But it couldn't last forever. Not here. Too soon, Spike groaned, sucked at her still-bleeding tongue, before doing what she couldn't and pulling back.

"I know," he said, pressing his ridged brow against her smooth one. "You don't have to say it."

Good. Because she didn't know.

"Didn't mean to take it that far. Puttin' on a show..." He shook his head and pulled back, his face shifting back to human. "I know. And it's fine."

Buffy frowned and, for the second time, tried to open her mouth and demand answers. But he pressed his fingers to her lips and shook his head.

"Later," he said.

Then the door behind him opened, and she understood.

"The committee will see you now," the demon announced.

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That had either been bloody brilliant or the stupidest thing a bloke could've done. Spike couldn't keep from licking his lips, savoring the taste of her that lingered there, even if it went straight to his cock and made concentrating on the present something of a challenge.

He'd meant what he said, but fuck, a man could hope. After the play-acting that had gotten her pressed up against him, after the shine he'd seen in her eyes, maybe their days of being platonic roomies were coming to an end.

First, though, he needed to get her out of the building alive.

Spike stopped short when the snake-headed demon came to a halt. The nasty little bugger took a moment to turn and appraise Buffy from head to toe—and not that Spike could blame the guy, but if this git so much as sniffed at her, he was tearing his foul head right off. Cover or no cover. Granted, he'd gotten himself into the situation by the show he'd put on—touching the Slayer like that hadn't been a part of the bloody plan, but fuck, Spike knew wankers like these and if seeing her in pain didn't do it for them, seeing her in pleasure sure as hell would. Still, that was where it ended. Unless Buffy got her jollies from exhibitionism, but he somewhat doubted this was the case.

"She is an exquisite creature," the demon intoned.

Right. Like he needed to be told.

"The best one I've had," Spike agreed.

"Yet you wish to sell her. I know it's not my place, but I'm not sure I could make the same choice if given the chance." The demon licked its lips—or the space lips would be if he'd had any.

The primal part of Spike that he had come to accept as being tied to the claim gave a tremulous roar. *Mine!*

Somehow, Spike managed to push that back and shrugged a shoulder instead. "If it gets me in, I reckon I'll earn more than my fair share of reward over time. Slayers come and go, after all. Could be fun to try and catch the next one."

He felt Buffy stiffen and was thankful he stood between her and the slimy lackey. Though she wore her bloody emotions on her sleeve, he had to admit she'd done an admirable job thus far. But he could hear her heart hammering, felt the way it skipped when he talked about his past with slayers. He wondered if she was thinking about the first time they'd met, how he'd stepped out of the shadows, all balls and swagger, and declared with complete confidence that he'd kill her over the coming weekend. Or what had happened after—how he'd gotten close then and so many times. When she'd been a trembling little girl on Halloween or the night she'd crashed an organ on his back. Incidents and encounters that seemed like a lifetime ago, yet recent enough that he recalled the things he'd thought then. How real those threats had been—how badly he'd wanted to fight her because it was as close to fucking another woman as he'd ever gotten. How badly he'd wanted to fuck her even then, and how much that had scared him because, as far as he'd been concerned, Dru was the only woman for him. Sure, he'd gotten off on killing slayers before—with Dru. But since arriving in Sunnydale, his fantasies involving sex and the Slayer had had little to do with Dru. Well, truthfully, *nothing* to do with Dru. In those fantasies, it had been just him and the Slayer, fighting hard and fucking harder. It had bothered him then but he understood it now. Part of him, from that first night, had wanted Buffy. Maybe that was why it had been so easy for him to make the switch—the second he'd kissed her in that bloody school, his path had been chosen for him.

She probably didn't think about those times the same way he did. But if the way her heart was hammering was any indication, that mind of hers had been working nonstop since they'd stepped inside. And if he could hear it then the other vamps would be able to too. If he was lucky, maybe they'd figure that she was still coming down from the orgasm they'd be able to smell on her.

But if this went the way it ought to, Buffy need not keep the act up much longer. Then they could go home and suss everything out properly. Preferably sans clothing.

"Don't hold me to this," the little bugger said before knocking on the door, "but Dareth has been a little less than pleased with Viktor the Butcher's performance."

"Oh, really?" Spike drawled as though he knew or cared who this Viktor person was.

"Viktor was instrumental in the expansion plans," the demon continued. "The favorite to head setting up the east coast operation and become Master of New York."

Master of New York? These wankers really thought they were tough shit. If he weren't so keen on playing this straight, he'd laugh himself silly.

"Love New York," he said honestly. "Killed my second slayer there. Bloody brilliant night that was."

Again, he felt Buffy stiffen, and she didn't relax so easily this time. Maybe because she sensed the truth in those words—most of what he'd said tonight had been all bluster, but there were certain realities he couldn't run away from. That night *had* been brilliant and he couldn't say he regretted it—something he bizarrely regretted. Because he wasn't an idiot—he knew how much easier all of this would be if he could muster up a real human conscience. The sort that had driven Angel all screwy, only without the escape clause.

Perhaps that was what kept the Slayer at arm's length. Hell, he knew it had to be part of it at least. The idea that he might decide he liked chasing, hunting, and killing too much to stop on anyone's account, even hers. And he wasn't sure what he could do or offer to make that worry go away.

"Play your cards right, and it could be yours," the demon chum

said, then wrapped his scaly knuckles on what looked like an ordinary piece of wall. Except walls typically didn't knock back or open, but this section did. Blink and you miss it, a door appearing from nowhere.

Spike swallowed and tugged on the cuffs as the demon disappeared into a dark corridor. This was bloody it.

The hallway was a short one, and he could see almost immediately that it led to an auditorium-type room. This had to be it—there were a total of five vamps sitting in a semicircle, scowling and doing what they could to look rich and important. And, he was surprised to see, they weren't as old as he would have guessed. Not that he could really tell a vamp's age from across the room, but the older lot had a different feel about them. Heavier, less to prove, so they didn't waste much time with intimidation tactics. Their very presence was intimidation enough.

These five were all bedecked in black with a black goatees and long, stringy black hair. Like a sodding KISS tribute band without the makeup.

For the second time in less than three minutes, Spike fought the urge to laugh.

In the center of the room stood the Host, Lorne, who was gabbing a mile a minute and holding onto a very rigid Charles Gunn. Better yet, the crossbow was within easy grabbing distance at the hunter's feet. The green fella didn't so much as flinch or turn around when tentacle-head stomped in behind him, which was good because Lorne and Gunn being in the room at the same time had been a best-case pie-in-the-sky scenario, and Spike was feeling giddy enough to gloat. Looked like Christmas was indeed coming early this year.

The git in the middle of the Goth-rejects lineup abruptly shifted his attention to Spike, then to Buffy, and lingered there. He waited a minute before holding up a hand, signaling Lorne to stop babbling. "Marvin," he said in a very important voice, "I take it this is the Slayer."

"The Slayer?" Lorne flinched and whirled around, dragging Gunn with him. Gunn, who had a ball gag in his mouth and a very sour expression on his face.

This time, Spike couldn't swallow his laughter if he tried, but the

others in the room seemed to share his amusement and chuckled along with him.

Gunn's eyes narrowed into slits.

"Seems I might be interruptin' a party," Spike said loudly. "This one for eats or for fun?"

"This one," the Middle Goth said in a very important voice, "is our green friend's way of apologizing for an unfortunate incident that occurred earlier this week. One thing you will learn if you get into this business... Spike, was it?"

Spike felt Buffy tremble just by virtue of standing so near her. Either she was getting properly nervous or found his as amusing as he did. Knowing her, the latter.

"Yeah, Spike," he agreed. "Take it you're the Dareth who makes everyone soil their knickers around here."

A slow, confident smile was his answer. "That would be me. Spike, you'll find that some of our playthings like to play the hero. This meat sack calls himself a vamp hunter. Guess he missed the memo about slayers not having dicks to swing around and thought he'd try out for the part. We sent him a message earlier this week by way of his sister and would have been happy to let sleeping dogs lie. But he seems determined to join her, and we are nothing if not accommodating."

Spike was certain that Dareth fancied himself big and intimidating, but he just looked like a kid playing dress-up.

Lorne brought his hands up, and either he was a very good actor or he was scared pissless. "I made a mistake," he said to the vamp-in-charge. "I know that."

"You told the girl where to find us. You brought a hunter into our den. She nearly cost us five and a quarter that night."

Spike perked his brows. "You lot do that well, then?"

Dareth nodded slowly, looking back to him. "Business is very good," he agreed. "Very...very good. And it's about to get better. Marvin tells us your girl passed the test with flying colors. Pretty ripe, too, from the smell of things. Tell me...how does she taste?"

Again, Spike felt Buffy go stiff. He wasn't sure how long she intended to keep the act up, but this entire thing was her show. Until she gave the cue, he'd play the part.

"Decadent," he replied. "Peaches and cream. So much so I'm starting to get second thoughts. Puss this hot and tight might be outta your price range."

Dareth curled his lip back. The leer on his face bloody well advertised all the things he intended to do to Buffy before putting her on the market. And something in Spike clicked, his stake in what was about to happen shifting from impersonal to personal. He was going to kill this wanker, and he would enjoy every bloody second.

"I think you'll find," Dareth said, running his eyes up and down Buffy in a way that pretty much said he didn't care much for those eyes, "that we can be...quite generous. Did Marvin discuss the partnership? Our operation is expanding. We could use someone of your... particular talent to acquire other high-end products for our clientele."

Oh yeah. He was killing this guy. And if Buffy didn't make the first move here soon, he definitely would.

She must still be waiting for something.

Then it hit him.

"Expanding," he said. "Where all are we now?"

Dareth's smile turned a tad smugger at the word *we.* Bloke was much too confident for his health.

"Today, Los Angeles. New York is next. Once we set up market there, I do believe the world will be our oyster. Now, show us how you get her to perform for you. From the smell of things, she enjoyed herself."

Spike tightened his jaw, the reins he had on his temper snapping. And either Buffy sensed it or had arrived at the same decision, because the next instant, he heard the telltale snap of the cuffs and nearly swore his relief.

"Sorry," Buffy said in that bright, peppy way of hers that made Spike wonder just how long he'd had a schoolgirl fetish. "I so did not sign up for a fang bang."

It took Dareth and the others a full two seconds to realize what had happened. Those two seconds, more than anything, was what decided how the next thirty went. By the time outrage had conquered Dareth's lust, Buffy had seized her favorite stake out from where Spike had stashed it on his belt and it was flying across the room in a bloody

perfect spiral. It hit the git to Dareth's right, who barely had time to look down in shock before he crumbled into dust.

Dareth gawked for a moment, his face a moving portrait of fury. "Marvin!" he screamed, but that was as far as he got before Spike tackled him to the ground, the back-up stake pressed against his chest.

The room descended into chaos.

AFTER THE VAMP seated next to the head honcho went up in a cloud of dust, everyone lost their collective minds, no more so than Spike. Buffy had barely had time to whirl around before she saw him practically fly across the room in what could only be called a blind rage, having apparently taken Dareth's leers to heart. In a blink, the two collided, tumbling over each other on the ground until Spike, leveraging his strength and experience, straddled the creep and began raining down punches on his pallid Goth face. A solid strategy, except it left his back exposed and suddenly the room was a frenzy of chaotic movement.

Buffy leap-frogged over Lorne, who was cowering near the floor and frantically handing Gunn the arrows he'd smuggled in under his shirt. Mr. Pointy lay near the pile of ash formerly known as Vamp Crony Number One, and until she got her hands on it, she felt much too vulnerable for her liking.

"Spike!" she snapped, dropping to the ground and sliding toward her stake. "Watch—"

But a pair of hands seized her by the shoulder and swung her around. Vamp Crony Number Two snarled down at her in full game face.

"Where do you think you're off to, Slayer?"

"Dropped something of mine," she replied, smashing her foot against his ugly nose. The vamp cried out and released her, stumbling back a few blind steps. When she whirled around again, Mr. Pointy was no longer where she'd left it—another crony had snatched it up and was barreling down on Spike at a speed she wouldn't be able to match.

"Spike!" she screamed, her heart in her throat. And for a second,

she thought this was the end. She was certain. Spike had his back was to her, his fists flying in blind fury, his lips curled over his fangs in a wild snarl.

She was thrown back to the mansion without her mind's permission, to the second she'd thrust the sword through Angel's chest and watched as Hell gobbled him up. And yeah, only days had passed, but right then, that moment seemed so long ago, so distant—like it had happened to another person. But here she was, and this was somehow worse. Watching as time slowed to a crawl but sped by at the same time. Watching as Spike, oblivious, made himself the perfect target for some nobody who was about to tear him out of this world.

"Spike!" she screamed again, fighting to her feet. Then an arrow whizzed by her head, close enough that it caused a tuft of hair to flutter after it, and embedded itself into the chest of the vamp at Spike's back. And just like that, the threat went up in a shower of dust.

It seemed impossible that the worst second of her life could be so anticlimactic. That it would happen from nowhere, without an apocalypse as the backdrop, without a larger-than-life Big Bad. In a blink, Spike could have been dust. Here one second and gone the next.

She might have never gotten to tell him...

What? Tell him what?

"Slayer!" Gunn yelled, running past her. "Snap out of it!"

Buffy shook her head and refocused. He was right—this was not the time to reflect. She needed to dust these jerks, grab her vampire, and get the hell out of Dodge.

Thankfully, Spike was no longer trying to punch his way to China, starting with Dareth's skull. The ringleader had been reduced to ash and Spike was on his feet again, swinging at someone else, apparently none the wiser that he'd almost been dust, himself. Damn, she was so going to kick his ass later.

Lorne flew by her with a loud squeal, slipping on the ground and grabbing one of the now-vacated seats for balance. The vamp on his tail snarled and made to lunge, but the Host hefted the chair into his arms and braced it as a shield. "We don't have to do this," he said, taking tentative steps backward and keeping the seat legs pointed at the vamp's chest. "Let's all...come together and give peace a chance."

The vampire blinked. Behind him, Gunn fired another arrow bolt, and Buffy saw with growing horror more vampires fighting their way into the room. Apparently, Marvin had been successful in calling for reinforcements. Buffy swore and made a break for the stake Spike's would-be assassin had dropped when he'd dusted. Once she had it, something in her calmed, and she jumped into the fray, moving on instinct.

Somehow, even as the air was rent with roars and snarls, she still heard Lorne's irrational babbling.

"Imagine all the people. Uhh...Eleanor Rigby, Sergeant Pepper... even Lucy, all able to just admire some Norwegian wood in a yellow submarine."

Gunn fired the last of his arrows, then cursed and brought the crossbow down on the head of the nearest vamp.

"I wanna hold everyone's hand and simply say, 'Love me do. You know I love you.'"

"Sure know how to throw a party, Slayer," came from her back. Buffy turned in time to catch Spike wink at her. And again she acted on instinct, grabbing him by the lapels of his duster and dragging him down for a brief but fierce kiss, fangs and all.

Sure, she was going to let him have it later, but at the moment, she was just too happy he was alive.

"More where that comes from, love," he murmured against her lips. "Glad to give it to you anytime." The asshole winked again, then swung around and shoved his stake into the chest of the nearest attacker.

The jerk was enjoying this. He'd nearly gotten himself killed and he was *enjoying* this.

Buffy tightened her fist around Mr. Pointy and began swinging without mercy—kicking here, ducking there, and was soon breathing nothing but dust. While Dareth and his friends definitely won the numbers game, the cavalry was comprised of a bunch of sloppy underlings who likely had never been in a fight like this. They were clumsy and confused, which made for a lethal combination. She fell into a rhythm that was both easy and natural, like it had been choreographed and she wasn't the only one who knew the steps. Spike was with her, laughing and jeering and taking out lackeys left and right. Even Gunn

seemed to have gotten the moves down, and though he didn't look nearly as elated, Buffy could tell he wasn't having a bad time, either.

Not once had she considered fights like this fun. Even if they included a green demon spouting off song lyrics like it was his job. Which, yeah, was a first.

"I got a ticket to ride," Lorne went on, only he wasn't speaking to just one vamp anymore. In fact, he seemed to have snared the attention of each remaining member of Dareth's backup, who were either too befuddled by what he was saying to realize their companions had dusted or all extremely determined to shut the green guy up. Maybe both. "Yesterday, life was such an easy game to play. Now we are grown and we want to be doctors and lawyers and paperback writers. But we need to stop in the name of love and twist and shout."

"Oi!" Spike yelled from across the room, a mad grin on his face. "That doesn't fit! You can't've run outta Beatles material already, mate."

Lorne threw him a death glare, which Gunn punctuated by thrusting an arrow he'd collected off the floor into the back of the nearest lackey. This jump-started the fight again, but by this time, it was so much shooting fish in a barrel. Those who were left made themselves easy targets. Almost took the sport out of it.

How this could be true when just minutes earlier, a stake had nearly stolen Spike's life, Buffy didn't know. And she didn't want to think about it—how negligible and random the universe was, how life-changing moments could happen in the middle of a fight that was, at its core, not dissimilar from most of the other fights she'd found herself in.

"If we could do that we could all achieve our inner walrus," Lorne was saying when Buffy seized Spike's stake out of his hands, twirled midair, and launched it into the chest of an advancing enemy, "have diamonds in the sky and life would go on. It would be a good day sunshine."

"Trust me," Spike continued jovially. "No day in the sunshine's a good one for me."

"So simply praise the lord and let it be," Lorne concluded as Buffy plunged her stake into the last lackey standing, and just like that, the room pitched to silence again.

For a long moment, no one said anything. Buffy kept twisting around, looking for signs of movement, but there were no hiding places left. The chairs had toppled over and the floor was covered in a layer of dust. Spike stood where she'd left him, wiping off his duster, still in game face, his lips pulled into a smirk. He seemed to vibrate with energy. If she hadn't known better, she might have believed the concern that had shadowed him earlier had been a figment of her imagination. But Spike wasn't beholden to those kinds of moods—he'd worried, yes, but when he was in action, he threw himself all in. And enjoyed it.

"What the hell," Gunn said finally, panting and wiping a heaping of vamp remains off his face, "was that about?"

"I know, right?" Spike agreed, shaking the last bit of dust from his duster. "Really expected more security here. Seemed a bit too easy, didn't it?"

"Too easy?" Buffy echoed. "You were almost one of these dust piles, Spike. Gunn saved your ass."

Spike snorted and rolled his eyes. "Always had it handled, love. Have some bloody faith."

Okay, now she was worried for his health again, because she might just stake the bastard herself.

Gunn shook his head. "I was talking about him." He pointed at Lorne. "Was any of that supposed to make sense?"

"No," Lorne said slowly, drawing the word out. "It was supposed to keep as many vampires distracted as possible. Slow them down, let the blond duo level the playing field as much as possible. You're welcome, by the way."

"Welcome? 'Cause you rambled on like a lunatic for five minutes?"

Lorne spread his arms. "I'm a lover, not a fighter! I panicked!" He shuddered and shook his head, turning to Buffy. "No offense, doll, but please don't make me a part of your plans going forward. I'll serve the victory drinks but, line? That's where I'm drawing it." He panted a few breaths. "It's drinks time now, right?"

"First we need to get all the humans out of here safely," she replied, the rush of adrenaline finally starting to slow. "Then you can drink as much as you want."

Lorne shook his head, slapping a hand over his chest. "I think I'll just...wait here. You guys go on."

Spike snorted and, when Buffy turned to glare at him, just waggled his eyebrows and gestured for the door. "After you, Slayer."

Yeah. Once they were alone, she would let him have it.

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Spike was in such a jubilant mood that Buffy almost hated to wreck it for him. Almost. Every time she felt her conviction waver, she'd close her eyes and imagine his exposed back and the stake that had almost been buried there. How just a second here or there had spared her from watching another man she cared about die.

He stopped when they were almost to their building, whirled around and rocked excitedly on his heels. "Fancy a run through the cemetery? Still got some energy to burn."

Buffy shook her head. "We need to talk. Keep walking."

He sighed, his shoulders dropping. "Sounds more like you need to yell. What's got your knickers all twisted, Slayer? We fought the good fight and won. Best case scenario, that. Charlie got to do in the dolts who killed kid sis, and I lost count of how many little humans you sent home to their own beddy-bys tonight."

"Not here," Buffy said, taking him by the elbow and steering him home.

Spike didn't say anything else on the walk, though his mood change couldn't have been more apparent. Gone were the wicked smirks and self-indulgent chuckles. No, he'd swung the pendulum so hard he'd

landed on sulky teenager, which both amused and annoyed her because that was so her role.

Once they were safely on the other side of the door, Spike sighed and turned to face her, stretching his arms wide. "Let me have it, then. But before you get started, you oughta know that you were givin' pretty good yourself, love."

What the hell did that mean?

"Huh?" she asked before she could stop herself.

"That tussle in front of the tentacled-bloke, and don't play bloody coy. You were bein' downright naughty."

Buffy blinked, her temples beginning to pound. "Wait—you're talking about the audition room?"

"You're not?" Some of the fight in him vanished. "I knew I took it too far in there. But I also know the kind of show wankers like that want to see."

This was so not what she'd intended to yell at him over, but now that they were on the subject, she decided to go with it. "So getting me to spread my legs when he hadn't said a word about that had nothing to do with the fact that you were horny."

"Wouldn't throw stones, love. You nearly melted my skin off when I touched you. Could smell it all over you and he could too. I guarantee it."

"Because you—" Buffy stopped, gathering control of herself, and shook her head. That was a road they didn't need to go down. Not right now, and particularly not when even talking about it had parts of her shaking for reasons completely unrelated to anger. "You know what? No. I'm not fighting with you about this, even though, yes. Skeezy."

"That I made you come or that you enjoyed it?"

"That you nearly died tonight, Spike!"

That seemed to take the wind out of his sails. Spike, who had been open-mouthed, ready to fire back at her, blinked and somewhat deflated. "I what now?"

"You. Nearly. Died."

"Did not."

"You went all Cave Spike on Dareth and even after he was very much dead, you were punching him like a maniac."

"So you're saying I was hitting his dust, then? Think I woulda remembered that."

"You had him. You had him and that wasn't enough for you."

Spike stared at her, started to say something, stopped, and shook his head. "Fine. Fine. I got a mite carried away. Couldn't stand the way the wanker was eyeballing you. But I hardly think—"

"He was eyeballing me because you made me reek of sex before we got in there. And that's not even the point!" Buffy took a deep breath, willing herself to calm. "The point is, while you were losing your mind on Dareth, one of the other vamps got Mr. Pointy and almost made you very dusty."

"Pretty sure I would have noticed that."

"Gunn saved your ass. You're here because he knows how to wield a crossbow."

Spike frowned and shrugged. "What's it matter, then? It all worked out, didn't it?"

If she got any angrier, she might just explode. "It all worked out? So...just ignore that, were it for a guy who could have just as easily decided that letting you stake would've been a clean way to get one more vamp off this world forever. Because it all worked out."

"Not really sure what you want me to say."

"I want you to say you'll be more careful! I want you to say things like that won't happen again! And I want you to mean it." Buffy shook her head, clenching her fists tight, not certain she could keep from hitting the big idiot otherwise. "I almost lost you tonight. And...and..."

Spike arched an eyebrow, though his expression had softened a bit. "And what, love?"

Buffy stared at him, breathing hard, her mind racing a thousand miles a second. "And I'm done," she said.

Then launched herself at him.

Spike stumbled back when she hit his chest, his arms going around her on what had to be instinct. She didn't give him time to react, or herself time to think, before seizing his face and bringing him down to pour her fear and fury and desperation into a kiss that lit her from the

inside out. The second his lips were on hers, the screaming in her head stopped, as did the pounding in her veins, the terror that had kept her moving since she'd realized how close she'd come to losing him tonight. Everything else in the world faded except for him.

Spike was stock still for half a second before melting into her, moaning into her mouth and pulling her flush against him. And yes, she needed this. She'd missed it—missed the way he kissed with his whole damn body, missed how he seemed to need her like she needed air, missed the soft growls that scratched at his throat. How he came alive in ways no vampire should.

Breathing became an issue, but she didn't want to pull away. She wanted to crawl inside him and stay there forever. Still, her lungs eventually overpowered her brain, and she wrenched her lips back with a hard gasp.

Spike panted against her, and she'd missed that too. How he breathed.

"Slayer," he murmured, nudging her brow with his. "Almost afraid to ask..."

"I'm done."

Spike nodded, pulling back just enough to catch her eyes. The need, the hope she saw there made her tremble. "Said as much. What's it you're done with?"

"Waiting." Buffy fisted the material of his duster before shoving it off his shoulders. "I'm done waiting. I want you."

"God yes."

Then he was kissing her again, hot and hard as he tugged on the scrap of fabric that had functioned as a top tonight. Buffy raised her arms and allowed him to pull it over her head. The second the air hit her skin, Spike's mouth was there, peppering a line of kisses down her throat and over her collarbone. When he reached her bra, he growled, fisted the knot where the cups met and tore the garment off of her.

"That," Buffy said, throwing back her head as Spike wrapped his lips around one of her nipples, "seemed...drastic."

"You remember when you flashed your tits at me the other day?" Spike asked, kissing his way to her other breast. "Have any idea how hard it was to just pretend like it was nothing?"

Buffy giggled, but the sound became a whimper when he tugged on her nipple with his teeth. "Ahh...are you talking about when I changed in front of you?" she asked, torn between amused and exasperated. "Thought you'd...have more control over yourself than that."

"Oh, I did." Spike dragged his mouth back up her chest, over her throat, and captured her in another desperate kiss. "Loads of restraint. How else do you figure you got out the sodding door? Point is..." He dropped his hands to her skirt and began to tug. "I'm a starvin' man and you just gave me permission to devour."

"Don't break the skirt! It's not mine."

An impatient growl tickled the air and he immediately began searching for the zipper. "Might see if you can keep this," he murmured, dropping to his knees to drag the material down her legs. "Reminds me of those dainty skirts you wore when I first saw you."

She snorted. "You say that like it was forever ago."

He looked up then, arching his scarred eyebrow. "It was for me. For all that's changed."

Buffy held his gaze and released a trembling breath. Her body was buzzing and her emotions were going haywire, but she knew what he was doing. Telling her again that he loved her—that the vampire he'd been that night at the Bronze and the vampire currently on his knees before her were so far removed they wouldn't recognize each other. And yeah, that was heady, particularly since all she'd managed to work out for herself was...

Oh no.

She stood suspended between two worlds, one foot in Sunnydale and one right here with Spike. Sunnydale wasn't so far back that she couldn't see it in her rearview mirror, but she felt ages older than the girl she'd been when Spike had ushered her into his car and taken off. Even the night he'd claimed her out of anger and jealousy—then, she'd felt broken. Shattered. And not just because of Angel, though he'd been a big part of it. The weight of everything she'd shouldered up until that point had come crashing down on her. The reasons she'd left had been good ones but strange as it was, that headspace seemed inaccessible now.

Because that girl had been broken. This girl was not.

This girl was in love with Spike.

She barely registered the sensation of the skirt sliding down her legs until Spike lifted each foot in turn to divest her of her shoes. He dropped a kiss on her ankle before situating her foot back on the ground, then raked his eyes up her body in a way that almost felt like a caress in itself.

"Second thoughts?" he asked, his voice rough.

Buffy shook her head, her throat tight. "I'm done," she said for the third time. Hoping he'd understand what it meant and terrified that he would at the same time.

"Not nearly."

The next thing she knew, Spike was on his feet again and she was flush against his chest, and yes, he was kissing her. Hard and fierce and hot enough to melt her skin right off her bones. He plundered her mouth with his tongue, licking and caressing and consuming, and it was all so good. She barely registered the little whimpers tickling her throat, the call of something deeper and primal stirring from a place she'd tried to keep locked away. It was too much and not enough—she needed more.

She needed...

"Spike," she whimpered against his lips when he broke away again. "Please."

Spike studied her for a moment, yellow flickering beneath the blue. "Dunno what you want, Slayer...but if it's sweet and tender, not sure I'm your bloke tonight. Between wanting you so bloody badly and that brawl, feelin' more animal than man."

"Just be you."

He moaned and crushed her to him again, and this time she felt it. Spike unleashed. She hadn't even considered that he might have been holding back before, but he had to have been because the way he kissed her almost stung. It took a moment and a split lip for her to realize he'd vamped out, but hell if that didn't make her hotter. Both the sensation of his fangs against her skin and the knowledge that, monster though he was, he was entirely hers.

Spike cupped her ass and pulled her against his cock, which she

realized was still behind the zipper of his fly. He'd gotten her naked, except for her panties, and he was still mostly dressed.

That was twelve kinds of unfair.

"Wrap your legs around me," he growled into her mouth.

She'd worry about fair later. Buffy locked her arms behind his neck and did as he said, letting out a small cry when the wet flesh of her sex connected with the rough denim of his jeans. She threw her head back and pressed herself harder against him, feeling his answering growl in the biting kisses he left upon her throat as the world shifted around them.

The next instant, though, her feet were back on the floor. The scenery had changed, but not much. He'd taken her as far as the couch before stopping.

"Clothes," Buffy said, tugging at his shirt.

"Later." Spike whirled her around, then dragged a hand down her spine. "Grab the back of the sofa and show me that pretty little arse of yours."

Her heart did a funny flip but she obeyed, feeling a mixture of turned on beyond belief and on display as she thrust back her hips.

"Spread your legs."

Damn, his voice alone might do the job before he had the chance. "Spike, touch me. Please."

She thought he might tease her—he didn't. The next second, his hand was between her legs, fingers running between her soaked folds. And when he spoke, his voice was right at her ear. "Fuck, Slayer. You're drenched."

"I need—"

"I know what you need."

Spike pulled his hand back and she would have whimpered in protest had she not heard him tearing at his belt. But it was the sound of the zipper lowering that had her knees suddenly shaking, her heart ratcheting up its hard thumps. And then he was there again, rubbing up and down her slit, first with his fingers and then with the head of his cock. He nudged her clit once, twice, and just when she was about scream at him, he plunged inside her.

"Fuck yes," he whispered against her neck. His hands found her hips and gripped hard enough to hurt.

The first time they'd had sex had been rough and angry, but there had been some time between then and when she'd left the motel where he'd been soft, even sweet. Worried that he'd been too hard on her, left her bruised. And part of her, a very small part but a real part nonetheless, had wondered if she could expect the near fury of their first time again, or if it had been circumstance. If perhaps Spike worried that the way he'd fucked her that night had been some of the motivation behind her decision to leave, and would therefore treat her with kiddie gloves if they were ever together like that again. And she'd kept wondering it, even after he'd vamped on her a few minutes earlier, even after he'd told her he wouldn't be gentle.

He hadn't been lying or holding back. He pulled back, then slammed his cock inside her again, and began to pound. Hard, fast, and desperate, his fingers digging into her hips, his balls slapping against her flesh, a growl erupting through his throat every time he thrust back inside her. Something clawed at her throat and hit the air in a pitch she hadn't known she could hit. Buffy bucked back against him, needing more, demanding more, but not sure she could handle it all the same. She gripped the back of the couch so tight she felt the material begin to give under her hands, but she didn't care.

"Fuck, Slayer, fuck," Spike babbled into her ear. "Feel so good. So fucking good. Missed this. Missed your juicy cunt. Missed the sounds you make, the way you feel. You feel me, love? Feel how hard you make me?"

One of the hands on her hips moved before she could reply, and then she felt him between her legs, teasing her where they were joined.

"Oh god!"

"Just you. Buffy. My Buffy. Squeezing me like that."

She hadn't even realized she was squeezing him until then—it seemed natural. Every time he pushed inside, some part of her contracted, desperate and needy. Trying to clamp around him so he'd stay but also needing him to move so badly she might combust if he didn't.

"Spike—"

"Tell me you missed me. Missed this." He dragged his hand up her slippery flesh until he had her clit under the pad of his finger. "Tell me you've been craving my cock."

"Yes, yes," she panted, nodding. Though, to be fair, she was pretty sure she would have agreed to pretty much anything at that moment.

"Wanna hear you say it." He pressed down on her clit, pounding into her so hard the couch had started edging along the floor. "Tell me."

What had he wanted to know again? Buffy's mind was a fog of sensation alone—the feel of him pushing in and out of her, the hard smacks of their bodies colliding, the sparks that shot from her center every time he pressed down on her clit. She was chasing something and it kept slipping away from her, but damn, the pursuit was so sweet she almost didn't mind. Almost.

"Say it!"

Oh yeah. She remembered.

"Missed you. Missed this," Buffy cried, barely recognizing her own voice.

"And my cock? Missed that, did you?"

"Yes. Missed your cock."

It was only by virtue that he was fucking her shyness right out of her that she managed to say that without succumbing to embarrassment.

Spike moaned and buried his face in the crook of her neck, pressing his vampiric ridges into her sweaty skin.

"Fuck, Buffy. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck."

The rasp of his voice around his fangs was what did it. Another thrill, hot and pure, rocketed through her body, and she knew what she needed. "Missed your...fangs."

He moaned again, the sound raw and guttural, almost as though he were in pain. But then he was there, piercing her throat and rumbling against her flesh, and it was over. Buffy released a sound she was sure she'd never made before, her pussy clenching around his cock as the fire inside her coalesced and exploded. Spike growled into her throat, slamming his hips against her before she felt him tense and spill inside her. He kept moving long after the last waves had begun to recede, the

strokes almost desperate, before he collapsed against her back. His cool body pressed to her burning one and drew his fangs from her throat.

For a long moment, Buffy remained in limbo, gulping air and waiting for the feeling to return to her legs. Spike was shaking against her, his arm wrapped around her middle, holding her to him, and she felt the desperation there, too. Felt his mind spinning, the questions he wanted to ask but didn't out of fear of their answers. As though if he held her tight enough, they could stay as they were forever.

Buffy released a low breath, searching for something to say. Something like, "I love you," because if that hadn't been clear before he'd screwed her brains out, it was definitely clear now.

But god, did those words ever terrify her. The last time she'd said them to someone, they'd been thrown back in her face. Angel, freshly soulless and relishing her pain, laughing his way out of his apartment as tears streamed down her cheeks and her heart shattered.

This was the part she wasn't good at—the feelings part. Or sex of any kind that didn't involve some level of hurt. What she'd shared with Angel on her birthday had been, she'd thought, beautiful, but forever tarnished in what had come after. And the night after Acathla awakened, the night she'd thrown herself at Spike—that had been pain too. Pain and hurt and loss and grief and confusion and a bunch of other things, and all she'd wanted to do was turn those feelings off.

For the first time, she'd experienced sex without pain. And call her a coward, but she didn't want to risk it. So she didn't say the words. Scary enough that she felt them, especially with so much of her life still being pieced back together.

"Slayer," Spike murmured at last, tightening his hold around her middle. "Please tell me you don't regret this. Or if you're gonna, just let me enjoy this a mo' longer."

"Spike—"

"Just a moment."

"Spike, I don't regret it." Those words, at least, were easy. "I wanted you, too. I meant it when I said I was done."

He didn't reply at first but pulled back so his cock, which had begun to harden again, slipped out of her. Then he turned her around

and took her mouth in a soft kiss, tentative and gentle in all the ways he hadn't been just a few minutes ago.

"What does done mean?" he asked, tugging on a tendril of her hair. The hope, the need in his voice had her pressing her thighs together. Had her sliding harder into love. "Done just tonight?"

Relief burned her chest. These words were easy too. "No. Not just tonight. I'm done...not being with you. Or not...doing this."

The corner of his mouth kicked up. "This?"

"Being with you...like this." Well, that sounded nice and lame. "I don't want to be platonic roomies anymore."

"Was never platonic on my end, pet."

"I know."

"This all because you got brassed at me tonight?"

"Because you almost died and that can happen any time."

Spike arched an eyebrow. "Gotten pretty good at survivin'. Whatever you thought almost happened tonight was a one-off."

"Are you seriously trying to talk me out of having more hot monkey sex, because that was a plot twist I didn't see coming."

His gaze darkened and he took a step forward, bracing his arms on either side of her on the couch, caging her in. "Just tryin' to make sure I follow the new rules," he said before nipping at her mouth. "'Cause I want you all the sodding time. Being close to you, not touching you... It's been bloody torture. And I'm a bloke who knows a thing or two about torture. You tell me you're done... Does that mean you're ready to be with me? Really be with me? Be sure, Buffy. Not sure I can stand it if we do this and you take it away again."

The answer was immediate and solid. Buffy answered him with a kiss, wrapping her arms around his neck and pressing herself flush against his chest. "I'm all in. Completely, one-hundred-percent in."

Spike was grinning now, sliding his hands down her back to cup her ass. "So if I wanted to take you back to that room and make it so you can't walk straight tomorrow..."

"I'd say you'd have a challenge on your hands because, well, slayer."

That was a total bluff and she knew he knew it. Her legs had yet to stop shaking and she was pretty sure, if he weren't standing so close, she'd have melted into a puddle of slayer goo. Because while she was

the Slayer, he had vamp strength plus years of experience on his side, and the last time he'd had her in bed, he'd made it hurt in all the right ways.

The fact that his grin turned into a smirk confirmed that he knew her mouth had just written a check her body couldn't cash but would have a hell of a time trying.

"Never been known to back down from a challenge."

Before she could blink, Spike had scooped her into his arms and was moving in thunderous strides toward the bedroom. They were barely over the threshold when he tossed her onto the mattress so he could rip off his shirt. Buffy regained her equilibrium just in time to appreciate the sight of Spike sliding his jeans down his legs. He'd wanted her so badly he hadn't even taken the time to undress earlier—for whatever reason, that thought had the parts of her that had been happily satiated just a second ago roaring back to life. Fresh longing had her pressing her thighs together, needing friction.

He knew, of course, smug bastard that he was. "Don't you worry, love," he said before dragging his tongue across his teeth. "Daddy's gonna take care of it."

Then he dropped to his knees at the foot of the bed, grabbed her by the hips, and jerked her down until her ass was hanging off the side.

"Spike!"

"Mhmm," he replied as he took one of her legs and positioned it over her shoulder. "As much fun as it was, I didn't get to really enjoy this earlier. Gonna do it proper now. Take my time." Spike draped her other leg over his other shoulder and buried his face in her sex. "Then I'm gonna fuck your pretty little brains out."

Buffy trembled, and his grin turned lascivious.

"And after that, Slayer?" He rubbed a finger up and down her slit. "After that, I'm gonna do it all over again."

She liked to think she would have replied, said something sultry if he hadn't sucked her clit between his lips.

As it was, the second his mouth was on her, the noise in her head dissolved into pure white bliss.

IF IT HADN'T BEEN for the pounding on the door, Buffy could have slept until next week. Lord knew she had no motivation to move. When it became clear the sound wasn't just in her head, she managed to convince one of her eyes to peek open and was instantly treated to the view of a shirtless Spike, who looked dead to the world in every sense of the phrase. This sight joined forces with the tenderness between her legs, and everything from the previous twenty-four hours came roaring back.

The club. The audition room. Spike nearly dusting. Coming home. Arguing. Then...

Buffy flushed hot and rolled over, more muscles announcing themselves at the movement. Yeah, he'd made good on his promise, and she felt it all over. A delicious kind of hurt that a girl could fast grow addicted to.

At the thought, an explosion of giddiness jolted her from drowsy to wide awake.

A morning after. A real morning after. That's what she had to look forward to—Spike waking up later, giving her one of those lazy smiles, saying something to make her melt and then pulling her under him. Or on top of him. Or perhaps telling her to get on all fours or straddle his face or—

The knocks came again, harsher this time. Either there was an incredibly persistent salesperson desperate to make a quota or someone was here to share news of another emergency. Buffy stifled a groan and forced her legs over the side of the bed, except her legs didn't want to work for the first few steps. She plucked Spike's discarded T-shirt off the floor, hoping that'd be enough because she didn't trust herself to try and negotiate her way into pants at the moment.

More knocking, this time accompanied by a voice.

"Buffy! Are you okay?"

Oh good. It was Fred. No need for modesty. Well, not much, anyway.

Buffy cracked the door open and flashed her friend a tired smile. "Hey. Sorry we didn't check in last night. Things...umm...got intense."

Fred arched an eyebrow, pointedly looking down to where bare-

Buffy leg was clearly visible. "Yeah. Word of caution unless you're into that sort of thing—these walls? Paper-thin."

"Oh." She tried for apologetic but figured her grin was too giddy to fool anyone. "Well...things went well. Better than we..." The sad, anxious look on Fred's face had the party in Buffy's head coming to a screeching halt. "What is it?"

Fred released a deep breath. "Is Spike...?"

"Asleep. What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just...did the reading. From the pages you gave me. And...I think you need to hear this."

There it was. The other shoe—the thing that inevitably dropped after she'd landed somewhere safe. Her giddiness vanished without warning, launching her back into the real world. The one where Buffy didn't get loving morning afters. Buffy didn't get breaks. Buffy didn't get this.

"It's bad?" she asked, then realized she didn't want to have this conversation here. "Wait. Let me put on pants and I'll come to you."

"It's not bad," Fred said, though her expression didn't change. "I just...don't know if it's good."

Five minutes later, Buffy was in Fred's apartment, grimacing into the coffee Fred had brewed—she'd accepted to be polite—and trying not to spiral into a tangle of anxiety. It was so far from where she'd been just ten minutes ago that she wasn't sure she hadn't dreamed that happy place. But god, it had felt real. If only for a moment.

"Okay, so, here's the deal," Fred said, spreading the pages across the kitchen table. "Vampire claiming happened a lot back in the day but not anymore. There were dedicated families—kinda like Romeo and Juliet? Several names were mentioned a lot—Augustus, Vespasian, Pius, Aurelius, Trejan, Anthony. Really a who's who of Roman families, and I think that's because the book you took this from was written in Rome. I mean, best guess. All the names were very Roman Empire-y so there's a good chance that if you looked at the text from any other region, you'd find other family names and histories and—"

"Fred?"

"I know I'm rambling," she said without missing a beat. "Sorry. So these families—or clans, or whatever you want to call them—were

vying for power, particularly in who got to control Rome. The Aurelius family reached out to a coven of witches, who agreed to provide blood magic in exchange for their protection if they won the Roman territory. The Aurelians decided the best way to claim territory was to absorb the other families, by force if necessary. That would keep them from going to war, something they knew they couldn't survive because the other clans would turn on them. They essentially claimed other vampires as Aurelians, which would more or less make them Aurelian. There's really no way to know if Spike is Aurelian, but odds are—"

"He is," Buffy said, her thoughts racing. Angel had gone over his lineage one night almost a year ago after she'd returned from Los Angeles and crushed the Master's bones to dust. If Angel had been Aurelian, then Spike had to be too. "So it was about...territory. Not mating after all."

Though that wasn't the most pleasant thought, she found herself relaxing all the same. Spike had said otherwise, of course, when they had talked about it, but he'd also admitted his knowledge on the subject was fairly limited. He'd once wanted to claim Drusilla and she'd refused him. Perhaps this was why—perhaps Dru, crazy as she was, had known what it meant better than he did. That it had nothing to do with love or devotion after all.

Buffy could almost convince herself of this, except for the look on Fred's face.

"Well," Fred said a moment later, "the other clans grew wise and... kinda turned it into that. Mates, rather than territory. They waged war on the Aurelians and the witches until the coven decided to curse the Aurelian line in retaliation for not keeping their end of the bargain. Instead of just claiming vampires into the clan... Well, it essentially tied that vampire to the vampire they'd claimed. Unable to do it to anyone else and completely dedicated to the one they'd done it to. Pain if they wandered too far away. And if they tried to kill the vampire they'd claimed to get out of it, they'd die too. It was kinda the perfect revenge."

The sick feeling was back, and this time it took no prisoners.

Completely dedicated. Dedicated like the primal urge that had taken Spike back at the club—had made him blind and deaf to

anything beyond the minuscule threat presented by a wannabe undead crime boss. Dedicated like slipping her a bunch of cash and not walking away when she'd given him an out, coming after her—the Slayer. Saying, even believing, that he loved her when it should be impossible.

Buffy closed her eyes, which had started to burn. "So...it's a spell. Whatever Spike feels for me, it's because he claimed me?"

"I don't know," Fred said. "The text didn't go into that—if the claim could make you feel things. But I guess it's possible. It's definitely...not something that happens often. And I'm not even sure if it's only for Aurelian vampires or if any vampire can do it. I'd need to read more of the book to be sure." A pause. "There's more."

Of course.

"Once the Aurelians discovered they'd been betrayed, they abducted two of the witches—a mother and daughter. They tortured the daughter until the mother agreed to help, to give them a way to prevent members of their family from going mad by claiming the wrong person. The magic couldn't be completely undone—blood magic is apparently too powerful—but with more blood magic, the effects could be...reversed."

Buffy's heart had stopped thumping, trapped as it was in her throat. "Fred..."

"So there's a way to get out of the claim," Fred said, glancing at the ripped pages. "And...I think I can do it."

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"I'd like to be...under the sea...in an octopus's garden in the shade." Fred winced and, for the third time since Lorne had ushered her onto the stage, shot Buffy a look that could only mean *please kill me*. *"He'd let us in. Knows where we've been...in an octopus's garden...in the shade."*

The accompanying music kicked in with the telltale drumroll, which had Fred about jumping out of her skin. She swore loudly into the mic, flashed a pained smile, and stumbled to keep up with the lyrics scrawling across the screen.

"I'd ask my friends to come and see...an octopus's garden with me. Ba dum dum dum. I'd like to be...under the sea...in an octopus's garden in the shade."

Lorne, who was seated to Buffy's right—Spike to her left, his arm around her shoulders—let out a long wolf whistle and clapped enthusiastically. "You're killin' it, doll! Just killin' it!" Lorne's bright, exuberant smile remained in place until he turned his face from the stage, and it fell into a grimace. "And by *it*, I mean my ears. This, kids, might just be the day the music died."

While Buffy's bleeding ears couldn't help but agree with him, she was loyal enough to Fred to shoot Lorne her patented if-looks-could-

stake glare before smacking his shoulder. "You're the bully who made her go up there."

"Owie!" Lorne pouted and rubbed the place where she'd hit him. "Girlie, how many times do I have to tell you to remember you have super strength? One more of those and you'll have volunteered yourself as my mic holder for opening night."

"Don't make fun of her again or I'll really make it hurt."

At that, Spike chuckled, dragging his fingers lightly up and down the exposed skin of her upper arm. She squirmed and turned to glare at him. It wasn't much of a glare, more a silent admonition to behave himself in public—an admonition he was more likely to ignore than respect if his answering smirk was anything to judge by.

Since the night they'd liberated the prisoners of Dusk a few weeks back—the night that Buffy had come close enough to losing Spike to realize what he meant to her—they'd, well, the term *like bunnies* came to mind. It was like Spike had some bet with himself as to how quickly he could get her naked and screaming once they were alone. Or, as had been the case a night last week, in a place secluded enough so as not to attract attention.

The answer to both questions was within seconds.

"Got a lotta lost time to make up for, pet," he'd whispered against her skin sometime during the third week, barely ten seconds after Fred had bid them adieu for the evening. "Went too bloody long not bein' inside your cunt. Hell, you're lucky I let you stop for nosh."

Buffy had wanted to argue that, in actuality, it hadn't been all that long since that night at the motel that had changed the trajectory of her life, but then his lips had been around her clit and she'd decided he had a point.

The past few weeks with Spike had been just short of blissful, so much so that it seemed stupid that she'd hesitated at all when he'd plowed back into her life. The drive to be with him was a constant that hadn't changed.

And if she tried really hard, she could forget the finer points of the truth bomb Fred had dropped on her the morning after the raid on Dusk.

Forget that the claim, which seemed to grow stronger with every touch, might be responsible for the way Spike felt about her.

Except she couldn't forget about it. It crowded every dark corner of her head, the thing that kept all the moments she'd shared with him from being well and truly blissful. Because if the claim was responsible for the way Spike felt about her, then there was no way she could keep him.

Part of her hoped she never found out either way. That she never had to take Fred up on the offer to undo it. After everything that had happened with Angel... Well, the thought alone of losing Spike was too large and terrible to entertain.

"We would be warm...below the storm...in our little hideaway beneath the waves," Fred went on, her wince deepening. *"Resting our head...on the sea bed...in an octopus' garden near a cave."*

The worst was, there was no happy medium. She couldn't just undo the claim and see if that answered the question of whether or not he genuinely loved her. The ritual would boot Spike out of her life for good. As in, they wouldn't be able to stay in the same room, speak, touch, or even look at each other ever again. That was the way blood magic worked, according to Fred's research. There was no way for things to simply go back to status quo—the bond itself was too strong and required too much mystical firepower to untangle.

Buffy's heart performed a somersault, as it often did when her thoughts led her down this path. She knew Spike felt it, some of what was going through her head. When he wasn't tugging her into dark corners or testing the resilience of their bedsprings at home, he'd ask if everything was all right. She'd smile and say yes, knowing he didn't believe her.

"We would sing and dance around. Because we know we can't be found. I'd like to be...under the sea...in an octopus' garden in the shade."

Her immediate instinct had been to shrug off everything Fred had uncovered and return to life as she knew it. Pretend she'd never seen those pages and live with the new understanding that she was indeed in love with another vampire. She knew what Spike would say, after all, if she told him he'd been wrong, that there *was* a way to undo what he'd done that night. She could almost see the hurt in his eyes, how his

face would contort with pain, and how he'd beg her not to do it. To not even consider it, even if he was under the influence of a spell he'd unwittingly put himself under. He wouldn't care.

But if it was the claim that made him not care, then his feelings on the matter couldn't be trusted.

"We would shout...and swim about...the coral that lies beneath the waves," Fred went on. *"Oh what joy...for every girl and boy...knowing they're happy and they're safe..."*

Spike turned and grinned at her as the music began to wind down. "You're goin' up next, right, pet?"

"We would be so happy you and me. No one there to tell us what to do. I'd like to be...under the sea...in an octopus's garden with you. In an octopus's garden with you."

Buffy's chest constricted and she forced a smile of her own. "A world of no."

"Come on. We promised the sod to be his test dummies."

"And you wanted to know your fortune, honey-britches," Lorne said, tossing her a look. "Come on. I bet the Slayer has a killer set of pipes."

"Yeah, after listening to you tease poor Fred, I think I'll pass."

"Buff muffin," Lorne said, twisting to face her. "Trust me when I tell you that you want to sing for me." He gestured at her, then started picking at the air around her head as though chasing stray hairs. "Your aura's been all over the place the last few times I've seen you. Get your cutie little booty up there."

Buffy inhaled and flicked her gaze to Spike. "My aura's all over the place?"

"Not the vamp to ask, m'afraid," he replied, shrugging. "Got something on your mind, Slayer? Besides what we talked about?"

Oh, right. There was that other thing. Like her life wasn't heavy enough.

"No," she said a bit too quickly. Spike's eyes narrowed, concern leaking in.

"Follow me, honey," Lorne said, scooting his way out of the booth. "Think I got the perfect song for you. And I promise, you'll feel better. There will *be* an answer if you let it be."

Spike snickered. "When do you figure you'll be off this Beatles kick? Feels like the bleeding sixties all over again."

He wasn't wrong. Ever since Lorne's impromptu speech at Dusk, the green demon seemed to be obsessed with the legends from Liverpool.

"And don't think I'm not jealous that you got to be there while they were changing the world," Lorne said to Spike, placing a hand at the small of Buffy's back. "You still haven't told me about the time you had dinner with John and Yoko."

Buffy blinked and threw her vampire a surprised look. "You did what now?"

Spike shrugged, though his grin betrayed just how much he was enjoying himself. "Spent a good part of the seventies in good ole New York. A fella gets around."

"But...you met *John Lenn*—"

"Buffalicious," Lorne said, "I promise I won't keep you from this story, but time is money. Opening night's in a few days and I need to make sure the system works."

Buffy whimpered as the Host pushed her to the stage. She didn't even like the way her voice sounded when she sang in the shower—something that had only solidified the day Spike had sneaked in to see what was dying in the bathroom. His words.

When she'd told him she had a Madonna song stuck in her head, he'd laughed so hard he would have passed out had he been human.

Also, she was terrified of what Lorne would see when she sang. That he'd confirm the darkest of the thoughts she'd entertained regarding the claim. That he'd tell her the only moral thing to do would be to give Spike up and to do it now—now while she had a chance of recovering.

"It's not natural, Buffarino," he'd say. *"A vampire hanging up his fangs to cozy up with the Slayer? Tell me you didn't think that was weird. That something a little more mystical and a little less Harlequin was going through that platinum brain of his?"*

But this thing between us started before the claim, she told herself. It was an easy go-to when she felt overwhelmed, when her spiraling thoughts

threaten to drown her. *It started the night the ghosts took over the high school. It started and it didn't stop.*

"There's a mighty fine line between lust and love, sugarbritches," Lorne would reply, a sad smile on his face. *"That primal feeling inside you is inside him too. You feel his demon and he feels your heart—and romantic as it is, it ain't real."*

"Shut up," Buffy muttered, causing the real Lorne to start and favor her with a frown.

"Something wrong, blossom?"

"No." She plastered on a smile. "Just...telling my inner critic to shut up. You know. Before I make with the singing."

Lorne looked like he didn't believe her. The next instant, he took a step toward her and placed a hand on her shoulder. "Slayer mine, everything will be okay. You know that hunka burnin' vamp thinks you're his world, right?"

Buffy's throat tightened and tears stung her eyes, but she managed a nod all the same. "Yeah."

"We'll get this all figured out once I get a good look at your noggin'." He lightly rapped his knuckles against her brow. "Now...let's get you all set up."

❧

SPIKE TRIED NOT to look too bloody eager when the Host made his way back to the booth, but fuck it, his nerves were shot to pieces and he had no sodding idea why.

Except that wasn't entirely true—he knew Buffy was the cause. When wasn't she?

He'd lived every sodding second since the night she'd told him she was *done* waiting for her to backtrack, change her mind. Tell him she was barmy for rushing in and that she still had more thinking to do. Instead, the past few weeks, she'd all but jumped his bones every time they were alone. Well, he'd done his fair share of bone-jumping, unable to get enough of her as he was. And love it though he did, something seemed off.

She seemed off. Or maybe that was his head. Maybe he just wasn't

used to actually having everything he wanted. Seemed about right, given how quickly things had turned around for him.

The one time he'd asked, the Slayer had fed him some line about realizing how far into the summer they were.

"School supplies were out at the store," she'd said, stocking the fridge full of blood and a few of those microwave dinners. He'd told her she needn't waste any dosh on that rot, but she'd been adamant that eating out wasn't much of a long-term plan. She didn't know how to cook for rubbish and neither did he, though he fancied the idea of learning. Dru had never been much for human food so there'd been little reason to know his way around a kitchen. But he found he wanted to prepare meals for Buffy—give her what she needed, since she was so bloody good about doing the same for him.

"School supplies?" he'd repeated, not getting it.

"Yeah. It won't be long before school starts." She'd pressed her lips together, considering the contents of their fridge. "And I'm here."

The sadness in her voice had nearly done him in. "We can head back anytime, Slayer. Just say the word and Sunnyhell awaits."

There had been nothing for a moment. She'd just stood there, awash in cool air, her eyes a thousand miles away.

Eventually, though, she'd swallowed and closed the door, stepped back and wrapped her arms around herself.

"Too much has changed," she'd said. "Plus I'm still wanted for questioning in Kendra's death, my mom kicked me out of the house, and I'm pretty sure being of the claimed with a vampire who used to kill slayers for fun would secure my place as the worst slayer in history, and that's one Giles lecture I don't need." She'd released a breath, trembling. "But I miss them sometimes."

He'd wanted to press the issue, not because he fancied going back to the Hellmouth because he didn't, but he could tell that she was more bothered than she'd let on. Though he'd been all too happy to whisk her away after that business with old Stony, he wagered she'd never intended to stay on the lam for long. Her mum had kicked her out, yes, but even Spike had guessed that much had been hot air. As for the other slayer, yeah, it was likely that Buffy disappearing right after the girl snuffed it made her the prime suspect, ridiculous as that was.

But that was what the Wankers Council was there for, right? Getting the Chosen bird out of all kinds of topsy-turvy situations. There had to be some kind of plan in place, particularly in these modern times, for what happened when a slayer's duty had her tangling with human law enforcement.

And he hadn't missed his role in the play. *A vampire who used to kill slayers for fun*. He'd never gotten around to talking to her after the incident at Dusk about the things he'd said when he'd been parading her around under the noses of vamps, relying heavily on his reputation of being a monstrous thing in search of a good time. But he also hadn't forgotten the way she'd stiffened then, or how he'd known her heart had started thumping in double-time.

He wondered just how often that thought occurred to her—that she was sharing her space with a man who had been hell-bent on killing her less than a year ago. Who had blown into town and would have ripped out her pretty little throat if her mum hadn't had an ax handy. That he had come that close to not knowing her, not having this, didn't sit well with him. Granted, he was a vampire, and killing things—particularly slayers—was what vampires did. Or what he'd done, at least. He knew that, accepted it, but what if she never could? Sure, she was with him now, in his bed and under his hands every night, but Spike had done the dance with a woman who could never truly love him before. And yeah, he'd do it again to stay with Buffy, but that wasn't what he wanted. He'd seen firsthand how fiercely and passionately she'd loved Angel, and call him a selfish git but he'd never be satisfied knowing that sort of love was possible, but not for him.

Later in bed, when she was curled in his arms, soft and pliant after the fourth orgasm of the night, she'd whispered, "I failed at being the Slayer. And I'm pretty sure I failed at being a daughter. There's nothing to go back to."

He'd opened his mouth to protest, but she'd asked him not to talk, and not knowing whether or not that had been one of the times where it was better to ignore her or listen, he'd erred on the side of caution. There was plenty of time to disabuse her of the nonsense that she'd failed at anything.

Only in the days that had passed, he hadn't found a way to bring

the subject up again. But he'd had plenty of time to think on it, and none of his conclusions had been good ones.

Perhaps Buffy couldn't love him without abandon because of rot like his lack of a soul. Perhaps what he was, as much as what had happened, was what kept her from making a phone call home. What had her thinking she'd failed on any level. After all, what sort of slayer fell in love with a vampire?

Realizing his feelings for the Slayer, for Buffy, had been hard enough on him, though he'd more or less rolled with the punches. He'd known it was wrong from the offset, but *wrong* was something Spike had plenty of experience accepting. What it was for her, though, with her shiny conscience and her pure fucking soul, might be worse.

"Does Buffy sing well?" Fred asked, piercing through the fog that had settled inside his head. She'd made her way to the booth after finishing up her number, and for all he knew, had been prattling on in his ear for the last five minutes.

A grin tugged at Spike's lips and, happily, he pulled himself out of his thoughts. "She can carry a tune just fine, but she doesn't make much effort. Caught her bleatin' her pretty little head off in the shower and had to beg her to quiet up—take some pity on poor blokes with sensitive hearin'."

Fred went pink. "I think I'd die of mortification if the guy I was with said anything like that to me. Also, I'm sorry for whatever pain I caused your ears a few minutes ago. It was not my idea."

"Whaddya talk?" Lorne asked, sliding back into his seat with a broad, showman's smile. "You're sweet as an angel and sing like one too."

Right. A tone-deaf angel. Much like the actual tone-deaf Angel. The thought made him snicker, but he covered it with a cough when both Fred and Lorne glanced at him.

"Truth be told, pet," Spike said, nodding to Buffy as she edged onto the stage, "when I said it, I was aimin' to be punished. Never know what's gonna set her off and she tastes that much sweeter when she's brassed."

If possible, Fred's blush deepened. She glanced at the Host for help

and he just brought up his hands, grinning. "Don't look at me. It's a vamp thing."

"Like...her blood tastes better or...?"

Spike grinned and fired up a cigarette. "The answer is yes."

The chords to the song Lorne had chosen for the Slayer burst through the air before Fred could make heads or tails of what he'd said, and then Buffy's sweet voice—bugger what he'd said, he liked how she sang—followed.

"Don't let me down... Don't let me down... Don't let me down... Don't let me down." A breath. She seemed shaken, and he couldn't tell if it was nerves or something else. He didn't have time to wonder, because then she was singing again. *"Nobody ever love me like he does. Oh, he does. Yes, he does."*

She met his eyes, flushed, and looked back to the prompter where the lyrics were being fed. *"And if somebody loved me like he do me. Oh, he do me. Yes, he does."*

"She has a nice voice!" Fred whispered, smacking Spike's arm. "How could you let her think she doesn't?"

He didn't so much as glance at the twig, too enraptured by the sight of the Slayer. "Easy. I'm evil."

"You're *mean*."

"Still evil."

"Don't let me down... Don't let me down... Don't let me down... Don't let me down."

"You'll apologize to her when she's done," Fred said decisively. "Tell her that you love it."

Spike smirked but still didn't take his gaze off the stage, his throat tight at what he saw. Maybe his mind was playing tricks on him, but the Slayer's eyes looked rounder than usual, and each line she sang came choked out with more emotion. He didn't know what to think of it—if he was even seeing what he thought he saw, but it had him too distracted to engage.

"Oh, I'm in love for the first time," Buffy went on, her voice sounding thicker still. *"Don't you know it's gonna last? It's the love that lasts forever. It's the love that has no past."*

No, he definitely wasn't imagining it. Those were tears in her eyes.

Bloody hell.

"Oh, sugarplum," Lorne breathed out, slapping a hand to his chest. "You poor little soul."

"What?" Spike demanded, practically lurching across the table. "Something's wrong? What's wrong?"

But Lorne just made a face and waved him off, turning his attention back to the stage.

"And from the first time that he really done me. Oh, he done me, he done me good. I guess nobody ever really done me. Oh, he done me. He done me good." Buffy shook her head and straightened her shoulders, adopting what Spike knew as her own version of game face. Soldiering on through the very last. "*Don't let me down... Don't let me down... Don't let me down... Don't let me down."*

The music faded and Buffy lowly lowered the microphone. She flashed Fred a grateful smile when the girl bounced to her feet in applause but made to leave right quick. And Lorne was after her almost at once, Spike on his heels, making his way toward the back area where performers warmed up for their turns at the mic.

Before they reached the Slayer, though, Lorne whirled around and held up a hand. "Easy there, tiger. Have some respect for client/empath demon confidentiality."

Spike tightened his jaw and his fist. "Slayer's business is my business."

"And I'm sure if she feels that way, she'll tell you everything." The Host flashed a patronizing grin and patted Spike's shoulder. "Park your booty back in your seat and I'll be out in two shakes of a lamb's tail."

The urge to take a swing at the wanker was almost impossible to ignore, except that there was a sanctuary spell on the place and Spike didn't exactly fancy the thought of being tossed across the room. He glared a moment longer, for lack of any other option, then jerked his chin up before prowling back to the table.

Fred greeted him with a wince. "Something wrong?"

Spike barely kept himself from snarling a response. "Git won't let me know what he saw when he read her. Not like it involves *me,* or anything." This part he yelled toward the stage, the sound thick and guttural. "Just my bloody *mate*, is all. Bound blood and all that."

He hadn't really expected this outburst to have an effect, but that didn't stop him from pouting at the lack of response. Seconds ticked by, maturing into minutes, each of which had the demon at his chest clawing for action. When at last Buffy appeared from around the back, wiping at her eyes, it was all he could do to keep himself from plowing her down in his haste to close the distance between them.

"What's the matter, love?" he asked, cupping her cheek and searching her eyes. "That green git say somethin'?"

Buffy smiled a smile that told him answers would not be forthcoming anytime soon. "Later," she said and pressed a kiss to his mouth. "It's your turn."

"Slayer—"

"I'm fine, Spike," the little bitch lied. "Go on."

She pulled away from him and was making her way to join Fred before he could protest. He stared after her, torn between the need to shake the truth out of her and rip the so-called Host's ugly head from his body. But he knew the Slayer well enough to know that hounding her to talk to him would do nothing but put more distance between them, so he swore and stalked backstage, settling on Plan B.

Lorne greeted him with a smile that betrayed just how little respect he had for Spike's patience. "What's your poison from Abbey Road?" he asked, holding up the CD case. "Not really seeing anything for you on Let it Be and all the other discs are still in my office."

"What the bleeding hell did you say to her?"

The smile didn't so much as wither. "Poodle, if she wants you to know, she'll tell you. But enough about Buff. Onto platinum things."

"Bugger that."

Lorne sighed and held up a hand. "Listen, Romeo, the girl's been through a whole mess of a lot. I know you think you know that, but this isn't the sort of thing you can know unless you've lived it. Or, in my case, had an all-access pass to her head." He tapped his temple. "The most I can tell you is there is *nothing* she's not thinking about right now. The whole big bad world is on her tender seventeen-year-old shoulders and she's staring down an eternity of the same. Just talk to her when this is done and I'm sure everything will be right as rain.

Now." He waggled the CD. "I'd suggest 'Here Comes the Sun' but that seems a little mean-spirited. How about—"

"'Oh! Darling,'" Spike said. His anger had drained, replaced with more of that worry from before. Just how long had she been feeling like this? He hadn't noticed a change in her until after she'd welcomed him back into her bed, and if that had something to do with it—if what had her in this state was *him*... Bloody hell, he didn't know what he'd do with himself. Except love her. "That's on that one, yeah?"

"Thought you, you big cream puff, would go for 'Something.' Color me shocked." Lorne teased, nodding to the stage. "But if you're set on making a statement..."

Spike just blinked at him.

"All right. Get on up there."

So he did. He made his way to the stage where Buffy had stood just moments before, when she'd sung "Don't Let Me Down"—something he hadn't thought at the time had been aimed at him necessarily, but fuck. Maybe it had been.

Nothing terrified him more than the thought that he could let her down. Because he knew if he did, he'd lose her.

The opening key cued him in, and he didn't have any more time to think on the matter.

"*Oh, darlin'*," he began, keeping his eyes pinned on the Slayer, *"please believe me. I'll never do you no harm. Believe me when I tell you...I'll never do you no harm."*

Over the sound of the accompaniment, he heard Fred whimper, "Not fair."

"Oh, darlin'...if you leave me." Spike's throat tightened and he swallowed. *"I'll never make it alone. Believe me when I beg you...don't ever leave me alone."*

He was still holding her gaze and didn't know whether to be relieved or dismayed when Buffy offered him a watery smile.

"When you told me...you didn't need me anymore... Well you know I nearly broke down...and cried. When you told me...you didn't need me anymore... Well you know I nearly broke down...and died."

He watched as little Fred leaned across the booth. When she

spoke, she made no attempt to lower her voice. "Did you know he sang like this? Because, oh my."

"Oh, darlin'...if you leave me. I'll never make it alone. Believe me when I tell you...I'll never do you no harm."

Buffy didn't respond at first, rather kept her gaze on him, which was fortunate because he needed her to know just how much he meant every bloody word.

"When you told me...you didn't need me anymore... Well you know I nearly broke down...and cried. When you told me...you didn't need me anymore... Well you know I nearly broke down...and died."

"Buffy? Did you hear me? Has he sung to you like this before?"

Buffy shook her head, not looking away from him. "Nope. Hadn't heard him sing. This is a first."

Fred gaped, then, as though he had committed some terrible offense, cupped her mouth and yelled, "Spike! You need to sing for Buffy! A lot! You big derp."

He snickered in spite of himself before the music cued him back in. *"Oh, darlin'...please believe me...I'll never let you down! Oh, believe me, darlin'. Believe me when I tell you..."* Spike drew in an unneeded breath, then threw his head back and belted out the song's conclusion. "*I'll never do you no harm."*

And that was it. The music faded and he was met with a smattering of applause. Fred had decided to favor him with a standing ovation. And, when the girl nudged her shoulder, Buffy rose to her feet and joined in. He wanted to rush directly to her, but before he could put thought into action, a hand clamped on his shoulder and steered him back to the backstage area.

"Bit on the nose, but if your girlie doesn't get the message, I think she's hopeless," Lorne said, fanning himself. "Also? You *must* lend us those pipes of yours on a regular basis."

Spike's patience had run out well before he'd taken the stage, so it was a sodding miracle he managed to not roar at the prat. "See anythin' of use at all?"

Lorne studied him for a moment before releasing a deep sigh and patting him on the back. "You really do have your head all in a twist about this girl," he said. "I don't know much about vampires, to be

frank. They're not exactly falling out of the sky back home and I haven't been in this world long enough to do more than catch up on the pop culture. I get the basics, mind you—fangs, grr, and sunlight's a no-no—but the whole *soul-no soul* thing." He waved his hands and faked a scream. "Not my specialty."

The fact that he'd brought up souls at all had Spike's stomach tightening.

"What I can tell you, my fair-leathered friend, is you're doing all the right things. Be there when she needs you. Tell her every day what you have going on in that big ole bruiser of a heart of yours." Lorne felt it necessary, apparently, to pat said bruiser. "From everything I saw, you're good for her. She just might not really know it yet."

Spike jerked his head back. "What?"

But Lorne was shaking his head, his hands up. "And that's all I'm gonna say. You want more, you talk to her. But more than talk, pumpkin. Try and *listen*. With more than just your ears."

Well, if this was the sort of service the git aimed to give everyone who came to him to have their fortunes read, this place would be filing for Chapter 7 before the end of the month.

Spike gave himself a moment to calm down—or try to, at least—before making his way back to the booth, where the Slayer and Fred were chatting animatedly. The little librarian saw him first, and her eyes lit up almost enough to have him wincing.

"Seriously!" Fred said by way of greeting. "You had *never* sung to her before? You're right—you *are* evil."

He tried to summon a grin, but his heart wasn't in it. Instead, he looked to Buffy. Could be his imagination but she did look a bit better than she had before. Some of the heaviness around her eyes had lifted and the smile she gave him was a warm one.

"It was, I admit, the kind of hot that ought to come with a warning label," she said. "And I'm so glad I went first because, following that? I'm never singing in front of you again."

"He likes your singing," Fred said, smirking. "He told me so."

"You little tattle," Spike replied, rolling his eyes.

But Buffy was shaking her head. "Um, I dunno what he told you, but if you'd heard the things he said—"

"Yeah, he told me. Also told me he liked getting you riled up because...I dunno, angry sex or something." She flapped a hand and hitched her purse onto her shoulder. "And yes, I am tattling, because I am not evil and Buffy deserves to know these things." Fred beamed and gave a little wave. "I'm off. Buffy has the spare key in case you run out of blood."

This made no sense, but Spike wasn't too keen on asking after it—he liked the bird all right, but at the moment, he wanted her gone. He needed the Slayer alone.

"Have fun," Buffy said, and watched as her friend made her way to the door. When she looked back to Spike, she said, "That science-y conference she mentioned yesterday. She's driving to San Diego tonight."

He nodded as though he gave a fuck. "Slayer, what's wrong?"

Buffy's face fell a fraction. "What?"

"When you were up there, the green guy..." He swallowed, at once hating himself. This required more finesse than he was capable of giving at the moment—not that he was capable of a lot to begin with. But fuck, he needed to know. "The past few weeks have been the best of my unlife, love," he said, dropping his shoulders. "I mean it. But a bloke can tell when something's off. Can't do rot to fix it if you don't talk to me."

For a moment, he was terrified she'd deny it. Shake her head and ask what in the world he was talking about when they both knew better. The Slayer was good at keeping things close to the vest when she put a mind to it, which was right infuriating, considering he usually had such a good read on her. But when she wanted to slam the doors closed, she did, and good luck to the man who tried to pry them open.

But then Buffy sighed and looked down, and he felt a rush of relief. She was going to talk about it.

"I...have been thinking. A lot. Mostly trying not to but some things just...won't stay quiet." She scuffed her foot along the floor. "About a lot of things, actually. The future, you and me, what it...all means."

"What what means, love?"

"The claim. We still don't know much about it. I mean, you knew enough to do it and..." She paused, and the rest came out in a rush, as

though she feared saying it but *had* to at the same time. "I found some pages in a book. A book Giles has, actually. That talk about claims more."

Spike frowned. "When was this?"

"A...while ago." She winced. "Right before everything went down at Dusk, actually. I found it in the warehouse where Gunn's sister went missing."

A ripple of anger inched up his spine. "Any reason I'm just hearin' about it now?"

"Because now's when I'm telling you. I... Look, I opened to a random page, saw that it talked about claims, and ripped it out before I could read it. Then I gave it to Fred because we were all with the mission and it just seemed like something she'd understand better than I would."

So Fred knew about this. Better and better. "And it got you thinkin' what, exactly, about claims?"

Buffy shook her head, still not looking at him. "I don't know. The history's...weird. According to the book at least. I thought maybe..." She drew in a deep breath, swallowed, then finally raised her eyes to his. "I thought maybe you just...felt the way you did about me might have something to do with...that."

"With the claim? That it was, what? Makin' me love you?"

"Maybe."

Spike stared at her for a moment, then shook his head and barked out a laugh. "Slayer, I was halfway in love with you when we left Sunnyhell. You know that, right?"

From the look she gave him, she had, in fact, not known that. Or hadn't believed it. "You were?"

"Why the sodding hell would I have made off with you if that wasn't the case, you daft twig! Got what I wanted, didn't I?"

"What you wanted was Dru."

"What I wanted was the sodding wanker to sodding snuff it!" he roared back, his demon dangerously close to the surface. "How many times do I have to say it before it gets through that thick skull of yours? Dru wanted me dead. She ran me through with a sword and left me there to suffer until the sun could finish me off. That isn't the sort

of thing a man just walks off, vamp or not." He paused, considered, and decided it was better to be honest with himself. "All right, yeah, maybe if I hadn't been so over the moon for you, I woulda tossed her in the trunk. See if I could undo whatever the big git had done. But not because it woulda worked—because I'm bloody *hopeless* for the women I love. And since I *was* over the bloody moon and you were hurtin', my thought was just to get you as far away from all that as possible. And if it was just about shagging you, pet, I gotta let you know, that bite I took outta you would've been a different kinda permanent. I would've drained you dry. But that's not what happened, is it? All I knew once I got my fangs in you was that you were mine."

He broke off, panting hard, having gotten himself nice and worked up without fully realizing it, but blast it all, the daft girl had no bloody idea what she did to him.

Or maybe she did because the next thing he knew, she seized him by the face and her mouth was against his. Soft and sweet and familiar, so familiar now, but the second he began to melt into her, she practically dissolved, like a dam had been broken.

"I love you, Slayer," Spike murmured against her lips, grasping her by the upper arms. "You drive me outta my sodding mind, but fuck, I love you. Think I did since the moment I saw you on that dance floor, movin' like sin and so full of fire you could set me ablaze. And it's never gonna stop, you hear me? Never."

Buffy nodded against him, her eyes shining. "Okay."

"Okay?"

"I should've... I was just scared it was true. I didn't want it to be true."

Spike blinked. "You...didn't want what to be true?"

"That the claim was what made you love me. I...I wanted this to be real."

That she could send him from one extreme to the next without bloody blinking was something he reckoned he'd never get used to. Ready to rip her head off one second and desperate to fuck her raw the next—overwhelmed, stunned, nearly in tears because, *fuck*, did she realize what she was saying? What that meant?

Telling Buffy he loved her had been a lot like dying—taking his last

breath in one life and not knowing if he'd open his eyes in the next. Though he'd told her he loved her plenty over the last few weeks, and though she seemed to like hearing it, he'd never gotten the inkling that the words meant anything more to her than... Well, any of the times he'd ever given them to Dru. Something she fancied hearing, sure, but didn't need.

That Buffy wanted the words, that she needed them to be real...

"I love you," he said again, because fuck, he could say nothing else. "I love you more than my unlife is worth."

Buffy nodded, smiling at him so brightly he thought he might just dust. "Okay. Okay. Okay."

Then she was kissing him again, and though the words he wanted weren't the words he got, he thought he might have felt them all the same.

Someday, he thought.

And for now, that would be enough.

41

On the day that Sunnydale High welcomed its students back for the first day of school, Buffy started patrolling again, like that was what she'd been waiting for. Spike didn't question it, couldn't—life in Los Angeles had become somewhat mellow. Well, *blissful* was the word he'd use, except he did miss the action. The hunt and the chase, the feel of some sorry sod's bones cracking under his swinging fists or the feel of flesh dangling from between his fangs. The monster in him that needed to be let out every now and then.

Without saying anything to the Slayer, he'd started taking the scenic route to the butcher's just so he could skulk around alleyways and thrash any miscreant he came across. Mostly what he got was the odd mugger, but he'd pummeled more than one rapist and stopped a bloke from blowing out some kid's head off. Of course, leaving human criminals alive was a struggle, particularly because he wasn't sure what the point was of not killing those who would kill others, but he'd made a promise to Buffy and by god, he'd keep it.

The best nights were those when he found other vampires snacking on tourists. Then he could really let go, and he did with relish.

So when Buffy had told him she wanted to patrol, find a cemetery

and put her slayer muscles to good use, he'd all but tripped over himself in his excitement to make that happen.

That night, the first night he'd fought alongside her since the battle at Dusk, she told him she wanted to look into getting her GED.

"So we're stayin', then?" he asked, watching as she bashed the head of a fledgling against the sharp corner of a gravestone. Poor little sod hadn't stood a chance. "You're sure?"

They hadn't talked much about the long-term plans since the night at Caritas where she'd told him about the book she'd found and he'd helped clear up the nonsense she'd been fed about the claim making him feel things that weren't real. At the time, and every night since then, he hadn't much wanted to revisit the subject of her family and friends. She'd already given him her list of reasons for not heading back, though he suspected there was still a bit more there than she'd shared. Maybe things tied to the claim, maybe not. Still, happy as he was to have her all to himself, he wagered he wouldn't be doing the best by her if he didn't check to make sure she hadn't changed her mind.

That much was likely the claim's doing. The Spike of old had been a bit too selfish to wonder about things like that. Or maybe it was her —being with her, thinking things through as he hadn't before. Trying to view the world through her eyes, hard as it was at times.

With a final smash against the headstone, Buffy succeeded in tearing the fledgling's head clean off his body and up into a cloud of dust he went. She wrinkled her nose, stepping back and coughing.

"Did you say something?" she asked, brushing herself off.

"Reckon we're stayin' here for some time if you're thinkin' you'll do your studying here. Sure you wanna do that?"

Buffy arched an eyebrow and fell into step beside him. "Get my GED? Yeah. Not sure when we'll go back...and I really don't think I wanna do the high school scene again, now or in the future. I feel... *beyond* it, if that makes sense."

It did. Trial by fire, the Slayer had grown up, which would make it hard to go back to a world of tests and dances and other childish things. He could get behind that.

But there was something else—something they hadn't talked about

at all. The fact that Sunnydale sat on the Hellmouth meant that the day would come when returning became a thing she *had* to do, bloody do-gooder that she was. One day, probably sooner than she'd like, she'd catch wind of some big evil and need to rush in and save the sorry gits that had never deserved her to begin with.

Still, he knew she missed home and all its familiarity. Though she'd been an LA girl once, it wasn't really the sort of place you got all weepy-eyed for unless you were keen on trying to make it big. Then there was her mum, who, though she had booted the Slayer from the house, was still her mum. Just last week, he'd found balls of discarded paper in the wastebin, each filled with the attempts of a letter home.

He hadn't mentioned those. Wagered it wasn't his place. He hadn't had a mum in over a century, after all, and given how that had gone, he reckoned he wasn't the best bloke to be doling out advice. Especially since he didn't know their dynamic all that well—not enough to presume much of anything.

Sometimes he thought about it, though. Heading out one night to find a payphone, let the woman know that Buffy was all right, if nothing else. That was the sort of thing *his* mum would have wanted had she lived—and been herself throughout.

Except thinking things like that only reminded him of the bloody terrible decision he'd made once upon a time, believing wholeheartedly it was the right thing to do. That had blown up in his face and he didn't want what he had with the Slayer to take a hit due to his idiocy. Because while she hadn't told him she loved him, there were times he believed she did.

And even if she didn't love him, he knew she could. That if he was patient enough, gave her what she needed, she'd fall the rest of the way.

"Fred can help me with the science and math stuff," Buffy said. "I already asked her and she said she would—got all kinds of geeky about it, actually." A soft, wistful smile fell across her face, the sort that made him think she was thinking of that redheaded chum of hers. She didn't talk about the friends she'd left behind all that much, as though discussing them would make her miss them more, but he knew she thought of them often. Probably more than she even realized.

Spike nodded. "Good. Be a bit useless at that myself."

"Do you think you could help with things like history? I mean, since you lived it. And I can just wing the English."

"Not sure how much help I'll be in history. When you're livin' it, you don't know what's gonna make the books, and it gets written down wrong anyway. But yeah, Slayer, I'll lend a hand." He paused, hesitated. Strange no matter how many years he put between himself and the bloody awful poet, thinking about that period never became easier. Still, to make Buffy happy, anything was worth the price of admission. "Can help with English, too."

Buffy stopped patting herself down and looked up with wide, incredulous eyes. "English? You?"

"Was a man once, you know. Had a Masters and everything."

"You...went to college?"

"Did at that. Obscure place, not many have heard of, unless Cambridge rings a bell." He found keeping her gaze a bit difficult then and glanced away, rubbing at the back of his head. "Fancied the study of natural and moral sciences, if you can believe it, but I excelled in modern language. Read as much as I could then and whatever I didn't read, I wrote."

"You...wrote?"

He nodded, still unable to look at her. Instead, he pretended to be fascinated a tuft of wild grass growing by a nearby headstone. "Guess you'd call them essays these days," he muttered. "On whatever I was thinkin' at the time. The bollocks I read and the like. And then..." He swallowed hard. "Poetry."

"You. Spike. You wrote *poetry*."

There was no sneer in her tone, nothing to make him self-conscious, but the words had him wincing just the same. "Worst bloody stuff you'd ever read, pet. I was awful at it. Loved reading it and wanted to create something, really anything, worth reading. But wantin' to be a writer or a poet doesn't mean you're any good. It was all rubbish."

He felt her move closer and tried not to react when she ran a hand down his arm.

"I bet it was better than you thought," she said softly. "Hell, good, even."

Something in his chest warmed. "Kind of you to say, kitten, but—"

"Did you keep any of it? Could I see it?"

Yeah, he had all of it locked between his ears all right, but he wasn't about to let her hear a word. "Nothing written down. Reckon that got lost after I kicked it."

Or rather after his mum had kicked it—after he'd made the mistake of thinking the salvation he'd been given could be shared.

And hell, hadn't that been the first sign that he wasn't the right sort of vamp? That he'd only vamped his mother to save her life, and that staking her had nearly torn him apart?

Fuck, why was he thinking about his mother so much?

Then he looked at the Slayer, remembered the mum she'd left behind, the wadded up letters in the trash, and understood.

"Would you write more, then?" she asked, resting her head on his shoulder. "For me? I mean, I wouldn't know bad poetry if it came up and introduced itself, but knowing you wrote it at all? Kinda hot."

Spike stared at her a moment before barking a laugh. Of all the things she could have said, that about knocked him off his feet. "Yeah? Hot, is it?"

"Did Angel...when he was evil and all, ever tell you about Owen?"

"Name doesn't ring a bell."

She nodded, chewing on the inside of her cheek. "Well, Owen was this guy I had a crush on last year. Or almost two years ago now, I guess. Regular, human boy-type. Really into poetry and stuff. Also into morgues, which is why that didn't work more than the one date—you never wanna be in a place where you're not sure if your boyfriend is into you for you or because you hang out with corpses."

This earned another laugh. Fuck, in a thousand sodding years, he would never have thought he could feel light while talking about his nancy-boy past. Like it was something other than a massive bloody embarrassment. And maybe the Slayer was humoring him, but he didn't think so. He felt he knew her well enough now to suss out the difference between when she was being authentic and when she was

holding back. That night at the green demon's club a few weeks back had proved it.

"So, what do you say?" She wiggled a bit, favoring him with one of those looks that cemented him as her bitch for sodding life. "Will you write more? Share it with me?"

Spike studied her for a long moment, then chuckled and tilted his head back. "Slayer, startin' to think there's nothin' you couldn't ask me to do that I wouldn't with a bloody smile."

"Is that a yes then?"

"I get the itch, then yeah, love. I'll write for you. But you can't wallop me if the stuff makes your ears and eyes bleed. You bloody well asked for it."

Buffy cupped his cheeks and drew his mouth down to hers, and when he felt her lips curl into a smile, the last of his reservations melted. Because he'd been right—there was nothing he wouldn't do for this girl. Even put his pride on the line. Maybe especially.

"And you'll be my study buddy?" she asked when she pulled back. "History and English?"

He laughed again, feeling a bit dizzy. "Anything else you fancy? Might as well go shopping for a nice dog collar and a leash while we're at it."

"Not exactly the fashion statement I was thinking to make."

"Truly might be rubbish at history, pet. Like I said, not sure I was payin' attention to the rot your academics wager was worth remembering. Hard to read the label when you're inside the bottle, and all that." He ran his fingers through her hair. "But if I can help, I will."

Buffy beamed and kissed him again, and seemed content to just keep on kissing him until the air broke with the sound of a clearing throat. The scent hit Spike a moment too late, but in time to keep him from flashing fang when he whirled around.

Charles Gunn stood by a nearby headstone, his hands up and fingers splayed. "Hold up. I come in peace."

Spike stared at the bloke for a tick, then glanced to the Slayer, whose expression was unreadable. At length, he slid his hands into his pockets and nodded a greeting. "Charlie," he said. "It's been a spell."

It had. Neither he nor Buffy had so much as seen or heard from

Gunn since the night at Dusk. He'd rather figured the man had decided to pack up and leave town, since he had nothing holding him here any longer. Had rather hoped that was the case, too. The last thing he needed was a vamp hunter with a vendetta and no one to point it at anymore.

"Yeah. Though I've seen you." Gunn jerked his chin at Spike. "Hitting some of my normal haunts. Nice work last week, by the way. I couldn't have gotten to her in time."

Well, that was right embarrassing. Being seen by his own kind while in full white-hat garb was bad enough, but apparently he'd been tracked by a hunter while doing the bit of rescue. And here he'd thought his senses were sharper than that. Spike reached up to rub the back of his neck, aware now that Buffy was studying him, waiting for an explanation. "Vamp speed, and what all," he muttered, casting his gaze to the ground. "Put it to use on some nights."

"What is he talking about?" Buffy asked. "What happened last week?"

"Street gang had this gal cornered," Gunn supplied before Spike could think of what to say. "They managed to get her underwear off but not much else. Your boy knocked them all out."

Spike kicked along the ground, his jaw tight.

Buffy touched his shoulder. "You did? When was this? Where was I?"

He hesitated, glanced up to Gunn, then heaved another sigh. "Been makin' the rounds these last few weeks when I go out for nosh," he muttered. "I'm a vampire, love. Need me a spot of violence to keep the demon from losin' its marbles. Haven't killed anyone—human, at least—if that's what you're worried—"

"No. I'm not."

At that, he looked up, and while she wasn't smiling at him, the look in her eyes was kind.

Buffy lifted a shoulder. "I just...didn't know. Is that why you were so psyched to go patrol tonight?"

He nodded. "That and you need it too, whether you know it or not. Wired too bloody much like us."

"Well, that would explain why I've been going stir-crazy." Buffy

took his hand and squeezed before turning back to Gunn. The softness in her tone fell away without ceremony. "So you've been keeping tabs on Spike? Just waiting for him to slip up so you can stake him and make with the I-told-you-so? Or am I reading this situation wrong?"

Gunn looked down and released a long breath. "Yeah, it started that way," he said in a voice so low Spike strained to hear it above the noises of the city. "Didn't set out to follow him or nothin', but saw him in my neighborhood. Looked like he was on the hunt and I thought maybe he'd broken off your leash."

Spike fought back a snarl, because fuck if everything about that didn't rub him the wrong way. Were it not for the death-grip the Slayer had on his hand, he might have done something stupid.

"I was wrong, though," Gunn said, nodding at Spike, still not lifting his gaze off the ground. "Didn't wanna be, Slayer. Not after... But I was." He sniffed. "Look, I... I got no one now. The boys are dead. Alonna... It was always me and her, right? And yeah, I was lookin' to put the hurt on the people who killed her and yeah, I found out that wasn't enough. 'Cause it don't stop."

At that, Spike felt Buffy relax. Not all the way, but enough that he knew how the conversation was going to go from here. Because that was the sort of person Buffy was, through and through. It was what made her who she was. It was why she'd never outrun being the Slayer, no matter which direction she pointed her feet.

"Fuck, I don't even know what I'm doing here," Gunn said a moment later, not-so-discretely wiping at his eyes. "But I guess you and your boy are the only people in this stupid city I know anymore. Have some sources and the like, but they're not the sorta people you'd wanna put on your emergency contact list, if you catch my drift. Guess I'm askin' if it's all right if..."

"Gunn," Buffy said softly. "We'll be your friends."

Spike scoffed—he couldn't help it. Much like he wagered Buffy couldn't help giving him a kick.

"Man, that sounds weak," Gunn said, but his face had brightened. "But yeah, I guess I could use 'em right now."

"As long as we understand one thing." At this, Buffy released Spike's hand and took a step forward. "Spike is mine. I don't care what he does

—what you see him do. If he kills, I handle it. If he maims, I handle it. If *anything*, I handle it. That is not and never will be your call to make. Do we understand each other?"

Gunn glanced to Spike. "Yeah. We understand it."

"Good." Buffy reached behind her blindly for Spike's hand, and he gave it with a firm squeeze. There were a lot of things he wanted to say, but still he held his tongue. He figured he and Gunn would never be chums, no matter how much the bloke ended up hanging around, but it'd put the Slayer in a sour mood if he voiced any of what he was thinking.

Later though, when they were home again and he was peeling her shirt over her head, he found himself asking, "You mean it, love?"

Buffy, who was busy tugging on his fly at the moment, didn't look up for a full three count. When she did, her eyes were confused. "Huh?"

"What you said out there to Charlie. 'Bout him not puttin' me down if I..."

"Absolutely," she said, pulling his belt free. "That will always be my call."

"Thanks ever so."

"And... It's different, isn't it? If something happens, if you..." She looked away, swallowing. "If something happens and you lose control or something, that's not the same as going out with the intention of hurting someone. I don't think you'd do that."

It was a bloody small thing, but also something he'd taken for granted. That she could feel any other way now, with everything they'd been through and all the promises he'd made, hadn't been a blip on his sodding radar until her little speech. Thing like that made a fella wonder. "You don't?" he asked, his throat tight.

"No. Of course, I don't." She dropped her hands to her sides. "But Gunn doesn't know that. He doesn't trust you and he might never. And... Spike, I'm not stupid. We're both stronger than the average bear and... I hate this, but I have to remember that mistakes are possible no matter who you are. The entire concept of manslaughter exists because people unintentionally cause the deaths of other people every day. You...have all these instincts and you're going against them,

but you might not be able to always. I don't want Gunn finding you on a day where you had to kill to save yourself or just used too much force and broke the wrong bone. Because if he saw that, he would jump to the worst conclusion. And then I'd have to kill *him,* which would be a mess of ick that I do not want to get in to."

This last bit she said to the floor. Spike slid his fingers under her chin to guide her eyes back to him.

"I love you, Slayer. Fuck, I think I love you more every day."

She gave him one of those smiles that made him think he'd kissed the sun. "There are...feelings on my end too."

"Feelings, huh?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry I can't...just yet."

He wouldn't say that much didn't hurt—it did, but she was a better woman Dru could have ever hoped to be just for the fact that she didn't mince words. More than that, he was almost bloody certain she did love him. The way she looked at him these days, even what she'd said to Charlie earlier, was enough to convince the most hardened skeptic. But something held her back, kept her from giving him that much. He didn't know if it had anything to do with her homesickness or the sodding book she'd found or, worse yet, lingering feelings for Angel, but he reckoned she was aware of it. The Slayer had a piss-poor poker face.

"Are you mad?"

Spike blinked and jerked his head, refocusing on her. "'Course not, pet," he murmured, then kissed her because he could. And when she whimpered and melted into him, he decided it didn't matter for rot when she said what, because he felt it in the way her mouth moved against his. How she gasped and sighed and arched into him. How bloody wet she always was, and how she clung to him when he was inside her.

Sometimes they went at it hard and rough. Other times, like tonight, he fancied taking his time. Dragging his mouth over her skin, teasing her nipples, strumming her clit like a harp to get her hot and writhing and so near the edge that all he'd need to do to feel those amazing muscles of hers milking his cock was push inside. Getting her there gave him permission to be a bit selfish after, focus on how

fucking incredible she felt. The first few pumps would be entirely self-indulgent, then he'd return to himself, get an eyeful of Buffy panting and writhing beneath him, and be possessed with the need to feel her come all over again. His unlife had never been better.

He just hoped whatever barriers kept her from trusting him with the parts of her he didn't yet have would fall soon, if only so he could prove he'd always be there to catch her.

42

"I CAN'T LOOK." BUFFY THRUST THE ENVELOPE INTO FRED'S HANDS and barreled her way into her friend's apartment. "You have to do it for me."

Fred favored the envelope with a bemused look before dragging her gaze upward. "Buffy, I'm sure you did fine. You nailed all the practice exams."

"Just...open it and put me out of my misery." Buffy rocked on her heels. "And do it before Spike comes looking for me."

"He's home?"

"Yes, I just stepped out to check the mail."

"He's home and...you don't want him to do the ceremonial opening?"

God, just the thought made her stomach twist. Yeah, he might be a bit peeved that she'd shared her scores with someone else ahead of him, but it was one thing to look like an idiot in front of a friend. In front of your boyfriend? No thank you. If she was indeed as dumb as she felt most days, then the GED scores would conveniently never arrive and she'd never mention them again.

"I don't need him knowing I'm an idiot. He can figure that out on his own if he hasn't already."

"Buffy, you're not an—"

"Just open the damn thing!"

Fred blinked a bit at her tone, but didn't scold her because Fred was, at the end of the day, just the very best. She tore the envelope open and slid out the sheets of paper that could very well determine Buffy's academic future.

If there was such a thing. Buffy was still undecided on college, not knowing whether or not it made sense to pursue higher education as an immortal being—of the claimed with her vampire. But every time she had this thought, she flashed back to the night she and Spike had started patrolling together again and he'd let slip that he was a graduate of freaking Cambridge. Sure, that had all been before he'd become undead, but just knowing he had that amount of knowledge in his already too-sexy head was intimidating as hell.

She'd never asked Angel about his education, if he'd ever received a formal one, and he'd never volunteered much information about his human life. That Spike had admitted to being a poet—even if he still refused to pen her anything—was more than she'd ever gotten from her other vampire boyfriend. And though she'd appreciated all the coaching and encouragement he'd given her over the last few weeks as she'd prepared to take the exam, she couldn't deny that she felt a little intellectually challenged in his presence. Which was so not something she'd have ever thought possible with Spike. He played the idiot savant so well.

"Okay," Fred said in a way-too-calm voice, "so, you have to score at least one hundred and forty-five on each subject to pass."

"Oh god, I am so dead."

"I'll start with your lowest score. Mathematical reasoning. You scored one-sixty-six."

Buffy blinked. "Umm...that's more than one-forty-five."

Fred beamed at her. "Hey, look at you, using that math in the real world!"

"I scored one-sixty-six in *math*? And that was my lowest subject?" Buffy yanked the paper from Fred's hands without ceremony, her heart in her throat. First, she checked the name at the top to ensure it was

indeed her own. Then she scoured the scores, vaguely aware of the beat of her pulse at her temple.

- Reasoning Through Language Arts: 194
- Mathematical Reasoning: 166
- Social Studies: 181
- Science: 172

"I passed," she said numbly. "I...passed."

"You rocked it!" Fred threw her arms around the thoroughly stunned Buffy, nearly knocking her off her feet. "And, by the way, I freaking told you so."

Buffy's brain was still buzzing to catch up with the information it had just received. "I...*passed*." She glanced at the page again over Fred's shoulder. She'd passed science. *Science*. The two subjects she'd been most apprehensive about had been math and science, and not only had she passed, but...

"Buffy," Fred said, pulling back, a happy smile fixed to her beaming face, "not only did you pass, but anything over one-seventy-five can get you college credit some places. One-sixty-five means you're college-ready. You *nailed* this thing!"

That was rather charitable, considering her worst subjects had been the ones Fred had done the legwork in helping her study. Numbers and formulas were very much non-mixy things in the brain of Buffy. Understanding literature, grammar, and history had come much more easily.

"I passed." Buffy released a deep breath, the reality of that statement setting in.

The past few weeks had been crammed full of studying and slaying in equal order—she'd never approached any academic achievement with more dedication than she had the GED. It had really hit her that she wasn't going back as the summer had matured into fall, when the thought of calling home had grown beyond a wayward inkling and into an actual urge. When she'd bought a spiral notebook for the sole purpose of drafting a note home to test the waters...though she wasn't sure where to begin. What she could say. How she could hope to

condense what her life had become since her mother had kicked her out of the house.

In the end, she'd half-started more than two dozen letters only to pitch each in the trash. There wasn't an appropriate level of contrition in any of them, because when push came to shove, she wasn't sorry. Actually, she was pretty damn pissed. Parents were supposed to be the people who stood by you no matter what, especially during the bad times, and the night she'd left Sunnydale had been one of the worst of her life. Missing her mother—which she did—did not magically make that anger go away.

The only letter she'd completed had been full of snark. It was also the only letter she hadn't trashed. She found keeping it around helped remind her, in moments of weakness, why staying in Los Angeles was the wiser decision on multiple fronts.

Dear Mom,

It's the daughter you don't want. Yes, still slaying vampires. I know you're disappointed, and I did try to quit, but it didn't take. If it's any consolation, I am a bad slayer. Remember Spike? He and I are mated. This is a vampire thing that basically means my life is tied to his for the rest of forever. My Watcher and I never got around to discussing the levels of acceptable fraternization with vampires, but he wasn't wild about Angel and boy did he ever have his reasons.

As I write this, I realize you have no idea what a Watcher is. Every Slayer has one. The Watcher's job is to, well, watch and make sure the Slayer knows how to kill things and not die. I had a good Watcher but since my ex killed his girlfriend, I'm guessing the whole "mated to a vampire" thing would go down about as well as it would with you.

Though I know you wanted me out of the house, I figure you're probably worried about me. I am too. I don't know what I'm doing and I'd love to have my mom around. Would have loved to have had her around last year when the vampy ex started stalking me and my friends. I think about what I could have done different, if I should have clued you in that Angel wasn't some college guy but the reanimated undead, but then I'd think about how well you handled the whole Hemery situation and realized that being in my corner when I needed you is really not your thing. So all in all, your comfort was definitely more important than my ex-boyfriend trying to suck the world into Hell.

I made it out alive. I had to kill the ex to do it but I made it out.

I still love you. I miss you. I hope you're okay. I hope you don't hate me. But I'm not sure I'll ever not be mad at you.

This Buffy had dutifully folded up and slid into an old tampon box that she kept in the back of the bathroom cabinet drawer. It was entirely possible Spike would discover it—perhaps he already had—but if he had, he hadn't mentioned it. She imagined there would be a big talk and he'd make some noise about heading back to Sunnydale. And yeah, there were times when the urge was so strong she could almost feel her mom's arms around her, but then she'd remember the look on her face, the way she'd screamed at Buffy to never come home again if she left to go save the world, and how that had hurt more than everything Angel had thrown at her.

Taking the GED—*passing* the GED—had at least felt like a step toward reasserting control over her life. No more standing in one place, hoping things would eventually make sense and she'd have some idea of where she wanted to go. And now with that one achievement nailed, she could look onto other things.

"Buffy?" Fred gave her shoulder a little shove. "You okay?"

She shook her head and forced herself to refocus on the present. "Yeah. Yeah. Just kinda... Well, *that* happened, so what comes next?"

"College?"

College meant applications, which meant putting her name on documents and looking into financial aid, because no matter how talented he was at swindling demons, Spike couldn't put her through college on it. Or however it was he kept them afloat. She trusted him enough to know his methods weren't dangerous but was also cognizant enough to realize they were probably were ethically ambiguous. The one time she'd asked, she'd only gotten far enough to confirm that he wasn't robbing or hurting people to keep his pockets lined, and that was as much as she cared to know.

"I'd need a license, or some kind of identification," Buffy muttered. "A social security number. All kinds of things that I don't have here." Plus, applying for financial aid would make her traceable. Probably. She wasn't sure if that made this prospect more or less attractive.

"True, but we can get those things done, easy peasy." Fred made a sound low in her throat. “Mmm. So, how are things with Spike?”

The question succeeded in throwing Buffy off her mental tangent on higher education. “Huh?”

“Just...doing my check-in on all things claimy.”

Oh. Right. She should have expected as much. Fred had agreed to lay off the questions about the book and the claim while Buffy had been in study-mode, so now that the results were in, it made sense that she’d started up again.

She understood Fred’s concern came from a good place. Her friend had followed her cues through everything relationship-related since determining what the book said about claims and undoing them, asking only here and there if Buffy was happy. Which was code for, “Just making sure you haven’t changed your mind.”

Because, while the trip to Caritas—Lorne's newly named karaoke club—had done wonders to ease her concerns regarding Spike’s feelings for her, the brain of Buffy had no shame and couldn’t stop looking for trouble when she was otherwise happy. There had been no certainties that night, just what Lorne could or couldn’t see, combined with what Spike had told her.

The good news was Lorne hadn’t seen anything in her psyche that would indicate someone had put a magical whammy on her or Spike. And every time they’d seen him since that night, the showy, green demon made a point to reiterate that fact.

“You’re still finding yourself, sugarplum,” he’d said. *“This big bad world just threw a whole mess of awful at you and you’re working through it. Don’t be too hard on yourself or others. The people who love you will understand and the people you love are worth the wait. And Spike-a-licious? That boy is nuts about you. Nuts like his ex, only coherent and without the daddy issues.”*

“And me?”

“You got a big bruiser of a heart there, Buffykins. It’s all over the place, but it knows what it wants. Learn to trust it without this thing”—he’d tapped her temples—“*clouding things up too much.”*

“Still with the good,” Buffy replied now. “The very good.”

Good was accurate without telling the full story. While she was eons removed from the place she’d been in the first night at Caritas, she

knew she was holding back. More to the point, she knew why. She knew she was in love with Spike, but the words wouldn't come, restrained by the fear that someday she might have to give it up. She'd love to blame it all on the wackiness involving what she'd learned about the claim, but the truth was more nuanced. The panic she felt at giving those words to anyone wasn't tied to a mystical bond—it was a byproduct of everything else. Every time she thought she might be able to do it, look at Spike and tell him how she felt, she flashed to that night on Angel's bed, soaked through with rain and as close as she'd thought she'd ever be with a man. And the endless bad that had followed—going from what should have been the best night of her life to the worst period of it. Then she'd think about the last time she'd seen him, how Angel had told her he loved her right before she'd shoved a sword through his gut, and the bad mental place where she'd landed.

And yeah, maybe she was afraid of letting go of Angel altogether. Something she couldn't really explain to herself, let alone other people. Because Buffy didn't miss Angel—hadn't for a long time. Honestly, there were times when she struggled to remember what had brought them together to begin with. How he'd leap-frogged from being the creepy-stalker-portent-of-Buffy's-death guy to someone she'd been willing to throw everything away for. What she missed was who she'd been then, how her girlish love for her creature-of-the-night boyfriend had seemed dangerous and fun and kind of forbidden but in a fairytale way. How, despite the dark world of monsters and death, she'd been able to embrace her inner teenager and just go with it.

There was that, which, when combined with the lingering doubts about the claim and its influence that she couldn't shut up—no matter what Lorne or Spike said—had her convinced that speaking up was the worst of all bad ideas. At least right now. At least until she was ready to move out of idle and discover what it was she wanted to do with her life. All if it seemed interlinked.

A series of hard knocks sounded against the door, jarring Buffy from her thoughts. Half a second later, Spike bellowed, "Slayer? You get lost?"

Fred gave her a smile and moved to let the vampire in. "She was being a chicken," she said by way of greeting. "Her scores came in."

Spike had done little to master the subtle art of pleasantries, so when he barreled right into Fred's apartment without so much as looking at the woman, Buffy wasn't surprised. It was part of who he was. Also, she couldn't deny the rush that came from knowing he only had eyes for her—something he reinforced every day. Though this time he was reinforcing it with an arched eyebrow and a frown.

"Scores came in and you didn't share with me first?" He jutted out his lower lip. "Anyone ever tell you it's not nice to do a fella like that?"

"I was afraid I'd flunked." She handed him the results.

"Piffle," he replied, wrenching the sheet open. She watched his eyes move over the information at a pace that seemed too fast to retain anything. Something he confirmed the next second when he looked up. "Well?"

"She passed," Fred said, sneaking past Spike with a grin. "Scores are out of two hundred. One-forty-five is required to pass each course. Actually, she really rocked your subjects. Like she might be able to get college credit."

Spike kept his eyes on Buffy, a wide grin splitting his face. "Well done, love!" The results sheet fell from his hands as he scooped her up and spun her around in a hug. "And I bloody told you."

"No," Buffy replied, though she was unable to keep the laugh from her voice, "you told me that tests are bogus and no one needs to know any of this crap to get on in the real world."

"Meant it, too. But you insisted. And you did brilliantly." He pulled back and beamed at her for a few seconds before the light in his gaze faded and irritation set in. "But I'm gonna tan your hide for not sharin' with me first."

"Sorry," she said. "I just... You and Cambridge kinda intimidated the crap out of me. Didn't want to see the look on your face when you realized you're mated to a dummy."

The irritation there softened a tad. "Slayer," he said, cupping her cheeks and tipping her head back so she had to look at him. "I spent the last sodding century with a bird who got her news from the stars

and took advice from dolls. More to the point, there isn't a dumb bone in your body."

"Oh no. I am sure that many of my bones are dumb. They just have you fooled. And the people who grade the GED exam. Completely snowed by Buffy bones." She paused, replayed that much, then shook her head. "See what I mean? I make the kind of sense that doesn't."

Spike chuckled, the sound deep. "Well, I won't argue with that."

"Jerk."

"Bite your tongue or I will." He kissed her before she could offer back a retort, and damn, it was hard to think when his mouth was on hers. Every kiss somehow managed to feel like a completely new experience yet warm and familiar at the same time. There were the growly and feral kisses that came out right after patrol, when he was high on the fight and closer to his baser instincts. Those kisses usually led to her being thrown against a wall or table and fucked within an inch of her life. There were soft and sweet kisses when they were about to be apart for any period of time, *just because* kisses that happened at any time. There were the worshipful, hungry kisses, like he was so overwhelmed by what he felt for her and didn't trust words to do the sensation justice. Like the growly kisses, these typically led to hot and sweaty goodness, though with an entirely different type of need and urgency. Then there were kisses like this. Affectionate and tender, not quite naughty but close enough that she knew what he was thinking.

"How you wanna celebrate, Slayer?" Spike asked softly, his blue eyes positively burning when she pulled back. "I'm yours to command."

"Ooh, power rush." Buffy rocked on her heels and tossed Fred a grin. "Sing for me at Caritas?"

He heaved a sigh and rolled his head back. "Could give you the bloody moon and you want a song and dance?"

"Song and dance is sexier than the moon." She favored him with the coy look she knew drove him nuts and enjoyed the way his eyes darkened, even more when they fell to her mouth. She poked out her lower lip right on cue. "Please?"

"Bloody hell, you don't fight fair."

"Nope."

"Right, Slayer. I'll give you a song or two." Spike smirked and hiked her into his arms. "And whatever else you want."

"Ooh, don't give me that kind of power."

"Like you don't know it's yours."

Yeah, she did. Spike showed her every day in a thousand ways, large and small, just how much she meant to him. He was one of the most physically demonstrative people—or vamps—she'd ever met. There was no guessing around him, no wondering about how he felt. Everything was in the open in ways it never had been before.

And she loved him. She knew she did. It wasn't the same kind of love she'd felt for Angel, either. That had been all-consuming, almost obsessive, to the point it had made her miserable. There had been so much uncertainty, which at the time had added to the excitement. Thinking about it now—returning to something like it—filled her with dread. It hadn't been stable, as most things with children weren't. And in all the ways that mattered, that was what she had been with Angel. A child.

The love she felt for Spike made her burn but also gave her a safe place to land. While it was also all-consuming, there was stability there that she hadn't experienced before. She always knew exactly where she was with Spike. He was the one constant in her changing world.

He deserved to know this, know everything. And she wanted to tell him.

One day, when she trusted that her world wouldn't fall apart all over again, she would.

43

There weren't many ways available to him anymore to get his evil in, so Spike had to take what he could. And since any good celebration should come with spirits, he hadn't hesitated when Buffy had mentioned throwing back a few drinks. Demon bars being what they were, getting his hands on something he thought his Slayer might find palatable had been rather easy. The bartender couldn't possibly care less who imbibed—likely hoping that some human would get nice and sloshed so the clientele could woo them outside for a nibble. The sanctuary spell was a good lure for that—attract all manner of creatures inside the door under the guise of playing nice so they could do their hunting in the open.

Spike hadn't mentioned that to the Host, though, or Buffy or Fred, for that matter. He might be on a leash these days, but that didn't mean he'd deny others easy access to a quick meal. Figured pulsers who wandered into places like this were asking to be taken for a ride. Might be one of those ethical gray areas he was navigating so frequently, he knew, but there was a logical component to it, as well. No matter how brilliant she was at what she did, Buffy would never be able to save everyone, and she didn't need to lengthen the list of things she felt guilty over when it was the circle of bloody life.

Little Fred had given Spike a hard glare when he'd returned from the bar with a frilly pink concoction in hand for Buffy, which was right hilarious of her, given that she'd shared with them both the kind of party girl she'd been just a few years back. Underage drinking hardly seemed like a major crime, and sod it, the Slayer deserved her kicks. Though she hadn't mentioned it in so many words, Spike knew she'd been on edge waiting for her results to come in.

Granted, she'd been on edge for any number of things. Things she didn't talk about, things he didn't press her on but knew were there anyway. He hadn't mentioned Sunnyhell or her mum since right before she'd dived into studying for the sodding GED, but a blind man could see the subject was never far from her thoughts. Now that the test was behind her and she'd relaxed, he might have to see about bringing it up again. Just to let her know that if the day came that she decided she wanted to go home, he'd do whatever it was she needed without complaint.

Spike wagered he could stay in Los Angeles like this, with her, forever. But he wasn't daft enough to believe this would be enough for Buffy, especially given how withdrawn she remained from him on certain days. The life she'd left behind was too much a part of her, and as long as she avoided returning to it—for closure if nothing else—the more it would weigh her down, steal her light, and he couldn't abide the thought.

But that was a conversation for another day. Not when they were celebrating her academic victory.

The first shot of alcohol to go down the Slayer's throat was met with the expected cough and watery eyes, which Spike didn't even bother to pretend wasn't adorable.

"Wow, that's...different," she said, shaking her head and blinking hard. "And my throat feels like it's on fire."

"Just how strong did you make that thing?" Fred demanded, stealing the glass to take a sniff. "Spike, she's seventeen years old!"

"She's the bloody Slayer," he shot back, repositioning the glass in front of his ladylove. "Bird's old enough to tussle with the undead, stop the sodding world from ending, but not throw back a few at the end of the day?"

"And I kinda like it," Buffy added, her brow scrunched up. "Again with the burny, but not a bad burny. What is this?"

Spike shrugged, reaching into his duster pocket for his ciggies. "Not sure, all told. Told the bloke to make somethin' sweet and fruity. Didn't pay much attention to what he put in it."

"So this could be roofied for all we know," Fred said primly.

"When'd you become such a tight-arse? Not like you weren't getting very stoned at her age, way you've told it."

At this, Fred looked down and flushed a bit. "I just... This is a demon bar and it seems reasonable to think that evil things might be happening, even if Lorne has gone out of his way to keep the peace."

"Only evil thing that's happenin' now is that cry for help on the stage," Spike shot back, holding back a grin when he saw Buffy take another sip out of his peripheral. "Speakin' of which, love, you volunteered me to have a go at the mic. Any requests?"

Buffy shook her head, giggling. "You're hot no matter what you sing."

There was no holding back his grin this time. Spike closed the couple of inches separating them at the booth to nudge her brow with his. "Don't be shy. Drink up. Wanna hear the other things I'm good at."

This was typically the time when she'd turn bright red and change the subject, sweet little thing that she was. But alcohol worked wonders on inhibitions, and it seemed the Slayer was no exception. Even with the few small sips she'd taken—girl had no tolerance built up, so it figured the stuff would hit her system with all the subtlety of an oncoming train.

"Well," she said, drawing out the word, a thoroughly sexual smirk twisting the artwork she called a mouth. "There is that thing you do with your tongue. Very, very good."

Spike waggled his eyebrows and ran said tongue over his teeth. "Find a dark corner, kitten, and I'll do it right now."

"You two both remember I'm here, right?" Fred asked loudly. "And also celibate."

"You aim to change as much, pidge, I'm sure there are decent

enough blokes around here that'd be keen to lend a hand," Spike said. "See one you fancy and I'll let you know if he's the sort of nasty to do you right or the kind you're better off avoiding."

"My wing-vamp!" Buffy beamed and pressed a hot kiss to his cheek before scooping up her drink and throwing back a heartier mouthful. She favored him with a goofy smile before turning to Fred. "Monster-lovin' is goooooood so long as you find the right monster. Like I did."

Spike growled and nipped at her lips. "I'll be whatever you want me to be."

"I thought you were gonna sing for me." She waved toward the stage. "Go get 'em."

"Whatever my lady asks." He kissed her again, and fuck, he'd never get tired of this. Though they'd been together now for several weeks—ever since they'd liberated the nightclub—the time before was never far from his mind. And worse still, the time before that, that detached state she'd been in the night they'd first had sex, and how she'd left him right after. Then, and even though he'd known he'd find her again, it had seemed a bit too much to hope that things would be like this between them. Fun, flirty, and simple. That he could kiss her in full sight of who the bloody hell cared, and she'd respond with enthusiasm.

Yeah, there were times he didn't trust it, how much he was enjoying the unlife these days. Even when he and Dru had been at their happiest, there'd always been the shadow of something over him, and as much and as deeply as he'd loved her, the thing he felt now was in a league of its own. Like he'd been playing around with the kiddy stuff then, which was right disturbing. That it could be more intense than whatever he'd felt before was something he doubted he'd ever really understand.

"Someone's in a good mood," Lorne said as Spike strutted toward the stage. "All's still well in the world of the Platinum Double-Threat?"

"Aces," Spike replied, and nodded at the wanker who was currently butchering Zeppelin. "Slayer passed her big test, asked me to reward her with my vocals. Hook a bloke up?"

"Darling, I'll take it anytime you wish to grace the stage with your pipes." The Host made some sort of *kill-it* motion to whoever was

manning the karaoke and the music pumping out toward the roomful of hostages died an abrupt death. "Have something in mind, sugarplum?"

"Think I'll go for something soft and sentimental-like tonight." He winked. "Gets her in the right kinda mood."

"Things I so did not need to know, but considering I'm going to have a front-row pass into your cranium, I guess it's unavoidable." Lorne clapped his shoulder and steered him toward the back, where all the acts got ready for their numbers. "Need to go make nice with the Shoshuna demon I just pissed off, so you tell Billy which song you want and he'll get you all set up."

Spike rifled through the song collection while Lorne made his excuses for cutting the last bloke's turn short. The green git still didn't have much of a range of things—a few Pink Floyd albums, which were all right, some Zeppelin, the Monkeys, a few compilation tracks, some eighties hair bands, and the entire bloody Beatles library. Supposed he could be a bit limited on the offering when the clientele came here to have their fortunes read rather than exercise their vocals. And it was still relatively close to opening, but the sod better expand his library soon or his regulars were going to bloody riot.

"Here," he said, tossing a CD at Billy, the timid Ptydol demon the Host had wrangled into working as a stagehand. "Number five on this one, yeah?"

Billy nodded, closed his scaly blue hands around the CD, blinked his sickly yellow eyes, then began working the equipment.

A few minutes later, Spike was on stage—a place he'd gotten rather familiar with over the past few weeks. He grinned at the smattering of applause he received from those who recognized him—Lorne had said he'd quickly become a favorite, and given how territorial the Slayer became after he'd performed, he found this to be very fortunate. The female demons in the crowd were definitely giving him eyes, and Buffy had noticed. Already the pretty smile that had been on her face had dropped into a scowl.

Yeah, it was petty, but Spike couldn't bring himself to care. He liked seeing her all green for him. Made him feel a bit more even in terms of where they stood.

The music cued in with the familiar chords of an acoustic guitar, and Spike neared the mic. *"I give her all my love. That's all I do. And if you saw my love, you'd love her too. And I love her."*

Fred, as was normal for these outings, made one of those swooning girl noises that never ceased to tickle him. Though he never quite knew where he stood with the girl—if she was in his corner or just tolerated him for the Slayer's benefit—he wagered he got as close as a bloke could to approval when he was crooning into the mic.

But as nice for the ego as that was, the one person whose opinion really mattered was Buffy's. And right now, Buffy had her face planted in her hands and was grinning her secret, just-for-him grin. Suddenly, he couldn't wait to be home.

"She gives me everything, and tenderly. The kiss my lover brings, she brings to me. And I love her."

Yeah, maybe he was being an emotional sod tonight. What of it? Wasn't like the Slayer didn't know just how indelibly wrapped around her finger he was.

"A love like ours...could never die...as long as I have you near me."

That much, he knew, was wishful thinking, though that was the only sort of thinking he let himself entertain these days. Buffy hadn't come closer to telling him she loved him beyond the bit she'd spoken some weeks back about there being *feelings* on her end, and he was trying like hell not to push her. Most days he managed just fine because being here at all—being with her—was its own reward. But there were other days—just moments, really—when the need to be loved the way he loved threatened to consume him from within. He wagered he could live like this just fine if it was all he ever got and be thankful for it, but it didn't seem much to ask, having the girl he loved, the girl he was mated to for all eternity, love him back just a little.

"Bright are the stars that shine. Dark is the sky." Spike leveled his gaze on Buffy once more and tried not to melt like a sappy wanker when she smiled at him again. *"I know this love of mine...will never die. And I love her."*

The music broke for the acoustic guitar solo. This was always his least favorite part of performing—sitting through lyricless music as a bunch of gits stared at him and he stared right back, waiting for his

cue. The seconds in between performance and spectatorship, when he was completely alone. Always reminded him a bit of the silence that would follow any reading he'd done as a bloody awful poet. He suspected part of him would always be waiting for someone to crack wise or start laughing at his expense. Some ghosts were harder to outrun than others.

"Bright are the stars that shine. Dark is the sky. I know this love of mine... will never die. And I love her."

And that was it, folks. All she wrote—she, being in this case, Lennon and McCartney. Spike grinned and gave the dutiful bow once the room exploded into applause, then reaffixed the mic on its stand and made to head off for the Slayer's table.

Jolly Green popped up in his line of vision before he could make it more than a few steps.

"Just...just all the feels, my delicious vampire creampuff, all the feels," he said. "I don't know how you do it, but man, you always know what note to hit."

"Reckon that's a bit of a relief, seein' as the same can't be said for most of your customers."

Lorne gave him a look that was somewhat scolding and somewhat commiserating at the same time, then threw an arm around his shoulder and situated himself at Spike's side. "Were you wanting a reading tonight, Snickerdoodle? Saw all kinds of interesting things."

Well, now that he'd mentioned that, what kind of berk would say no? "Wasn't why I did it, but yeah, share with the class."

"Okay, well. Take the bad but remember the good. The next little bit is going to be hard for you," Lorne said, patting his shoulder. "Make that somewhat excruciating."

Spike stopped short and turned to him, almost certain there for a tick he'd felt his dead heart thump. "Sorry?" he said, knowing damn well he'd heard just fine.

Lorne winced. "Yeah, buddy. Just remember—me messenger. What I *can* tell you is that there is an end to it. Do what comes naturally for you and everything will be peaches and cream, you get me?"

No, and now his temper was on the rise. "What the bleeding hell did you see?"

"Telling you the *what* would change it, and that's not something anyone wants."

"If whatever's in my future is *excruciating*, then yeah. Fancy skippin' that."

"But you *don't*, Spike, that's what I'm trying to tell you. With the bad and the ugly comes the good, too."

"Is it the Slayer? Somethin' happen to her?" Or had the green bugger seen her leaving him again? The thought alone was painful enough. If he woke up tomorrow and found Buffy had scarpered off, especially after all they'd shared, that might well be the end for him.

"There's no good way to give a man bad news," Lorne said with a long sigh. "Just remember what I said when the going gets rough—*do what comes naturally*. Those instincts of yours will keep you on the path of the beam."

What the bleeding blazes did that mean? "Listen here, you're gonna tell me everythin' you saw or one of these nights you'll find me lurkin' outside and those ugly horns of yours will pop right off."

"Ow. Do you have any idea how much of a pain in the ass they are to grow back?" Lorne delicately patted at his horns. "Seriously, man. The only reason I'm giving you a head's up at all is I know you're prone to the occasional bout of melodrama and it could be very, very easy to find yourself going todash if you don't watch out. *Do what comes naturally*. And in the words of Forrest Gump, that's all I'm gonna say about that. Now go over there, lay a big smackaroo on your lady, and keep your eyes on the prize."

And without another word, the infuriating git spun on his heels and disappeared into the crowd.

It was a minute before Spike could calm—a long minute. Every time he thought he might have himself under control, the gargle of riddle-talk the bugger had thrown at him roared back to the top of his mind, begging his demon to go and do something about it. But he knew chasing the Host down and trying to beat straighter information out of him wouldn't work, namely because the Slayer would catch wise and then he'd really be in for it. What was worse was the fucker knew it. Knew as long as Buffy found him entertaining, he had a ticket that couldn't be punched. And what would Spike say to her, anyway? Lorne

had read him, warned him, and walked off? Didn't seem like the sort of excuse that would garner him much sympathy.

Spike decided to buy time by ordering his girl another drink and himself three fingers of whiskey—his home remedy to dull the roaring in his head. Odds were high, though, he'd snatch a bottle of something before the night was out.

When he finally negotiated his way back to the table, he found a slightly slaphappy slayer who grinned up at him with wide, guileless eyes.

"There you are!" Buffy threw her arms around him and released a tipsy little titter that went further to quell his anger than all the bloody liquor in the world. "My sexy singing man."

And that was it. He was officially smiling. "Sexy, huh?"

"Like you don't know you're sexy, you doof," she said, maneuvering so she was on her knees, practically hanging out of the booth. "It made me wanna do naughty things."

"Buffy!" Fred whispered furiously, her cheeks flushed. When she met Spike's eyes, she rolled her own. "Apparently, she's a horny drunk."

Yeah, he could see that. Might have to cut the night early, see what kind of shagging she preferred when three sheets to the wind. "That little drink I brought her did this?"

"She might have gone to the bartender to get a refill. Or...or I went to the bartender to get her a refill because, celebrations, and I didn't want to be the lame adult." Fred sighed, rested her hand on her chin. "I seemed so much older to me when I was her age than she does right now. And it wasn't that long ago! When did I become the lame adult? I'm too young to be the lame adult, Spike!"

Spike brought up his hands, which were full. "Not throwin' stones, pidge. No harm done."

"Oooh, I like these!" Buffy said when she saw the pink concoction he'd brought her. "Gimme, gimme!"

He chuckled and handed it to her. "Might wanna take it easy. Get some nosh in your belly. Too fast and it'll come right back up."

"Whatever." Buffy threw back a slayer-sized gulp, her eyes somewhat glassy. "I am super strong and stuff. I can handle a little liquid."

He opted not to bring up the fact that she'd drowned the year

before. Seemed unsportsmanlike. Also, he knew as much because of Angelus, and that wasn't a door he was keen on opening at the moment. He wanted to keep her light and happy, her focus all on him. There was never any telling what bringing up the old sod would do to her mood.

Which was now downright sultry. Buffy polished off the rest of her drink like a champ before favoring him with the sort of grin that made him want to spread her out on the table and sink between her thighs. If he thought she wouldn't punish him for it in the morning, he might do just that.

"Spike," she said, her voice low enough that he knew she was trying to whisper but loud enough that she failed miserably. "I'm all hot and squirmy."

He waggled his brows at her. "You're definitely hot, love."

"And squirmy." She edged closer to him, so close he prepared himself to catch her should she topple out of the booth. "I'm squirmy."

"Are you now?"

"Uh huh." She laid her hands on his chest, dragging her teeth over her lower lip. "Aaaaand I wanna be squirmy on you."

A low growl tickled at his throat. "Give any thought to that dark corner I mentioned?" he murmured. "Might be fun if you're feelin' adventurous."

"Ooookay," Fred said, and started scooting her way to freedom. "I just got a major case of the third wheels. Buffy, congrats again on your awesome GED performance. Spike, she's underage and drunk. Throw in public indecency and you might actually get her arrested, which will look the opposite of good when applying to colleges." She rose to her feet, slung her purse over her shoulder. "Just something to keep in mind."

Spike rolled his eyes but couldn't contain his grin. "Spoilsport. Not like Lorne's gonna call the coppers on us, anyway. He'd have a bit of a time explainin' why some of his customers have antlers."

"Still. Principle." Fred offered a small smile, then waved. "If you manage to make it back to the apartment, please remember your friends with thin walls and no boyfriend."

Buffy, who had clearly not been following a word of the conversa-

tion, chose that moment to run her hand over the bulge in his jeans and start nibbling on his neck.

It took herculean effort, but Spike swallowed and croaked, "No promises."

SOMEHOW, he did manage to get her home before he lost control. It wasn't easy. More than once, he had to fight the urge to drag her down some alley and fuck her pretty little brains out. Wasn't enough that she was touching him all over—no, apparently the Slayer, when sloshed, was quite the dirty talker. He didn't know too many blokes who could keep it together when the woman they loved beyond reason was whispering how much she loved his cock and how badly she wanted it in her mouth.

The second the door was closed, Spike tugged Buffy into his arms and smashed his lips over hers. She whimpered and wrapped herself around him, her soft, sweet mouth moving against his with an urgency that had him worried he might not make it out of his trousers before he busted a nut. Buffy kissing him was one thing—Buffy starved for him, making those addictive little sounds, pulling at his belt, and rubbing herself all over him was a whole universe apart. He'd never felt like this—not once in all the years he and Dru had torn it up, and he'd been mad for her. Utterly mad.

But Buffy redefined everything he'd thought he'd known about himself. About how much he could feel, how deeply.

"This is right," she whispered against his lips, and though he had no idea which *this* she was referring to, he couldn't help but agree. Everything with her was just right.

"More than right, love." He shoved off his duster, letting it fall to the ground by the door. "It's bloody perfect."

She tugged down the zipper to his fly. "I wanna suck it," she said. "See if I'm any better."

Spike groaned as she wrapped her hand around his cock, not having the mental fortitude at the moment to scold her for doubting herself. The girl had some silly notion that she wasn't good at giving blowies.

Granted, he had been her first—and *fuck* what a night that had been—but no matter how much he told her that she set him on fire in the good, not-fatal way, she came back to this idea that she was doing something wrong. He wagered it had to do with inexperience—he'd made some fool comment early on after they'd started shagging again, in response to her asking how he'd gotten so good at eating pussy, that he'd had plenty of practice. A daft thing to say, even if it happened to be true, because Buffy was still very young and had only been with one man before him.

"I love how hard you get," she continued, pumping the length of him. "How you feel."

Fuck. If a bit of sauce was all it took to get the Slayer saying things like this on the regular, he saw a lot more alcohol in their future. "Buffy... So hot. You're so bloody hot."

"And wet," she agreed, grinning up at him.

Yeah, he knew. "Want your Spike to lick you up? Say the word."

"Maybe in a minute." She released his cock, braced her hands on his chest and began walking him back, and *bloody hell* if her take-charge attitude didn't do it for him. It reminded him a bit of when they'd fucked for the first time, painful as what had come after had been. She'd been wild that night, too, and he'd been rough with her. Rougher than he'd likely had any right to, but they'd both needed it.

This Buffy wasn't hurting, wasn't detaching herself from the world around her. She was enjoying it.

When she pushed him, Spike tumbled onto the sofa without complaint before setting out to help her drag his jeans the rest of the way down his legs. She tugged at his shoes and pulled his socks off his feet, paused just long enough to tickle his toes, then settled between his legs and dragged her tongue from the base of his cock to the tip.

"Fuck, that's good," he said, throwing his head back. "My hot, sweet Slayer."

"I like doing this," Buffy said, then sucked him into her mouth with an honest-to-fuck moan. She pulled at him a few times, perhaps a bit harder than she had before, then released him with a wet plop and grinned up at him.

That fucking grin...

"Good, 'cause I fucking love you doing it." He wrapped his own hand around his cock to direct it back to her mouth, rubbing the head across her lips. "Suck me, baby. Please."

There were times she enjoyed teasing him, and times he enjoyed being teased. Right now, though, he just wanted to feel her, and thank his lucky stars she was on the same page. Buffy licked the tip once, twice, then took him all the way in. The sight of her sitting there, blinking up at him with those vivid green eyes, mouth stuffed full of his cock was about enough to send him over the edge, but then he'd miss the best part. How her cheeks hollowed out and the way her head bobbed, the image of his dick, slick with her saliva, pumping between her lips. How she took him in a little deeper with each move, working herself up to deep throating him—something she'd insisted she learn after he'd described how amazing it felt.

"I wanna give you everything you had before," she'd said. "So you don't miss it."

It had either been astonishment or selfishness that had kept him from blurting that he could have her in plain missionary for the rest of his days and not miss a thing. Because while he would be happy with whatever she gave him, the fact that she wanted to give him more—give him anything—was the sort of thing that could have an otherwise together bloke bawling like a baby.

Dru hadn't been selfish in bed, necessarily, but she had been more singularly focused on what brought her pleasure. She'd taught him just enough to get him wrapped around her dainty little pinky. Every experience with Buffy was magnified for how different it was, that it was her, that she wanted to learn how he best liked to be fucked was its own aphrodisiac.

"You can grab my head," Buffy said. "It won't hurt."

Oh yeah, they were investing in more liquor. Spike groaned and threaded his fingers through her hair, and then he couldn't help himself. He began guiding her strokes, slowly at first to give her the option of moving away, then harder when he realized she wouldn't. It would be over quickly now, he knew. Watching Buffy as Buffy watched him, the open, earnest look in her eyes—the honest desire to please.

Every time his cock struck home, she sucked harder and contracted her throat muscles the way he liked, and bugger, that was it. He was a goner.

"Slayer..." Spike bucked, tightened his grip on her hair and growled as he began to shoot down her throat. Pleasure sparked and jolted, and it seemed to have no end because she was still there. Still pulling on him, making those bloody noises that could fool a bloke into thinking she was getting off on this, too. At last, the situation in his head began to calm and he fell back to the ground, panting and satisfied but still somehow in so much need he could barely see straight.

When he peeked his eyes open—eyes he hadn't realized he'd shut—he saw her resting her cheek against his thigh, a kittenish smile on her face. Like she'd truly enjoyed herself just now—a thought that had his dick stirring all over again.

"Fuck, Slayer, I love you," he heard himself babbling. "Love you so much. Your mouth. Your sweet mouth." He traced a finger around the mouth in question, and growled when she nipped at it. "How brilliantly you suck me with it. So good to me, you are. Could stay here forever."

"Mmm," she said before kissing the head of his swelling cock. "Forever. I think I like that. Forever here. No going back."

It would have been easy to barrel right over that thought, but fuck, Spike had never done anything easy. Especially since getting her to talk about this was next to impossible. "No? Don't wanna see your mum again? Your mates?"

"They'd just ruin everything." She sniffed, and the scent of tears hit the air, hard and cutting. So at odds with the little sexy kitten she'd been just seconds ago. "Mom kicked me out. And Giles...Giles would definitely hate you."

Spike sat there for a moment, staring at her, the high he'd just reached taking a rather spectacular nose-dive. After a beat, he leaned forward and seized her by the shoulders to drag her onto his lap. Felt bloody foolish having this conversation starkers, especially if she was upset. "Your mum was brassed," he said, wrapping his arms around her as she tucked her head under his chin. "Scared stupid, too, I'd reckon.

Most mums are when it comes to their kids. Guessin' your watcher's had more than one talk with her since then, made her see that you were tellin' her the truth about everything."

"She should have believed me," Buffy whispered hoarsely. "She should've known. All the times I nearly died. The time I *did*. All the dirt and blood on my clothes and she never asked. Never once even checked in to make sure I was okay. And then she thought I might've had something to do with what happened to Kendra." She started crying harder now. "That was the worst night of my life, Spike. The worst. And she...she took my home away."

Fuck. Spike released a long, tempered breath, doing his best to keep his own raging emotions under control, because he was an unworthy sod. That had been the worst night of her life—the night Dru had left him for dead in his dumpy little motel room, the night the other slayer had kicked it, the night Buffy had run a sword through her ex-honey's gut right after he'd been returned to her. Which part of it made it the worst night?

And how was it he could have her like this and feel just this side of blissful but still manage to be jealous of a dead man?

"And Giles would just try to undo it."

He swallowed hard, not knowing if he wanted to hear but certain he needed to. "Undo what, pet?"

"The claim. He'd try to undo it the second we got there."

At this, some of the pressure in his chest alleviated. Spike gave a soft snort. "Reckon he could try all he liked, but it's not goin' anywhere, pet."

"He has the same book—the one where I learned about claims. He has it. I know he does. Which means he knows how they can be undone."

"What's this?"

"They can be undone."

"You...you found a way to undo it?"

"Not me—Fred did. She keeps asking if I wanna undo it and I've thought about it and I decided I don't. I like things the way they are."

Bloody hell, the revelations just kept coming. Spike pulled his head

back, his lungs filling with lead. "You thought about it? About breaking the claim?"

"I like the way things are, though. I decided I like it here." She snuggled into him again and relaxed. "I like this with you."

The words were sweet and all, but he couldn't focus on them. All he heard, all he *could* hear, was that the Slayer had discovered a way to break their bond and had considered doing it.

When was this? How long ago? How often? And little Fred knew? *Kept* asking if Buffy wanted an out? The pretty picture in his head of everything they'd been doing for the past few weeks—months, really—abruptly shattered, taking his heart with it. All this time she'd been smiling at him when he told her he loved her, teasing him that she felt *something*, though what was anyone's guess, and she'd had an escape hatch at the ready just in case?

She didn't jump through it, though, he told himself, fighting the burn of his own tears now. *She's here. She decided she likes things the way they are.*

Well, wasn't that fine and bloody dandy? He was over here bleeding from the heart and she was okay with that. String old Spike along as long as it was fun, and ever the day came when it wasn't anymore, or when she decided to stop playing house, she'd just have to toddle on over to her friend's flat and then she could skip merrily back to her old life. Never mind what happened to him.

The rational side of his mind, the William side, implored him for patience. Let the girl sober up a bit so they could discuss this properly because he had to be missing something, right? That couldn't be all of it.

Except why hadn't she told him about the escape clause when she'd mentioned the bloody book? Why keep that in her back pocket *unless* she wanted it around to use one day?

Spike sighed, his heart too heavy and mind too torn to delve into this tonight. He swung her into his arms. "Let's go, pet."

"Mmm...bedtime?" She yawned against his throat, blissfully unaware of how she'd just upended his world. Girl was good at that—the doing and the not knowing. Or maybe not caring. "Sorry I'm pooping out on you, but my head's a bit fuzzy. I think I need sleep."

I think I need a drink.

"We'll get you all tucked in."

"You're good to me. So good, Spike."

Yeah, he was a regular prince. Just not the kind the girl wanted for keeps.

Story of his life.

44

A DRUM CORPS HAD TAKEN RESIDENCE IN HER HEAD. IT WAS THE only thing that could account for the pounding. Buffy groaned and rolled over, reaching for Spike. One of the perks to being of the mated, she'd learned. Just touching him took the edge off anything, from period cramps to sprained ankles. Granted, Fred thought that much might be psychosomatic, but Buffy didn't care. All that mattered was it worked.

Except not today, because he wasn't there.

Buffy furrowed her brow, wincing. She didn't want to open her eyes but knew there was no chance she'd get back to sleep now. While it wasn't completely unheard of for Spike to get out of bed before she did, it typically meant something was going on that required her attention. Like when the fridge had gone out—the one she'd hauled here pretty much on her own hadn't lasted long and they'd had to replace it within a month. The smell of spoiling blood had apparently been enough to stir Spike out of slumber, and she'd found him grumbling and tossing most of the contents into a trash bag.

She forced herself to a sitting position and tried not to whimper when the room went sideways on her. There was a foul taste in her

mouth and everything seemed brighter than usual. What in the world had she done last night?

It came in flashes—receiving her GED scores and the knowledge that she'd proven she wasn't a complete moron. Spike sweeping her into his arms and asking how she'd like to celebrate. And then...

Funny pink drinks that tasted like liquid candy, only with a monstrous kick.

She groaned, the sound low and pitiful. So she'd celebrated academic success by getting her very first hangover.

"Spike?" she called out weakly, stumbling to her feet. "My head feels funny."

There was no response, which was odd. Spike didn't make with the daylight runs if he could help it, and never without telling her. Buffy rubbed her arms and shuffled down the hall into the living area. Then stopped short.

Spike was sleeping on the couch.

What the hell?

Buffy released a low, slow breath, the pain in her head both intensifying and receding as her focus shifted. Spike hadn't slept on the couch since she'd rescued him from Gunn's old gang, and definitely not since they'd taken their relationship off hold and started screwing like bunnies. If he was there, then something was wrong. Really wrong.

Had she puked on him? She didn't remember much of last night beyond him singing for her and then sexy times when they'd gotten home. All things that should have led to her waking up curled in her vampire's arms as he kissed the bad headache away.

"Spike?" Even talking hurt. She swallowed and winced at the foul taste in her mouth, but forced physical discomfort to the back. This was more pressing. "Spike? Wake up."

Yeah, there was no chance in hell of that working. Aside from when his olfactory senses were assaulted, he slept like the dead.

Buffy edged closer, her heart beginning to pound along with her head. She was overreacting—she had to be. There were a thousand and one reasons for Spike to camp it on the sofa for a night. Maybe she'd been too loud for his sensitive vamp ears. Maybe she'd smelled too bad—she did kind of have an overall air of *gross* going on at the moment

and a shower, preferably a shared shower, with her name all over it in her future. Maybe she'd pissed him off by telling him what she really thought of the Sex Pistols. Anything was possible.

Well, whatever had happened, she wanted to get it behind them. Buffy rounded the couch and parked her butt on the coffee table, which she vaguely recalled having shoved away last night before she'd unleashed some of her oral skills on his unsuspecting person.

She winced. Maybe that was it. Sober Buffy wasn't anything spectacular in the giving of head department—drunk Buffy might be downright embarrassing.

"Spike?"

He didn't so much as twitch, which didn't surprise her. For a moment, she debated going back to bed, letting the guy get his rest. But there was little chance she'd be able to sleep, worrying about what had sent Spike from her side. So she leaned forward, pleased when the room stayed where it was this time, and gave him a little shove.

"Spike. Wakey wakey."

Still nothing. Damn him. She wasn't sure she could tolerate speaking much louder.

"Spike, come on. Wake up." She shoved him again, harder this time. "My head hurts and if you make me yell I'm gonna get really grouchy."

Half-murmured threats from his live-in girlfriend were apparently not the sort of thing this vampire took seriously. Buffy sighed and rolled her head back, and immediately wished she hadn't for the way her vision swam. She hesitated a moment before righting herself. This was ridiculous and so not the way she wanted to celebrate her post-GED score day. Once again, she leaned forward, and this time she meant business.

She took one of his platinum hairs between her fingers and yanked it out.

And that did it. Spike jolted upright with a snarl. "The bleedin' hell is your problem, Slayer?" he growled, swiping at her hand. "Can't you see I'm tryin' to kip here?"

"Yes," Buffy replied grumpily. "Here. On the couch. What gives?"

She frowned and pressed her palm against her brow. "Did I yack on you? If so, I'm sorry."

He blinked at her, then at his surroundings as though to verify he indeed wasn't in their bed. Then a shadow fell across his face and something hard filled his eyes. Her heart plummeted.

"I did something, didn't I?"

Yeah, Buffy was definitely never touching alcohol again.

"Said a piece, yeah," he replied in a tone she knew he was trying to keep neutral, but Spike wasn't good at masking his feelings, especially first thing after waking up. "Told me quite a bit. Gave a bloke some stuff to think about."

She furrowed her brow, urging her aching head to dredge up more memories of the night before. There had been plenty of stories about how drinking could affect a person. One need only listen to Xander's night-and-day description of his father, or hell, how her own mother seemed bluntly, if not at times offensively honest after she'd thrown back a few. But these were things Buffy had considered before taking her first sip and the only thing she could think of that might have slipped through her inner filters was that she was in love with the big doofus, and that seemed like something that'd make him happy. Unless he was mad he could only get her to say it when she was drunk, which might be valid, but still...sleeping on the couch was a bit of an overreaction.

"Don't remember, eh?" Spike barked a bitter laugh, pressing his palm against his brow. "Were that the rest of us were half as lucky."

"Whatever it is, I'm sorry."

"You're sorry." Again, no pitch to his voice, and that was somehow worse than if he'd been screaming at her. "Were you never gonna tell me?"

"Tell you what?"

"'Bout that handy little escape clause little Fred found in that book of yours."

Buffy frowned. "I...I'm missing something."

"So was I. Missin' that this was all a test run to you."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You said you don't want to go home because your Watcher has a

copy of that book that had you all twisted up about us a while back." The careful, emotionless delivery faded in a blink, and she missed it immediately because what took its place was raw heartache. "Said there's a way to undo it. The claim. A way for you to go back to your life and outta mine. And that you thought about takin' it."

For a moment, Buffy could do nothing but stare, willing the words to make sense. They didn't. Maybe it was the headache. "I don't understand," she said slowly. "The claim...and undoing it?"

"You said it was in that book."

"It was." She furrowed her brow. "There was a lot in that book about claims and how they started. I don't remember all of it, but Fred would know."

"Right, 'cause you've been gabbin' to her instead of talkin' to me."

All right. Hangover or not, logical or not, this conversation was starting to piss her off. "I am allowed to have friends outside of you, Spike. In case you haven't noticed, I've been going through what would charitably be called a crapload. So yeah, I've talked to Fred about this —about you and me. Can you blame me?"

"Don't mind you spillin' your guts to your chum, Slayer. What I do mind is bein' left out in the dark."

"I haven't left you out of anything! There was no leaving of any kind!"

"Then why's it I had to learn about this bollocks only when you were too bloody sloshed to keep your trap shut?" he barked, springing to his feet. "Never mind this is the same book that put the barmy idea in your head that I'm not actually in love with you—"

"It was suggested! I didn't know!"

"And you were just gonna let it stew forever if I hadn't said anything, right?"

Buffy opened her mouth, closed it, and opened it again. A thousand warring words and ideas crashed in her head, all vying for attention, but she could focus on none of them. How this had gone so utterly wrong so quickly...

"I was afraid of the answer," she said at last, her voice hoarse. "That's it. I *wanted* it to be real. I wanted everything to be real and not

because of some mystic blood bond you slapped on me when you were pissed off."

He went rigid. "Slapped it on you, did I?"

Yeah, that choice of words had been the opposite of good, but Buffy refused to back down, even though her head was pounding and she felt cornered on the defensive of a problem that had yet to be defined. "I don't think either one of us was at our best that night, no," she said, trying to keep her voice even and measured. "And I think you know it."

"I said you were mine and you agreed."

"Like I knew what that meant? Like *you* did? We've both been navigating this thing blind." Buffy waved a hand, as though she could pluck the words from the air and make them make sense. "And I'm still not even sure why you're mad at me! Yes, I learned the claim can be broken, but I didn't break it. I chose *not* to break it."

"Well, don't do me any sodding favors."

"I wanted to stay with you, jackass! What Fred told me was this spell, or whatever it is that would break it, would mean more than just the bond's gone—it'd mean we could never see each other again. That we couldn't even look at each other, I think. And I don't want that. I never did."

If she'd thought this much would calm him down, she'd been very wrong. Rather, the ire behind Spike's eyes flared even brighter. For a moment, she thought he might actually throw a punch. "And you say little Fred's been on you about breakin' the claim?" he managed through gritted teeth. "Knowing this? Knowin' that it'd more than break us up, it'd...it'd *rip* me from your life?"

The raw pain in his eyes was almost too much to bear. Buffy inhaled deeply, her own eyes beginning to sting as she scoured her mind for something to say—anything that might make this better. Yes, phrased like that, it sounded bad, but that wasn't what Fred had meant at all. She'd only been looking out for her, acting like the protective older sister Buffy needed in the absence of her actual family and the friends she'd left behind.

"It wasn't about you," Buffy managed to say. It was only then she realized that she was trembling all over, that it seemed she'd lost

control of her arms and legs and might topple over entirely if she tried to move an inch. A pain had taken residence in her chest as well, an all-consuming kind that made her bones feel brittle. Like a stiff breeze might be the death of her. That'd be a funny entry in Giles's books. "Fred knows that my life turned upside down and she wants to make sure that I'm here because I want to be."

"Right. And you're so convincin' at telling her everything's fine that she just can't help but keep the offer on the table just in case." Spike tore his gaze from hers, his jaw shaking. "That the plan, then? Ol' Spike steps outta line, decides to start drinkin' from the tap again, and you can cut ties and be merrily on your way, no matter what it does to me."

"God, Spike, it was nothing like that!"

"Then why didn't you bleeding *tell me* about this?" The walls shook with the impact of his roar. "You told me about the book, about the rest of it, yeah? But you didn't tell me this—that you had a way out and ready in case you changed your mind. Say that day came, Slayer, and you decided to pop on off—would you even tell me then?"

"That was never going to happen!"

"Wouldn't know that, would I? And if you were so bloody adamant, then why is our neighbor harpin' on you to end things?"

"That's not what she's doing! She just wants to make sure this is what I want. And it *is*!"

"Yeah. Must be right convincin' if she needs to check in every five sodding seconds." Spike shook his head, tearing his gaze from hers. "Might not wanna do it at the moment, Slayer, but you said it yourself. You thought about doin' it. Thought about—"

"Of *course* I thought about it!" The words were out before she could stop them, before she even realized they were in her head at all. But hell, she'd come too far to back down now. "I *had* to think about it! Everything that happened that night was out of my control, Spike! I didn't know what I was doing, what I was saying, what it meant when I said yes. I barely knew how I felt about you! I'd just run Angel through with a sword to save the world, in case you forgot. Everything I knew was gone and then, suddenly, I'm in a forever-long relationship with a vampire because he got possessive during sex? Learning that the claim

could be broken was the first time I had any choice in any of this. And I did *choose*, Spike! I chose *you*."

The quiet that engulfed the room the second she stopped screaming sounded impossibly loud, the pounding in her head coming harder than ever now. She felt sick—thought she might be for a second. Everything had managed to go wrong so quickly and she didn't know how to fix it. Except part of her didn't think there was anything to fix.

You could have told him that the claim can be undone, a mutinous voice whispered in her head. And yeah, she supposed she could have, but beyond the three seconds she'd taken to consider the possibility of undoing the claim, there had seemed little reason. By that time, she'd known Spike loved her and she'd been reasonably certain she loved him too. Perhaps if the book and its escape-hatch had been discovered sooner, the answer to that would be different. But that wasn't the way things had happened and, despite everything, Buffy was glad. Moments like this one aside, her life with Spike, her relationship with him, was what kept her grounded. It was the only thing that had ever truly been entirely hers and she wasn't about to give it up. Not for anything.

But that Spike couldn't see why she'd needed the choice at all...

"Slayer," Spike said after a moment, his voice low and unreadable. "Listen, I—"

Three harsh knocks sounded on the door before he could finish his thought.

"Ignore it," Buffy said, keeping her eyes on him, her heart in her throat. "What?"

He didn't reply, just stared at her with sad, broken eyes that both fueled her anger and had her flush with dread.

This was *so stupid*.

At last, Spike opened his mouth again, and again the knocks came.

"Slayer!" Gunn's voice boomed on the other side of the door. "I know you're in there. Hell, the whole damn building does, so open the goddamn door."

Buffy jolted. "Just a second," she said, glancing down. She wasn't wearing company-appropriate clothing. Neither was Spike, in that he

was wearing nothing at all. A fact she would have appreciated a whole lot more had they not spent the past few minutes arguing.

"Go put something on," Spike muttered, stalking toward the door. "Grab some jeans for me, too."

"Are you gonna answer like—"

He threw the door open before she could get the question fully out. Buffy squeaked and sped down the hallway, serenaded by Gunn's loud, "Hey man, I didn't need to see that!" and the low growl of whatever Spike said in return.

Five minutes later, dressed in jeans and one of Spike's tees, Buffy hurried back to the living room, arms full of Spike staples. Jeans, a black T-shirt, and a red button-up to wear over it. And of course, because this was the way her day was going, Fred was in the room now too, flushed and looking determinately anywhere but at the nude vampire. Which was the best thing for her health, considering that naked Spike was a sight for Buffy only and she'd otherwise be forced to pluck out the woman's eyeballs, and something told her this wouldn't bode well for their continued friendship.

"God, don't scandalize the neighborhood," Buffy muttered, walking right up to Spike so she was blocking everyone's view of her man's package.

"Figured it'd be all right, since Fred knows more about us than I do, apparently," he replied in a low voice, though not low enough that it didn't carry.

Fred threw her a worried look. "Is...is everything okay?"

"No," Spike said, tugging up his jeans. "But seein' as it doesn't involve you, pidge, might be better to keep your nose out of it before someone snaps it off."

Buffy's jaw unhinged. "Spike!"

"What?" he snapped, whirling back to her, his eyes shining with defiance. "Too much? Too *monstrous*? Ready to call it quits? Bet little Fred has that spell dog-eared and waiting. All you gotta do is say the word and she'll make the cut."

God, she wouldn't start crying. Not now. Not in front of others, especially not Gunn.

And thankfully, Gunn seemed to be on the same page. While it was

clear he understood that something was going on here—something important—he didn't start chasing rabbits. He leveled his gaze at Buffy, cool and determined. "Was on the hunt last night and a vamp said somethin' that stuck. Took a bit for it to click why, but I thought it might be the kinda thing you wanna know."

"What?"

"Sunnydale. That's your old stomping grounds, right?"

Her heart promptly somersaulted. "Sunnydale? What about Sunnydale?"

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw that Spike had gone rigid.

"Somethin' big's gonna go down there," Gunn said. "According to this vamp, at least. He'd just cleared out—said something about the mayor and a demon and... Look, Slayer, I don't know all what, just that it sounded like, if things go according to plan, the whole town will be wiped out come high school graduation time. I thought that might be the kinda thing that you'd want to know."

For a long moment, she could do nothing but stare at him, her legs shaking and her mind taking off at speeds too fast for her to keep up. Then Spike was at her side, wrapping his arm around her shoulders, lending her his strength in that wonderful way of his that had her fighting tears for a completely different reason. Because no matter how angry he was with her, there was this—the support he provided without needing to be asked, the way he understood her and always had.

It had been a matter of time, she knew. Returning to Sunnydale had always been on the calendar, just affixed on a point too far in the future to make out. And even though her thoughts were still racing, she understood that was what this news meant. Her time in Los Angeles had come to an end.

"I have to go," she muttered. "Oh god, I have to go."

Gunn nodded. "Yeah, well, from what I heard, this thing is big enough that we don't want it gettin' out of Sunnydale, so if it's all the same to you, I'm along for the ride."

"Me too," Fred piped in, then favored Spike with a look that practically dared him to argue.

Yet Spike didn't argue. He tightened his hold on Buffy's shoulder

and pressed his lips to her brow, soft and reassuring, even when nothing else that had happened here was.

But she had to make sure.

"You're coming too, right?" she asked, twisting to look at him directly. "Please come with me."

An unreadable *something* flickered across his eyes—eyes that had been full of anger and hurt just seconds before, though one wouldn't know to look at him.

"Long as I'm yours, I go where you go," he told her. "Never had any hope of keepin' you here, pet."

Now she *was* going to cry and she didn't give a damn. "Spike—"

"Later," he said, then nodded toward their room. "Think you got some packing to do."

45

They needed to talk. He knew they needed to—the air between them was so bloody thick even a dead man could choke on it. But bugger if Spike knew what to say, how to begin. There were words in his head, crowding the space, vying for attention over the shout of everything else, and at such odds with each other none felt like the right move. When push came to shove, all he wanted to do was fight. Scream. Rage. Take a swing at her, maybe take a bite out of her—do something that would exorcise some of this pain.

But that wasn't right. At least not for now. Because there were more pressing issues, and much as he'd love to grab her and force her to focus on them, that was the sort of thinking that could cost a man the best thing he'd ever had.

Something he hadn't known was possible until last night. And that morning...

Fuck, the things he'd learned since waking up that morning might be enough to do in a lesser bloke, and when cornered, fighting was the most bloody natural thing in the world. And fighting the Slayer? Mated to her or not, that drive would always be in his blood.

His future might well depend on how the next few days went, though, and Spike was not about to gamble with those odds. So he

kept his mouth shut on the drive, even as Buffy and friends chatted endlessly about what this big bad evil thing could be, if it was powerful enough to wipe out a whole town. Then Buffy had launched into a breakdown of the people they'd be likely to meet—the Watcher, for one. Willow, of course, though the name wasn't a new one to anyone. Xander came next—Buffy anticipated getting a lot of lip from him, just based on past experience, though she thought he and Gunn might get along well after the fireworks were over, given their mutual hatred for all things with fangs. And Oz, Willow's honey and apparently a werewolf, who Gunn was on strict orders not to kill.

She seemed to be taking a lot on faith, the Slayer. First that her mates were still chummy with each other and the Watcher; that they hadn't gone back to their less complicated lives the second she hadn't come back to town. Granted, he wagered doing as much would be almost impossible, as Plato had once suggested. Pretending the shadows weren't there was one of those things not easily done after they were spotted. Still, he worried that Buffy had this bottled idea of what life in Sunnyhell had been like for people other than her watcher and her mum after she'd bolted.

All things Buffy had either completely glossed over or not given much thought. He wasn't sure which he preferred.

Coming into SunnyD was a bit of a trip. Spike had to tamp down his desire to mow over the sodding welcome sign just in case someone in this bloody place was keen enough to put two and two together before the Slayer was ready to announce herself. And that much hit him like little else had, just how dramatically his life had changed in the year and a half that had passed since he'd first blown into town. Then he'd had Dru at his side and the unlife had been swell—or as swell as he reckoned it could get. That he would be with someone else, love someone else, would have had him ready to laugh himself silly before he started snapping necks.

But here he was, not only in love with someone else but so much so that what he'd felt before, the things that he'd thought had been forever, now seemed infantile.

The Spike who had loved Drusilla had died in this place—pinned to a motel wall with a sword and left for the morning sun to finish off.

But even that Spike had had half a foot out the door, stealing snogs from the Slayer whenever he could and dreaming about the day he got to sample the paradise between her legs. That Spike had been well on his way to becoming the Spike he was now.

The one whose heart the Slayer had taken for a ride.

The motel where he'd nearly snuffed it seemed like the appropriate venue for that reason. Aside from the fact that it was on the outskirts of town, it was where he'd been the last time his life had gone sideways, and the poet in him fancied the symmetry.

If Buffy noticed it was the same place, she didn't say. She also didn't appreciate that, unlike the last time he'd been here, Spike paraded up to the check-in desk like a good little housebroken boy and booked three rooms. One for Gunn, one for Fred, and one for him and his lady. They hadn't even begun to have the conversation about that sodding book that they were owed, but until then, he'd take as much time with her as he could manage. It might be all he'd have to remember her by once all this was over.

"How do you wanna do this, pet?" he asked once a closed door separated them from the others once again.

Buffy stood in the middle of the motel room, her back to him. She'd jabbered pretty much the entire way, but get them alone together and apparently that was enough to slow her tongue.

Though he knew that wasn't fair. None of this was. Just everything that had happened since yesterday had been at full bloody speed ahead. The things he'd said earlier had been born out of shock and hurt, and he'd been in a mood to throw some of that back at her. And though yeah, he'd seen this on the horizon—being called back to Sunnyhell out of a sense of duty if nothing else, he hadn't been ready for it to happen just yet. Before he knew exactly where he stood with the Slayer, a place that was more precarious now than it had been in weeks.

There was a bloody war being waged in her head, he knew. He felt it. And it had very little to do with whatever was happening between them.

"Slayer." Spike forced his feet forward, shucking the duffle bag she'd filled with their things to the ground. He inhaled deeply as he

halted right behind her, pulled in by the heat of her skin. "Tell me what's goin' on in that head of yours."

She didn't reply, just sighed and crossed her arms as though trying to fold in on herself.

"Just tell me what you need, sweet. Even if it's to bugger off for a bit. Can go and grab us a bite if you like." Though after he said it, he wondered if it was a good idea. Sunnydale was a much smaller town than LA, which increased the odds of running into a familiar face. And given that he and the Slayer had partnered up before the big showdown with Angelus last year, he doubted any of her chums would turn a blind eye.

"I'm scared," Buffy said hoarsely. "I...I guess I knew I'd have to come back here, that it'd... That I couldn't run forever. But I wanted to." She shook her head, and the scent of tears hit him hard. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do. Should I call my mom? Or Giles? Is Giles even still here?"

"You think he mighta left?"

"I've been gone long enough he probably thinks I'm dead. What other reason would he have for staying here? It's not like he upended his life to move across the globe to be a high school librarian." She barked a harsh, ugly laugh, then clapped a hand over her mouth. "I didn't even think about that until right now. How stupid is that? I guess I always just thought Giles would be here if I needed him. Like time stood still in Sunnydale while I was off living it up in LA and I could just...I dunno, pop back anytime I liked and find things the way I left them." She sniffed and dragged a hand under her eyes. "I was *worried* about Giles being here because I knew he had that book but he might not be here at all. And if he's not, I might just lose it because, god, Spike, now that I'm here? I need to see him. I need him to be here. Him and everyone else."

Spike closed his arms around her and pulled her to his chest, holding onto her as she began to tremble and break. "Had the thought myself," he murmured into her hair. "That the Watcher might not be here, while you were givin' the others a crash course on all things hellmouth. But I think he is."

"You do?" The sound was small and terrible.

"Sure," he replied. "Thinkin' you might be dead is a lot bloody different than knowing you're dead. All the Watcher knows is that you pulled a vanishing act after the world didn't end. Might have been able to suss that we split together, or he might think that you staked yours truly and took off on your own. As long as there's a shot you're still out there, I think he'd stay here."

"He probably thinks you killed me."

"I'm sure he's wondered that too. But without having an answer, I don't think the bloke would have left. He'd need to know what happened to you."

"And my mom." She began shaking harder. "Maybe she moved when I didn't come home. Or maybe she won't want to see me."

"Bollocks."

"You can't know—"

"I do. Your mum wouldn't leave. I don't believe that for an instant."

"But she's going to hate me." She choked a sob. "She hated me enough before I left and she's going to really hate me now, leaving her as long as I did. I thought about writing to her a thousand times—I *did* write to her, but then I'd get so angry about everything and chicken out."

Spike released a steady breath, thinking about all the notes he'd found in the rubbish bin over the past months. About the note she'd hidden in the loo in one of her girly boxes—the same that he'd seized on a whim before they'd left Los Angeles. Even now, he wasn't sure why he'd brought it, except that it had seemed like the thing to do, though he wasn't looking forward to telling the Slayer that he'd read things not meant for him. It had just seemed like the best way to gauge where she was with all things Sunnydale related, especially since she hadn't been too keen to tell him the old fashioned way.

"Spike."

He went rigid, tightening his arms around her.

"I'm...I'm sorry I didn't tell you everything about the book."

Spike was still a moment longer. This was the last thing she needed to be worried about at the moment, but hell, she'd opened the door and he couldn't help but walk right on through it. "You fancied keeping your options open."

"No, that wasn't it at all."

"Bit late for that. You already told me you considered it."

"I did." Buffy twisted in his arms, her red-rimmed eyes finding his. "I had to consider it. Anyone would have."

"I wouldn't. Never."

"Spike...what happened the night we left... I was in the worst possible place. I knew I had feelings for you, but I'd also literally just killed my first serious boyfriend. Everything in the world was outside of my control...and then the claim happened." She looked down, trembling. "It was all so fast and I didn't get a say in any of it. And so much of my life is not getting a say in things. So yes, when I found the book... When Fred told me there was a way to break the claim, I did think about it. I felt, for the first time, like I was actually in control again. That I wasn't just accepting what had happened and rolling with it, but if I wanted to change it, I could. I had the power." Buffy wet her lips, keeping her gaze on the space separating them. "And with that power, I *chose* to stay. I chose to not break the claim. I chose you."

Fuck. The last thing he wanted was to start crying or some other rot just because she'd said a few pretty words. Words that were not lost on him, even if the monster in his chest was still not satisfied. It meant everything that Buffy had chosen him, absolutely everything. A few months back, especially the time immediately following the claim, he reckoned the bond would have been broken before he'd had time to realize what was happening. Instead, he'd gotten her all to himself.

Still, this didn't change the fact that she hadn't told him about the escape hatch at all. Buffy choosing to stay might mean more than the world, but that she'd kept mum also spoke volumes. And it couldn't be as simple as she'd forgotten or it had slipped her mind, especially if Fred kept reminding her. She'd learned something, something important, and not only hadn't she shared, but she'd made the decision to not share every day until last night. Until she'd been too sloshed to keep from babbling.

That meant something too. If the knowledge about undoing the claims was that close to the surface, she had to have been thinking about it more than she wanted to let on.

He relaxed his grip on her and took a step back. "You still should

have told me," he said in a low voice he barely recognized as his own. "It's not like I knew much about this claim business going in, is it? Enough to do it, but not enough to know how it'd make us feel when we're apart or what all. That you'd feel some of me and I'd feel some of you. And you find this book you say your watcher has and you go to Fred and not me with it. Don't you think I have a right to know any of this?"

"Spike—"

"Not only that, after she fills your head with nonsense, you don't bloody tell me." He paused a moment, something occurring to him. "You were considering it then, weren't you? Breaking the claim 'cause you thought I might not actually love you?"

The shine in her eyes did the answering for her, and pain—pain a separate breed from anything he'd felt before—lanced through him with enough punch to send him to his knees. Somehow, though, he remained standing. Kept his gaze locked on the Slayer, the woman he loved, the woman who had been thinking for more than a couple of months now about severing the thing that kept them together. The woman who might have walked out on him without so much as a goodbye if things had gone even slightly different. The woman who might walk out on him still.

"I told you," she said hoarsely, "I wanted it to be real. I was terrified it wasn't."

"And how were you gonna figure that out, then, if you wouldn't bleeding *talk* to me?"

"I don't know. Spike, I didn't not tell you to hurt you. I was worried and I just..." A tear spilled down her cheek and was quickly chased by another. "I don't know what I was doing. I don't know how to do any of this. It's happened so fast and been so intense—"

"We've had weeks just us, you and I. Don't give me that *fast* rot."

"But it was fast!" she snapped. "Everything between us has been fast and the last time that happened, people died. Losing Angel nearly crushed me—I'm not sure what would have happened if you hadn't been in the school that night, but you started putting me back together. Making me feel things I didn't know if I could trust because, well, look how swell that worked out the last time. And then he was

dead and we were gone and I'm going through this huge, life-changing thing when you change my life even more."

"You can only use that excuse so many times, love."

"It's not an excuse! It's what happened." Tears were falling freely down her cheeks now, and it took everything in him not to close the space between them and kiss them off her beautiful, broken face. "I couldn't risk letting what happened with Angel happen again, and what happened was ignorance. I knew *nothing* about his stupid curse and it got people killed. It nearly ended the world."

"That's all well and good, pet, but you're forgetting—I'm not sodding Angel." Another pang struck, this one horribly familiar. "And that's it, isn't it? Gonna be measuring myself up against a ghost for the rest of my days?"

"I don't want you to be Angel! But I can't forget what happened with him. I have to know *everything*."

"But I can't?" Spike shot back, fisting his hands in an effort to keep himself from wrapping his fingers around her delectable neck and throttling her until she understood, until she loved him the way he needed her to. "I can't know what you know about the claim, what drivel is in your head, that you know there's a way to break it. I can't know that you might decide to cut me outta your life at any bloody time. You keep ole Spike in the dark so that when the day does come, he doesn't know what hit him?"

"The day was *never* going to come!"

"Then why not tell me?" This he didn't ask so much as roar, and it took everything in him not to bat an eye when she flinched. "You keep bringing up Angel like he's some excuse. Well, I'll tell you what—the thing that did in me and Dru was Angel. Her always hanging onto him, never letting him go, holding out that he might come to his senses and be her daddy again. I thought we shook him at the turn of the bleeding century, but he was always there. Always. I had to live like that with her and I've lived with it with you now, too. You think I don't know he's with you every sodding day? That you don't look at me without thinking about him?"

"That's not—"

"Tell me that's not true and I'll rip out your brain stem. You just told me *he's* the reason you held out."

"Because of how much it hurt!"

"Yeah. Same tune, different verse. Sing me another one."

Buffy practically flew into his arms at that, her hands on his cheeks, directing his eyes to hers. "What happened to me is the reason I held out," she said, crying harder now. "Because it's real with you. And it has been from the beginning. Angel and I were... I don't know if we were ever real. It felt real and I wanted it to be real but I never knew where I stood with him. We had barely been a couple when he lost his soul, and every moment before then, I was pretty much a ball of angst trying to figure out what we were. But I've always known with you. I've always...been able to be *me* with you. I didn't tell you there's a way to break it because I didn't want you to know. *I* didn't even want to know."

"What? So now you think I might've—"

"No. I just...I didn't want the possibility to be real. To be out there." She waved a hand at the room. "I know that's not a good reason, but—"

"Good? Try bloody terrible. You—"

But there was a knock on the door before he could get the rest of the words out, and that was likely for the better. He was too hot for this conversation now, and if he didn't watch himself, he'd stick his foot in it. And hell, maybe he was being unreasonable because the girl was here, wasn't she? She was still with him, crying tears he'd made her cry, telling him she'd chosen him and that ought to be enough. For as much as he'd mucked up her life—and he knew he had, he wasn't completely thick—the fact that she continued to choose him was nothing short of miraculous. Hell, she'd been well within her rights to ditch him the second she'd learned the claim could be broken. He supposed he should thank his lucky stars that she hadn't. Meant she was right and she did feel something for him after all.

Something she didn't trust because of the claim. Something that would likely never have the chance to grow into love.

Gunn offered him a flat grin when he opened the door, flicked his

gaze to Buffy and back again. "Not to keep interruptin' you two from getting your fight on, but do we have a game plan?"

"Can you give us a minute?" Buffy asked in a small, trembling voice. "We—"

"Might as well go scope out the school," Spike said with authority he didn't feel. "See if the Watcher is still there, yeah? Seems a good enough place to start."

Gunn frowned. "Think it's after school's let out. Would they still be there?" He narrowed his eyes at Spike. "And how'll you get there, Pasty? That car-tar stunt ain't gonna work on the entire town."

"Hate to break it to you, mate, but I've been dodging the bloody sun longer than you've been alive. Most of us have more than just one trick up our sleeves."

"Spike," Buffy started, "we can wait—"

"Rather not, if it's all the same to you. Gotta figure most of the people in this town are out for my dust. Seems smarter to get all our cards on the table. Sooner we take care of this business, the sooner we can head back out."

He hoped that sounded at least somewhat confident, because there was no guarantee when he left it would be as a mated vamp. No matter what she said, no matter what she thought right now, the fact remained that she'd kept this door open for a reason. And the reasons she'd given him had been bloody terrible. Now that it was all on the table, now that he knew just how tenuous his hold on Buffy was, it was just a matter of time before he smarted off or slipped up or did something to remind her just what it was she'd mated.

He should have figured. Nothing good had any chance of lasting, and since Buffy was the best thing that had ever happened to him, hoping for anything else just made him a fool.

46

"Don't take it personal, G, but I ain't exactly in a partyin' mood." Faith rubbed her arms, trying to stave off the persistent bitch of a headache throbbing behind her left eye. Unlike the super squad, she wasn't much for calling half-assed luck a victory. In fact, and for about the millionth time since she'd blown into town, she was contemplating turning tail and getting the fuck out of Dodge. But since that shit hadn't worked well for her with outrunning Kakistos, she didn't figure skipping out on a potential world-ending sitch would do much better.

All this girl wanted to do was get in her kicks and find someone to ride her to sleep.

"I still say the things we discovered were not inconsequential," Giles replied in his ever-the-optimist voice. How this walking ad for Xanax could manage it was no small task, so she gave him mad props. Didn't make her feel too much better, though.

"I'm with Giles on this one," Willow piped in from behind her little mountain of books. She and Giles had enough to build their own fort, spread across two library tables, and these days Faith rarely saw the redhead anywhere else, except for when she was doing her witchy thing. The girl was sweet in a puppy dog way, but Faith didn't much

like the idea of being anyone's stand-in, and she wasn't dumb enough to fool herself into thinking Willow would be hanging around her if she were anything but the Slayer.

"I mean, yes," Willow went on, "learning that the mayor can't be killed is of the massive and wiggy, but it's better to know, you know?"

She flashed Faith a tentative smile like she'd earned a cookie for that little bit of insight. Faith pressed her lips together and nodded, reminding herself to be patient and grateful.

"And he doesn't like germs," Xander volunteered. "Which...anyone else get? 'Cause I don't. If he's Mr. Immortality, why is he afraid of cooties?" He looked around. "Anyone? Anyone?"

"I do not think the *why* is what matters here," Wesley intoned, and this time Faith couldn't hide her eye roll if she tried.

Here we go.

"In revealing himself to be thusly preoccupied, he has given us an indication of how we may take him down." He concluded this little bit of brilliant insight with the same pompous, self-important nod that made her want to punch his glasses through his thick skull. It seemed she truly was doomed in the Watcher department. Wesley hadn't yet proven to be evil like the last one or—surprisingly—easy to kill like the first one, but he was the most annoying.

Though she was surrounded by annoying, which was a major bitch because she was really trying, dammit. Trying at the whole team approach, something she sure as hell hadn't signed up for and was still pretty sure she didn't want. Faith hadn't been much for close connections growing up, especially in situations where she was supposed to be the team leader, and given that Lenore—her first Watcher—had been clear on the whole *alone* part of the Slayer gig, that much had fit her rather well. Faith was good at *alone*—exceeded at it, really. Yeah, before being Called, she'd had a few good gal pals who were always in a mood to stir shit up, though they'd all understood that when the going got tough, they were loyal to no one but themselves. The concept of a *team effort* hadn't been one she'd thought she'd need to familiarize herself with, but then she also hadn't banked on literally picking up where her predecessor had left off. Granted, that much had been her own doing after Lenore's

murder and Faith's subsequent cross-country sprint to see the place the last Slayer had called home.

She hadn't planned on staying, but Giles and the Slayerettes—absent their mascot—had seemed all kinds of needy. Terrified at first, fearing her presence meant Buffy was dead, then thirsty for her once they'd determined that Kendra was the one who had triggered her activation. According to them, Faith was their ticket to learning whether or not Buffy Summers was still alive.

Nearly nine months later and that was still a big ole question mark. And that was only since Faith had shown up—B had been missing for almost a year now, and being the gambling sort, Faith had to assume that meant the other girl had punched her ticket. Giles had come around to that line of thinking over the past few months too, though he'd pretend otherwise for anyone who asked. This was especially true when it came to Joyce Summers, who made a point to call every day and swing by the library at least twice a week to both exorcise her anger at the librarian—she needed someone to blame, after all—and check to see if he'd heard anything.

Giles heaved a sigh, jerking Faith back to the present, and removed his glasses. "Have you, err, spoken with Angel at all since...the incident?"

"Nah. He's still a bit raw, I think," she replied. "Puttin' on that dog and pony show made all kinds of wicked nasty feelings come back, from what I gather."

Xander snorted, as he often did when the subject of Angel came around. "Trying really hard to feel bad for the guy, but I gotta say, I think we still have the market cornered on trauma."

"Well, it couldn't be easy," Willow piped in. "Especially with...all the unresolved things. And he did it as a favor to us, so I'd say we should go easy on him."

"You are so much more forgiving than I am," Xander replied.

That much went without say. Ever since Angel had popped back into existence, he'd given Giles and everyone else a rather wide berth. Apparently, something about having previously been homicidal made people uncomfortable. In fact, had Faith not been in town, it was safe

to bet that he'd have either staked himself or skedaddled. No one here was a fan, which, granted, was fair, given he'd murdered Giles's girlfriend and tried to end the world and all. But Faith found him at least somewhat useful some of the time—at least useful enough to keep him from ashing himself prematurely, as he nearly had over Christmas. It helped, she knew, that she hadn't been around when he'd been on his murder spree. The others had a beef with him and she hadn't let it become hers.

The fact that Angel had taken her interest in him as something other than pragmatic was a horse of a different color.

At first, getting anyone to blab about Angel had been like pulling teeth without anesthetic, but seeing the guy had a habit of popping up out of nowhere, Faith had jerked on the rubber glove, grabbed a wrench, and started pulling until someone talked. She still didn't have all bits of the story, but enough to piece together that the guy wasn't the sort she could ride for fun, which was kind of a bitch because she'd always wanted to see what it'd be like to do a vamp.

Faith jerked herself back to the present to find Xander and Willow exchanging one of those annoying reading-each-other's-minds looks that did little more than make her feel like the third wheel, which was hella annoying in a place where she was supposed to be calling the shots. It was something she'd gotten used to, more or less, since she'd blown into town.

She knew she oughta be grateful. This slayer gig was supposed to be a lonely road of one, but she'd gone and hit the mother-load. Barreled right into the territory carved out by her predecessor, the girl whose shadow she couldn't outrun despite however long Buffy the Great had been MIA. The perks included a couple of ready-made groupies who kept surprising her with how useful they could be, a grieving Watcher who refused to abandon his post even though he would tell anyone with an ear that his slayer had been killed nearly a year earlier by William the Bloody, and a broody stalker who insisted she was his path to redemption.

Call her crazy, but she wasn't about to be swept off her feet by a guy who went homicidal once he popped his top, no matter how soulful those eyes of his were.

"Xan," Faith said, "didn't you say once you went all commando-boy and learned a bunch of neat tricks?"

Xander straightened at that, looking all kinds of proud. "Yes. Halloween last year, I was turned into a military guy and, when I turned back, major with the intense knowledge of things I had never before found interesting." He paused, some of the light in his eyes fading. "Got Buffy a rocket launcher for her birthday."

Yeah, this story Faith had heard a thousand times or more, but she plastered on her grin and suffered through it. Something she'd learned since she'd landed in Sunnydale was that Xander was a guy who liked to feel useful, even if he was anything but. And when he had something of value to share, the best way to get to the good stuff was to stroke his ego by way of his past victories. There'd been one night, not too far back, when she'd been denied the kill while making the rounds at one of the cemeteries and debated taking Xander out for a spin to see if he could help her end the night on a high note. Then Angel had shown up, said a bunch of cryptic shit about the Hellmouth opening, and she'd been off to the library, relieved at the prospect of having a bigger baddie to slay.

Damn. Near-apocalypse aside, that night had been a good one. She'd gotten in a good day's slay, shoved a bacon cheeseburger and chili cheese fries down her gullet, then slept like a fucking rock. And avoided possibly breaking one of her so-called allies, because she was reasonably certain Xander wouldn't be able to handle her between the sheets.

"Might be something we can do with that," she said, offering the boy a placating smile.

"I can look into some books, see if I can find the source for the spell that made him all impervious." Willow offered a half-hearted grin. "Maybe there's a way to reverse that."

Faith tried not to roll her eyes. The little redhead's firepower was questionable. There were a few spells she'd pulled off since Faith had rolled into town, but none with any regularity. The most she'd been able to do on a consistent basis was make pencils twirl in the air. The larger spells—spells like the one she'd been working on all year, to determine if a certain slayer was still alive and kicking—were wildly

inconsistent. Giles had learned to stop rushing for the door every time she announced Buffy was indeed alive and somewhere close. Poor guy had gotten his hopes up a time too many, which might account for why he'd stopped outwardly searching for her. He didn't want to be seen as pathetic and idealistic, no matter if the alternative meant giving up.

There were times Faith figured she could kill the bitch herself for as much as she was talked about. These guys definitely had an issue letting someone go. At least once in every meeting, someone would utter the phrase, "What would Buffy do?" and make her want to punch a hole in the wall.

Buffy wasn't here, kids, and smart money said she wasn't ever coming back. Might as well get used to the idea that Sunnydale had a new sheriff, along with a new deputy, though Wesley was all kinds of useless and Faith was privately pulling to have Giles instated as her active Watcher.

"Given what we know of the Mayor, I think it safe to conclude that the ritual he conducted to make himself impervious would be rather difficult to crack," Giles muttered, missing the way Willow's face fell as it so often did whenever he dismissed one of her suggestions. "Every step he has taken has been deliberate and well-paced. There is a method to this that we're missing." He released a long sigh, looking about as old as he had since Faith had blown into town, and pinched the bridge of his nose. "The lengths that Wilkins has gone to in order to secure his immortality suggest that he intends to live a long time. It would stand to reason that the Ascension in Sharpsville involved a person of similar mindset and ambition, yet there is no record of this anywhere."

"So, what are you saying?" Willow asked, her brow furrowed.

"That perhaps Wilkins's invulnerability is fleeting." Giles sighed again. "That perhaps Wilkins can only be killed if allowed to Ascend."

"And possibly allowed to wipe Sunnydale off the map," Xander deadpanned. He glanced around the room. "Can I get a show of hands for *yay*?"

"This is all speculation, of course," Giles muttered, not bothering to respond, and honestly, Faith couldn't blame him. "The books you

uncovered will be most helpful, but by the time we have made our way through them, the bloody thing might be over."

Faith nodded, crossing her arms. "Well, we know what we know. I still say it might be worth sendin' Red over to do some recon." She eyed Willow, who sat up straighter at being referenced. "Good little A-plussers like you gets their jollies with civic work, right? Looks all kinds of good on those transcripts."

Giles shook his head. "And I've told you it's too dangerous. He wouldn't hesitate to kill her if she were discovered."

"And I've told you that the whole town's liable to be flattened if we don't get our shit together and bust this bitch."

"I really don't think that sort of attitude helps anyone, Faith," Wesley said in his snootiest voice.

"Bite me, British. Just tryin' to keep the world from goin' to shit."

"Really, now—"

"Fine then," Faith snapped, speaking over her so-called Watcher. "What about Angel?"

Xander scowled as he so often did when Angel was referenced. "What about him?"

"We know the Mayor thinks he's valuable, thanks to that little stunt with the shaman. Could be he plays the double agent." When no one looked particularly taken with this plan, Faith groaned her frustration and threw her hands in the air. "Look, we need a play here. Get someone close to him so he can fill us in on all the shit that's being said behind closed doors."

"So what do you propose, exactly?" Giles asked coolly. "Angel has already played the role of Angelus for the Mayor. Why would Wilkins believe anything—"

"Yes, Angelus. Not Angel." Faith glanced around the room. "Look, you guys are fine usin' him but he ain't part of the group. He might be all five-by-five with bein' shucked to the side, but Wilkins don't know that. Maybe the story is Angel's lookin' for somethin' to live for and he's done this white-hat gig since it didn't get him nothin' but on everyone's shit-list. He did us a solid pretending to be a bad guy, but that don't mean he's on the team. This is what he tells Wilkins when he goes in—that he's decided to switch teams, soul or not."

"And we're just...hoping that doesn't actually happen?" Xander asked. "'Cause I could see it actually happening."

"Won't know until we ask, I guess. And—"

The sound of the library door swinging open behind her cut her off, mostly because the only people who deigned to visit nowadays when school hours were over were the vamp in question and the werewolf. And since the tingles on her neck said *vampire*, that ruled out the witch's furry boyfriend.

"Funny," she said, turning to greet him, "we were just talk—"

But it wasn't Angel. It was a blonde Faith immediately recognized. The famous Buffy Summers, apparently more alive than dead, though for the look on her face, you wouldn't know it. She stood beside a leather-clad hottie with platinum hair and a sneer to match the attitude practically oozing off of him. That had to be the vamp.

That had to be Spike.

What the hell was going on?

Behind the Slayer stood two other people, both a bit too old for the high school scene. A man Faith wouldn't mind taking for a spin and a mousy little thing who looked to be cut from the same cloth as Red. They couldn't be a more mismatched gang if they tried.

After a long stretch of silence, Buffy Summers took a step forward.

"Hi, guys." She offered a strained smile. "Surprise?"

47

For as often as she'd seen this moment in her dreams, Buffy had expected it to be a little on the weird side. Visit a place often enough in your mind and it took on a fuzzy sense of reality when you went there during waking hours. But nothing could have prepared her for how strange it would feel to walk through the library doors—like diving head-first into the past. If she'd allowed herself a moment to second-guess, she doubted she would have found the strength to do it at all, especially with a completely separate war raging between her and the person she needed most.

Spike was with her but he wasn't. The tangled mess she'd made of their relationship wasn't where her focus needed to be, but knowing that didn't magically make her head clear.

Still, when her heart started pounding so loud it made her chest hurt, Spike didn't hesitate—he reached for her hand, threaded his fingers through hers and squeezed.

"Buffy." That was Giles, staggering forward from the group of blank faces staring at her. "Buffy, my god..."

"Good lord," said mini-Giles, or whoever the younger British guy was. "Is that really her?"

"Is that really her?" Willow echoed from behind, her voice high-pitched. "Xander, pinch me."

"Giles, don't!" Xander yelled at the same time. "She's a vampire."

At that, Spike snorted. "See your mates haven't smarted themselves up over the past year, pet."

"Spike." The hopeful, happy look on Giles's face blinked away. He stared hard at the vampire for a long moment before looking back at her, something hardening behind his eyes. "What is this?"

"Who is she?" Buffy replied, shifting her gaze to the girl currently staring daggers at her. She figured she already had the answer but wanted someone to say it anyway. This scene, with its research party, tweed-wearing adults, and bad-ass superchick looked a bit too familiar.

"Name's Faith," the girl replied. "And I believe my man G just asked you a question."

Her man? Buffy looked back to Giles and saw the last of the warmth had melted away, or at the very least been bricked behind a stoic façade. And it was then that the unreality of what she'd walked into struck home. It was a Scooby meeting—they'd kept going on, apparently. And when she hadn't returned, they'd found someone to fill her shoes.

"New slayer," Spike muttered. He glanced at her, his expression unreadable. "The bird Dru offed last year had a replacement called, I'd wager."

"A slayer?" Gunn asked. "Thought you said there was only supposed to be one of those at a time."

Xander aimed a scowl at him. "I'm sorry, who are you?"

"That's Gunn," Buffy said a bit flatly. "He's a vamp hunter from LA. And this is Fred." She gestured at Fred, who flashed a very Fred-like smile and offered a little wave. "She works at the Stewart Brunell Public Library, is a grad student at UCLA, and also my neighbor."

"Your...neighbor?" Giles repeated. "Your neighbor."

"You mean you've just been *living* in Los Angeles this entire time?" Willow demanded. "This *entire time*, Buffy?"

"I'm telling you, she's a vampire," Xander snapped. "She's holding hands with Spike."

"I am not a vampire," Buffy replied, going for calm and collected

but failing miserably. "Most vampires wouldn't be friends with vamp hunters, or did that part escape your notice?"

"Most *vampire slayers* wouldn't be cozying up to a vampire known for killing them!" Xander shot back. "And they definitely wouldn't abandon their friends and let them think they were dead for months!"

Buffy tightened her grip on Spike and was relieved, almost to the point of tears, when she felt him squeeze back. First order of business once they left this place would be to get past this book stuff—she wasn't sure what else she could tell him now, except the thing that she'd been terrified to admit. And honestly, if pressed, Buffy couldn't say what was holding her back anymore, except the fact that she hadn't wanted the first time she told Spike she loved him to be while they were fighting, especially after having held the words hostage for so long. But perhaps she should have seen this coming—they were *them*, after all, and one of the things *they* did best was fight.

"Look," she said a moment later, her throat tight, "I don't expect... anyone to understand—"

"Good!" Willow shouted in a trembling voice. "Because we don't. I don't. You just...*show up* back here after *months* and how are we supposed to react?"

"How about bloody chuffed, you ungrateful sods." Spike released her hand and took a step forward—a step that was immediately met by the other slayer, the new girl, and boy oh *boy*, Buffy so did not like the look in her eyes. If Spike noticed, he neither acknowledged it nor appeared concerned. "The Slayer didn't have to come back," he continued. "And after she was chased out the last time—"

"Chased?" Xander echoed, his voice hitting a shrill. "We *chased* her out of town?"

"What the hell do you think running a sodding sword through the git she loves does to a girl, eh? Even if it is to *save the world*? 'Specially since the lot of you decided to stuff a soul back up his righteous arse at the bloody eleventh hour. Brilliant call on that, by the way. Bring him back just long enough to steal a snog before he toddles off to Hell."

Buffy swallowed, her knees going a bit shaky. All things Angel-related were the last in a very long line of reasons she'd stayed away as

long as she had, but she didn't think she'd score any points by pointing that out now.

"Throw in her mum chucking her outta the house and the lot of you are bloody fortunate she cares enough to come back at all," Spike said decisively.

"All right, Blondie, that's enough," barked the new slayer. *Faith*. "Ain't no sense in playing the blame game, especially when we got this big nasty around the corner. So I say we shelve the drama and the finger-pointing until the mayor is yesterday's news. How about it?"

There was a beat in which no words were shared but many glares were exchanged. Faith kept her gaze pinned on Spike, which had every instinctive cell in Buffy's body going haywire. The urge was there, real and tangible, to stride across the room and sock the new slayer in the mouth. She'd thought about what would happen were she to return more times than she could count, imagined hundreds if not thousands of different scenarios and rehearsed even more arguments. But none of her prepared what-ifs had included a new slayer among the cast of characters. Not someone who could actually do damage were she to decide that what Spike deserved was dust.

If Faith made a move, Buffy would just have to be prepared. And she *would* be. This town couldn't have any more of her.

"You left," Giles said at last, forcing her attention back to him. "You left us *with him*. Let us wonder, *mourn* for you, for nearly a year. Do you have any concept of how awful these last few months have been?"

Faith sighed. "What did I just say? Ain't no reason to hash this out now. Got bigger things to worry about, right?"

"We deserved to know what happened," Willow said, tears now skating down her cheeks. "How could you do that, Buffy?"

God, this was too much. Buffy backed up a step, shaking her head. "I'm here to help with whatever is about to go down," she said, fighting for calm. Hard to do when every inch of her was shaking. "Like I said, I don't expect anyone to understand or...whatever."

"Look," Gunn said from behind her, nearly startling her out of her skin, "like the other super chick said, ya'll can knock each other out

playin' the blame game, but from the noise in LA, sounds like we don't have time for this now. So you gonna let our girl help out or what?"

Giles's expression remained frosty. "I will not be told what to do by a stranger in my own library, thank you."

"She didn't stay away to hurt anyone," Fred volunteered in a soft yet somehow carrying voice. "She's...talked about you a lot. Missed you a lot—all of you. But there were things going on that... Well, the claim, for one thing, that made her think—"

Spike snarled and whirled around. "Shut your gob," he hissed.

But it was too late—the damage was done. Both Giles and mini-Giles—or whoever the other tweed-clad guy was—went slack in the face region. Buffy's skin burned and her heart started pounding out a rapid tattoo. She really should have talked with Fred about this ahead of time; call her stupid, but she hadn't anticipated those words to just roll out like that.

"You're... He *claimed* you?" Giles asked in a tone so low she barely heard him. "You let this...*thing* claim you?"

"If you like your tongue where it is, Watcher, I'd suggest you hold it," Spike growled.

Xander raised his hand. "Uhh, question. What the hell does *claim* mean and why would it keep Buffy from picking up a phone?"

"A claim is an archaic vampire mating ritual," said mini-Giles, now looking at Buffy as though she were some freak science experiment gone wrong. "It unites the lifelines of the mated pair, allows them to feel and feed into one another's emotions, and effectively makes it impossible for the two to be apart for a prolonged period of time. It is deep and primal, and, unless I am very much mistaken, something most vampires avoid in the modern age." He stepped forward, his eyes going wide behind his glasses. "I have never heard of a vampire mating a human before, never mind a slayer. This is rather unprecedented."

Giles kept his stony gaze on her. "It's a bloody abomination, is what it is."

"Wait," Xander said, holding up a hand and moving forward, "so after everything with Angel—after Ms. Calendar and the apocalypse and everything else—you went and not only did the wacky

with *another* vampire but became his eternal love slave?" He huffed. "Yeah, getting why you'd think before coming back here. How stupid can you be, Buff?"

"I'm so sorry," Fred whispered from behind her. "I'm so sorry, Buffy, I wasn't thinking."

But Buffy barely heard her, terrified as she watched Spike snarled, his fangs descending as he prowled a step closer to Xander. A step closer to the other slayer, who still looked a bit too stake-happy for comfort. If Spike noticed, he didn't show it.

"Let's get one thing straight, kiddies," he said, "I am *nothing* like bloody Angel. Only reason I don't rip the lot of you apart is because the lady would object."

"Also, I'd hand you your ass on a platter," Faith replied casually, shrugging. "There's that."

"I've killed better slayers than you, Lolita. Bloody well guarantee it."

"Blondie, there ain't no better slayer than me."

Spike looked her up and down in a way that made Buffy want to punch the girl in the throat. There was nothing sexual about it, rather entirely the way a man would size up his enemy, but it made her uncomfortable all the same. There was something about this slayer that made her think, in another world, she and Spike might have hit it off, and that thought had Buffy's stomach twisting.

"Got the attitude," he said a moment later. "Reckon that'll be what does you in. Pity I didn't run into you sooner or I might've been the lucky bloke to snap that neck of yours."

Faith smirked and spread her arms. "Ain't nothin' stopping you now."

"Oh, yes there is," Buffy said, stepping forward and seizing Spike by the wrist before he could take the other slayer up on her offer. Not that she thought he would, but she felt better having her hand on him. "We're here to help with this mayor thing—all of us. I can't undo what I did and I wouldn't if I could. None of you have any idea what this last year has been like."

"We don't know?" Willow echoed, her voice shrill. "*We* don't know?"

"No, you don't. And you can't. Be grateful."

"You don't get to do that," Xander snapped. "You don't get to disappear for a year and then show up with *him* and tell us that we're the ones with the problem."

"Buffy," Giles said in a low undertone, one she'd never heard before —one that had her bones rattling. "I spent this last year turning over every stone trying to find you, praying you were alive, believing you were not. Never in my wildest would I have thought you were not only alive and well, but well within the means of contacting the people who love you to let us know... I don't think you will ever appreciate what you put all of us through." He paused, directing his gaze to the ground. "And now you're here...with *him*. I just... I need you to get out of my library."

Buffy blinked, her pulse pounding in her ears. "You...what?"

"You heard the man." Xander crossed his arms. "Get out. We don't need you."

"I wouldn't go that far," Willow muttered. "Need, yes. Want? No."

Spike snarled and shook his head. "Ungrateful gits, the lot of you. The Slayer would've been within her rights to let this sodding place burn."

"You're in a room full of people who want you dead and a very badass chick who can make it possible," Xander replied. "So by all means, keep talking."

That much was enough to knock Buffy out of her stupor. She shook her head and managed to pull her gaze from her watcher long enough to aim her once-friend what she hoped was a killer glare. "Anyone comes near Spike and I'm putting you through a wall."

"Spoken like a good little fang-banger," Xander shot back.

"Please," Giles yelled, raising his hands. "Buffy... Just leave."

"You're serious."

"Quite."

On some level, some deep level, the reality of what was happening made perfect sense. Part of her had even expected it—dreaded it, but expected it all the same. There really had been no chance that she'd be able to stroll in here like nothing had happened, make with the quick explanation, and hope they could smooth over the awkward and get

down to business. Yet knowing that, understanding it, didn't make the way her heart thudded any less painful. An awful, sickly heat spread through her and the room seemed to tilt. There was a sudden pressure in her chest, one that stretched her ribs and pushed against her skin with enough force she was certain it would rip itself to freedom.

"Where are you staying?" Giles asked, his voice thick. "We... Just give us time, Buffy. We weren't prepared for...well, you and...and this isn't going well."

Gunn snorted. "You think?"

"You can head back anytime you want, pal," Xander said.

Spike turned slightly and said, over his shoulder, "Boy makes a point, Slayer. Could just scarper off back home if this lot thinks they have the situation handled."

"I meant *him*," Xander spat, "but you're more than welcome to take that advice too. Or better yet, Faith can introduce you to her stake."

"I go where my lady goes, whelp."

"Fine. Faith, you have that stake handy?"

Buffy was in motion before her brain could catch up with her, feet eating the distance separating her from Spike. "I believe I said anyone who comes near him will be put through a wall," she said. "I can make with the example if you like."

Xander stared at her a long moment, then broke off with a dry, humorless laugh. "I was wrong. Buffy *is* dead. I don't know who you are, but you aren't her. My friend learned her lesson the first time she screwed the undead. She definitely wouldn't have—"

But whatever the Buffy in his head *wouldn't have* done, she didn't know, for a harsh growl had torn through Spike's throat and he was in motion. One second Xander was standing by one of the tables and the next he'd been thrown into the check-out desk, the air lighting with the crack that heralded the splitting of wood and plaster. Then Buffy was moving too—had to, because Faith's face had twisted into a sneer that said plainly hunting season was officially open.

"Bad move, Blondie," the other slayer snarled, pulling back her arm to presumably knock him into next week.

Spike smirked and caught the fist as it launched, then ducked when she swung at him with her free arm. "Bit predictable, pidge," he said before

landing a blow of his own—one that sent her flying over one of the tables. He turned just in time to meet the new watcher, who had charged with some sort of demented battle cry, with a punch that had him staggering back so fast he tripped over Xander and landed on the floor in a heap.

"We wanna brawl, kiddies? Can do this all bloody night."

Faith was back on her feet, murder in her eyes. "We get started and you don't have all night."

"Just goes to show *my* slayer's got the real stayin' power, doesn't it?" He laughed when she came at him again, deftly sidestepped and added her to the growing pile of bodies on the floor by the desk. "She can go for hours. Also knows how to throw a punch so it hurts in all the right ways."

Buffy bit back a groan but was ready when Giles started forward. "Guys, stop," she said, placing herself in front of Spike. "We didn't come here to fight."

"Then why did you bring him here at all?" Xander demanded, grunting and huffing as he pulled himself to his feet. "Dammit, Buff, you had to know how that was going to look."

"I didn't bring him. He came with me because he knew how hard this was going to be." Buffy forced herself past the lump in her throat, her heart starting to pound again. "Because he loves me and that's what you do when you love someone."

Spike turned enough so he could meet her eyes then, and though she knew better than to worry, she couldn't help it. But all he did was offer a soft, albeit fangy smile, the sort that filled her with the hope that everything between them would be okay, that the attempted conversations they'd had on the subject wouldn't set the stage for when they finally discussed the things they needed to discuss.

"He *loves* you?" Xander shot back. "Pretty sure I just threw up a little in my mouth."

"You gotta thing for vamps, don'cha?" Faith drawled, wiping herself off and aiming a glare at Spike. "Don't really see the appeal in boning the dead 'cept to see what the fuss is about, but to each her own. But right now, B? Hear what Giles was sayin'. We got problems and, intent aside, your showin' up ain't exactly helpful."

Spike stalked back toward her. "Your call, Slayer," he murmured. "Back to the room or back to home sweet home. I'll do whatever you want."

"What?" Giles demanded. "No, don't leave town. I said we just needed time—"

"Wasn't talkin' to you, Rupert," Spike said without breaking his eyes from hers. "She wants to head back, that's where I'll take her, and sod you lot. Hope this place gets bloody swallowed. No less than what you deserve."

"How do we deserve any of this?" Willow demanded, her face a mess of tears. There was anger there, lots of it from the look of things, but more hurt than anything else. Buffy wasn't sure how she knew, just that she did. "How do we deserve...after *everything* we went through together, to be left to think she'd died or worse? How is that fair, Spike?"

"Maybe because the lot of you never deserved her to begin with, eh?" He pointed at Xander. "Heard plenty about you over the past little bit. Punished the Slayer for spreading her legs for ole Granddaddy, though it was mighty convenient he went and lost that pesky soul of his to give you the excuse, right? Truth is you were never gonna be happy to hear she shagged someone who wasn't you."

Shock smacked the rage off Xander's face. He blinked and staggered a step back. "I... I..."

"Not that we can expect much from a bloke who tries to mojo his way back into a girl's heart," Spike continued. "Woulda served you right if Dru'd ripped your throat out."

"We ain't doin' this now," Faith said.

"Oh, no, I wanna hear how I deserve to have been abandoned by my best friend," Willow said. "Go ahead, *Spike*. What did I do?"

But Buffy had had enough. She seized Spike's wrist and dragged him back toward the door. "We'll be at the Sunnydale Inn," she said loudly, brushing past a befuddled Gunn and Fred, who turned to hurry after her. When she reached the door, she turned and met Giles's gaze. "If you decide you want our help, that's where you can find us. Tonight at least. We'll see how helpful we feel tomorrow."

Her former watcher looked somewhat aghast, and though she knew she had no right, she allowed herself a beat to enjoy it.

"I am sorry," Buffy said a moment later, though she honestly wasn't sure how much she felt it at the moment. So she turned and barreled through the doors before this became evident.

And somehow, she managed to make it as far as the front door before the reality of what had just happened crashed around her. Her legs gave a whine of protest and the world went a bit topsy-turvy, and Spike was there, holding her up as she fell apart.

Just like he always was.

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The Slayer sent Gunn and Fred on their way, telling them she needed to do this much on her own, but had grabbed Spike's wrist when he'd tried to follow. Seemed reasonable she expected their fight from earlier to continue, and maybe it should have, but he didn't have it in him.

It wasn't going to happen tonight. He knew it the second she suggested they swing by her old house because there was no way Joyce Summers would let Buffy just walk away. Yeah, he wanted to have it out—needed to know where they stood. He also was a bit wary of being around Fred at the moment, since the chit had blabbed about the claim in front of the Watcher. He still wasn't sure how they'd managed to walk out of the sodding library without Giles chasing his slayer down and insisting on trying out the reversal ritual, though he wagered he could expect whatever he hadn't gotten tonight tomorrow.

"Spike?"

He tensed, torn between answering her and ignoring her. "Yeah?"

"We... Before we see my mom, I need to—"

"No. Not now."

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught the worried look she aimed his way. "Not now?"

"Don't wanna get into a row just yet. Reckon you'll be staying with your mum tonight."

"I—no, definitely not. She's not gonna want to see me."

Spike stopped short and tugged on her arm so she did as well. "Yeah, Slayer, she is. Of course she's gonna wanna see you. All of them bloody did." He took in her stunned expression and offered a short laugh before pointing in the direction of the school. "Think they were brassed because you came back? That's what you took away from that? It's that you left at all. That you didn't trust them."

Buffy opened her mouth, closed it, and opened it again. "I... So you're saying I did this wrong, too? Since when? And what the hell was that back there with the 'you're lucky she came back at all' stuff?"

He rolled his eyes and did everything he could to rein in the part of him that wanted to throttle her. She made it difficult on the best of days. "I *don't* think you did anything wrong," he said, and was pleased to discover he sounded more or less under control. "Nothin' anyone could blame you for, at least. You owe them nothing."

"Then what—"

"That's not the way they see it. Not the way I saw it when you left me in that motel room, either, but I knew you were gonna do a runner. Was prepared for it, even if it hurt." He swallowed. "That's the difference between you and your mates, love, no matter who they are. They'll never understand what it's like to be you. They can want and try and tell themselves whatever they like, but until they're the ones makin' the calls you gotta make, livin' the way you live, feelin' the weight of the sodding world, you're gonna be a mystery to them." He heaved a few deep breaths, mind spinning. "There are other things, too. Wager you woulda headed back a long time ago if it weren't for me, right?"

"What?"

"Well, you said it, didn't you? Told me you were worried about Rupert."

That was as much as he'd say right now because any more would get them back to the thing he'd already decided they weren't discussing tonight.

Buffy hesitated, and for a moment he thought she might press him,

but she seemed to sense the futility in that and nodded instead. "Yeah."

"If it'd just been you—"

"If it had just been me, I don't know that I would've left in the first place," Buffy said, bringing up her hands. "I can't play that game because imagining a world where it was just me the night I killed Angel is... I can't see it, Spike. I can't go there. I sometimes have to remind myself that you and I weren't on the same page from the first—that I was ever with Angel to begin with."

Well, that was certainly new. Spike blinked but didn't quite let his heart jump for joy. "Were that the rest of us were as fortunate."

"I just mean...it's hard for me to see a time before you now." She swallowed and looked down, taking some of her steam with her. "Do you ever think that you and I were kind of inevitable?"

There was a question. "Inevitable?"

"Yeah. Like...we were always going to end up here?" She nibbled on her lower lip, not meeting his eyes. "If you hadn't been going for a stroll that night when the ghosts took over the school, if you hadn't come to me then..."

No right way to answer that question, he supposed, and it truly wasn't something he'd given much thought over the last few months. Because where he'd ended up was just fine with him, more or less. Or had been as of yesterday. He supposed he'd have eventually cottoned on that Dru wasn't coming back to him—or that their relationship was damaged beyond repair. Also seemed likely that he wouldn't be able to get the Slayer out of his head, knowing how it was when a woman found herself stuck there. Would he have fallen in love with her? He didn't know, only that a world where he didn't feel this way, wasn't lost for the girl, would be one where he wasn't truly himself.

"Think it was always inevitable for me, pet," he said after a beat. "You'd already crawled inside my head before then. Hated it that you were there, resented it, but fuck if that did rot to get you out. Dunno how things mighta gone if we hadn't snogged that night except you woulda stayed right and cozy where you were in the old noggin. I wanted to fuck you from the first moment I saw you and I think I

wanted to love you from the second." He shrugged, offered a weak smile. "Gotten bloody good at hiding that stuff from myself."

Buffy's heart pounded faster, her eyes widening in a way that told him she was close to tears. "You don't think it would've been inevitable for me?"

"What? That you'd fall in love with me?" He tried not to choke over the words, he really did, considering his certainty of her feelings had taken a blow he wasn't sure he'd ever recover from.

If nothing else, his bluntness seemed to have caught her off guard. "Spike—"

"Or that we'd end up like this? Me lost for you and willing to follow you to the ends of the bloody earth and you in a tizzy 'cause you don't know how you feel about me and—"

"Spike, I do know how I feel about you."

"Do you now? Patched it together between chattin' with Fred and bein' shoved out by your mates?"

"So are we talking about it? I thought—"

"No." He tore off again down the sidewalk, annoyed with himself for having gone down that route at all, though it seemed to be where all paths led. Another second and he'd fall to his bloody knees and beg her to love him the way he loved her, and in the aftermath of the storm the day had brought, he didn't want to consider how that conversation might go.

So he prowled his way toward her house, ignoring Buffy when she called his name, forcing himself to keep his eyes on the prize. Perhaps he was delaying the unavoidable here—by the time the Watcher got his head on straight, he'd come round, offering the Slayer the cure for what ailed her. Nice and tidy separation. And thus endeth the best year of Spike's bloody life.

He didn't stop until he was on her porch, then waited for her to catch up before pounding his fist against the door.

"Spike, please, let's just—"

"Your mum'll find out you're in town one way or another, I expect. You really fancy her showin' up at our room with a bloody ax?"

"An ax?"

He lifted a shoulder. "Way I met the lady, innit? Tends to leave an

impression." He waited a moment, then pounded again. "Oi! Joyce! Open up."

"Maybe she's not—"

But the second she started talking, the telltale clinking of locks being undone sounded through the door, stealing her voice. Buffy inhaled a sharp breath and seized his hand, a gesture he didn't know how to interpret but found rather warming in spite of himself. When the door opened, when the space before him suddenly filled with the slack, disbelieving face of Joyce Summers, he gave Buffy a squeeze of support and waited.

The silence seemed to stretch forever. Joyce staring at Buffy, Buffy staring back, looking especially timid and vulnerable. For a wild moment, Spike thought this might be it—the Summers women rendered speechless by the sight of the other. Or that his girl's mum would burst into tears and take her daughter into her arms and everything would be forgiven. That's the way it happened in all those sappy movies he was stuck watching when the sun was out, at least. Words would be exchanged but ultimately, just having Buffy back would be enough for her.

Of course, though, life wasn't a sodding telly drama, and nothing today seemed to be going his way. When the shock finally began to ebb in Joyce's face, relief and gratitude weren't what swarmed in to replace it, rather something colder and harder.

Then she turned her gaze on Spike and, if possible, it went even darker.

"Get the hell out of here," she said, her voice shaking. "Now."

That jarred Buffy out of her stupor. She blinked and glanced at Spike as though trying to see what had offended her, then back again. "Mom—"

"Mom? *Mom*? You disappear on me for a year, Buffy—a *year*—and you show up and suddenly I'm *Mom* again? No. And no to *him*." She kept her glare on Spike. "He's a monster."

"He's my—"

"He leaves *now*."

"No, Mom, he really doesn't. You want me, you take him. We're a package deal."

"A package..." Joyce barked, snapping back to her in a flash. "You show up here after nearly a year and have the gall to tell me who to let into my home?"

"Mom—"

"No. You don't get to do that. You don't get to *mom* me like nothing happened."

Buffy swallowed, her body going rigid. "Well, would you like me to call you something else, *Joyce*?"

"Don't you dare take that tone with me."

"Just trying to get a feeling for the rules." She glanced at Spike with her patented *I told you so* look, then faced forward again. "We're back. I'm back. We just came from the library—"

"The library? At the *school*?" Joyce stared at her. "You went to see *Mr. Giles* before me?"

This seemed to catch Buffy off guard, but to her credit, she didn't blanch. "Yes. There's something bad happening and I needed to see if I could...help in any way."

Another long stretch of silence in which nothing but glares were exchanged. Then, at last, the hardness in Joyce's face began to wane, and something like real pain leaked into her eyes. It was just a flash but it was enough for Spike's read on the situation to cement.

"I can't do this," Joyce said, shaking her head and backing her way deeper into the home. "Buffy, I..."

"Mom." Buffy stepped over the threshold. "I... There's a lot. I know there's a lot, probably more than we can talk about."

"Well, that's putting it mildly." Joyce shot Spike a rather contemptuous look over her daughter's shoulder. "And you're with him. The vampire, right?"

Seemed their absence had done something, at least, though Spike would have been more surprised if the Slayer's mum hadn't used the time apart to come to terms with the reality that was Buffy's life. Still, it wasn't like he enjoyed being sneered at by the woman who had birthed the girl he loved beyond reason.

"Yeah, that'd be me." Spike offered a little wave, then made to follow his lady inside. Except when he tried, he met the unmistakable resistance of a vamp barrier.

The bitch had rescinded his invite. Looked like Joyce had stones he hadn't counted on.

"Nice to see something around here went the way it was supposed to," Joyce said when he looked at her for confirmation. "After I accepted that monsters were real, and Mr. Giles explained some of the rules, we decided it was for the best to revoke your access to the house." She glanced at Buffy, and more of the pain she'd tried so valiantly to hide leaked into her eyes. "We thought you'd killed her."

Even from a distance, Spike could see Buffy's lower lip wobbling in that telltale way that said she was seconds from losing her pretty little head. "Well, he didn't," she said. "Spike, come in."

He knew even before he moved that it wouldn't work—the person who did the inviting needed to be a resident, and the Slayer hadn't called this stretch of Revello Drive home in nearly a year, as everyone kept saying. And at the moment, he wasn't sure just how that particular news would hit her, but he couldn't well ignore her and hope she didn't notice that he hadn't reacted. So Spike gritted his teeth and again pressed against the barrier. It remained firmly in place.

Joyce crossed her arms and showed him just exactly where Buffy had inherited her smirk. But he wasn't paying Joyce much attention, rather taking in the dawning comprehension on the Slayer's face. Perhaps her mum hadn't learned as much about vamps as she thought, seeing as she didn't seem to understand the significance of the moment.

And Spike wasn't sure what it meant, either, beyond the obvious—whether Buffy had to stop considering Sunnydale home in order for her invite not to magically unlock the door or if it was a matter that she'd been living elsewhere for a stretch. He wasn't sure, either, how to read what he saw in her eyes. Lost and confused and somewhat sad, like she'd just realized that something of herself was gone forever and could likely never be recovered.

"Invite him in," Buffy said once she recovered herself. "Mom—"

"Fat chance."

"He's part of this. A big part."

"He's not a part of you and me, and I'm not interested in excuses."

Buffy looked back to Spike, her expression stricken now. After a beat, she shook her head and started toward him. "Then goodbye."

"Excuse me, what?" Joyce barked after her.

"I'm not doing this without him."

"You are not leaving this house, young lady."

"Oh really? And you're gonna stop me?" She gave a laugh that warned she was close to losing it, and really, could he blame the girl? Spike was ready when she launched herself against him, wrapped his arms around her in a tight hug. The poor twig was trembling so hard he was somewhat surprised she'd remained upright at all, but that was his Slayer, through and through.

"Take me home," she whispered into his neck. "Take me home, Spike. I can't do this."

Fuck, his heart about shattered. There was little he'd deny her, but he knew, bloody *knew* if they popped back in the car and took off, she'd never forgive herself. And if something happened with this mayor rot, she'd never forgive *him*, either.

"Buffy Anne Summers!" Joyce practically squawked. "You are not walking out on me twice."

At that, Buffy tore away and spun around, all fire and fury. "*Walking out?* You *threw* me out."

"I said not to come back if you left."

"And I didn't."

"That's right, you didn't. Except now you're here and I'm telling you that you're going nowhere." And he saw then, clearly, that Joyce was nearing her breaking point too. She'd led with anger but anger had a tendency to fizzle when it was covering something else. Any second now she'd start bawling her head off. "You are going *nowhere*, Buffy."

"No, I'm going home. Coming here was a mistake."

"Home?"

Spike pressed himself up against her back, bracing her shoulders and lowering his mouth to her ear. "Stay. Talk to your mum. Have it out."

Buffy tensed and twisted to look at him, her eyes swimming. "What?"

"This'll chase you till the end of the world otherwise. Know you

have plenty to tell her." He flashed Joyce a quick warning look when he saw she was about to launch into a new line of protests. Then he shifted his attention back to Buffy and pressed a soft kiss against her trembling lips. "If you need a start," he murmured, reaching into his duster pocket and withdrawing the letter he'd sneaked out of the bathroom drawer at home, "here's as good a place as any."

Buffy glanced down as he pressed the paper into her hand, and he heard her heart rate ratchet up. There was nothing for a moment and he wasn't sure what to expect when she looked up again. After all, she'd be well within her rights to scream her head off at him for snooping.

She didn't, though when she met his eyes, he almost wished she would. The defeat there was suffocating.

"You won't take me home?"

"You need to talk to your mum," he said. "Got lots between you to put right. And even if you can't manage it, least you've tried, yeah?"

"But...*we* need to talk, Spike. About everything. We keep getting interrupted and it's so...so stupid and I—"

"Not going anywhere, love. Can't get rid of me that easily." Not without a ritual, at least, but he didn't say that. "All right?"

She studied the note in her hand, sighed and nodded. "Okay."

"There's a good girl." He looked to Joyce again and was somewhat pleased to see she'd landed somewhere near bewildered. That much might tame the fire a bit. "You know where I'll be if you need me," he said to Buffy.

Then he took her face in his hands and kissed her. Soft and sweet, but brief, before turning and forcing his feet to carry him back up the walkway and into the waiting night.

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THE FACT OF THE MATTER WAS BUFFY COULDN'T SLEEP WITHOUT him. She wasn't sure how she'd managed it the previous night, except that she'd been so toasted off her ass that she barely remembered coming home, much less going to bed. Not something she thought would be appropriate to share with her mother, though the urge had been strong to help herself to a shot of whiskey once Joyce had busted out the hooch. Somehow she didn't think that would improve their shaky relationship.

The conversation following Spike's departure had been one of the most emotionally draining of her life, and being that it had come at the end of one of the longest days she could remember living, she felt more than just a little tapped out. The tears, the screaming, the accusations, the demands for an apology she doubted she'd give in earnest—everything had piled on until the only thing to do was march to her room and throw herself on the bed.

There was one silver lining—the look on her mother's face when Buffy had shoved that note into her hands.

"Tell me now I didn't think about you once," she'd spat. "This is the only letter I kept but far from the only one I wrote. You wanna know

why I didn't come home. Didn't reach out? Didn't call you? It's all there."

That had been the last thing she'd said before storming off to her room. And damn, stepping into her room alone was like trekking back in time. It was full of her things—clothes, jewelry, makeup, and yeah, her slayer kit was where she'd left it under the bed. There was Mr. Gordo, her faithful stuffed pig, sitting in his spot. His button eyes favored her with an almost accusatory glare, which was just what she needed, but she tugged him to her chest anyway and let herself drift off in a sea of nostalgia.

The bed felt too small. The room was not right. Hell, everything about being here just seemed off. Her life hadn't exactly been a piece of cake since she'd left here with Spike last spring—she'd put herself through the emotional shredder more than once—but it had been lived, more or less, on her own terms. The walls here were cramped, less like a bedroom and more like a prison. The bed wasn't hers anymore—it didn't whine in the right way or have the bounce she was used to. And most importantly, it was missing the weight of the vampire who shared it.

A few days ago, if asked what had been the worst day of her life, she would have said the day that she killed Angel, no holds barred. And it was still in the top two. Discovering Kendra's body, finding Spike pinned to the wall in his room and being so certain he was dead, learning Giles had been kidnapped, everything that had happened with her mother and then seeing Angel again one last time before sending him to Hell.

The state her mind had been in that night was something she'd spent the past few months trying to forget. But that had been the culmination of months of badness—every second since Angel had lost his soul had been mounting to it. In no world was she going to get out of it unscathed, either because Angel would kill her or she'd have to kill him. That had been the worst-case scenario in her head, the one that had haunted her until she couldn't cry anymore, until Spike had blown her world apart.

But even with as horrible as that had been, she'd seen it on the

horizon. She'd known it was coming. Not at all like today. Today, she'd spent every second since she'd dragged herself from bed that morning dodging blows, leaving her with precious little time to gather her bearings before she was slammed with something else. Waking up in a bed without Spike, the fight about the claim, learning that the friends and family she'd left behind were in trouble, facing their wrath, fighting with Spike some more, and finally being forced to confront her mother.

All of these things, viewed independently, seemed way smaller than anything she'd faced the year before, but the rate at which they'd come and the impact they'd left... Buffy hadn't really felt alone before. Even at her lowest points last year, she'd had her friends, and eventually Spike as well. Right now she was in a room that should feel like hers but didn't, under a roof even the PTB had decided wasn't hers anymore, and worried that she might have alienated the most important person in her life so dramatically that there was no getting back what they'd had before.

She couldn't do this. There was no way she'd be able to sleep tonight, not here and especially not with this stuff left unresolved between them.

Sneaking out of her mother's house was probably not the best way to start mending fences, but she found, as much as she wanted to reconcile, the need to see Spike was greater. So Buffy slipped out of bed, shucked off her pajamas and rummaged through her closet for something decent. That was a plus to being here—there were entire outfits she'd forgotten she had. In the end, though, she went for comfort over fashion with a pair of hip-hugging sweats and a slightly tight-fitting T-shirt, sans a bra. Before heading to the window to make use of the tree that had served her so well in years past, she found some spare notebook paper from her long-neglected backpack and scribbled a quick note.

Mom,

Sorry to disappoint you again, but it seems that's all I'm good for these days.

I can't sleep without Spike. Part of the mated thing or maybe just because I'm not used to it. Either way, I can't stay here if he's not here too.

Love,

Buffy

It was weird, penning the first note in forever that she knew for certain her mother would see. Almost as weird as it felt opening her window and making the familiar climb down the tree there, her feet sliding effortlessly into all the right footholds and her hands remembering which branches were sturdiest and where to find the knots. She hit the ground with a soft grunt and patted the tree trunk.

"Thanks, Sprucy," she muttered. "You've been a good friend."

Then she turned and started off in the direction of the Sunnydale Inn.

THE WALK WAS AN EVENTFUL ONE. Though the nightlife in LA—in every sense of the word—was nothing to sneeze at, it couldn't hope to compare with the Hellmouth. And being that Buffy's head hadn't been in the right place, she'd gone and left her room without so much as a stake, which left her forced to improvise with a bit of one of the neighbor's fences.

The exercise she got on the way to the motel, whatever else, provided a welcome distraction and got her adrenaline going for all the right reasons. By the time she was outside their door, her mind felt something close to clear, which it hadn't since before she'd received her GED results.

God, that felt like a lifetime ago.

While she'd been blonde enough to forget to pack a stake, she hadn't forgotten the key to the room. But it turned out she didn't need one. Buffy barely had time to feel the telltale prickle before the door flew open and she found herself swimming into that impenetrable sea of blue.

For a long moment, they just stared at each other as though daring the other to move. Spike's face had taken on that unreadable quality that drove her nuts, but she supposed she should be grateful. More than once, she'd entertained the unsettling thought that he might have gone to have a word with Giles. But he wasn't with the Watcher—he was here. Right here and looking at her as though he could see through her. Perhaps he could.

He opened his mouth and the moment passed. "Slayer—"

Buffy moved without thinking, throwing herself into him and forcing his feet back. He caught her with a growl, closing his arms around her to haul her against his chest. Then he was kissing her—kissing her like he kissed her at home. Like he had the night in the motel, all teeth and tongue and more of those rumbly noises she liked so much. There was relief in his kiss, in the way he pulled and nipped and held her to him. Relief and some anger, too, and though part of her would have been happy just to focus on the relief and leave the anger for another day, she didn't think she could surf through another day like this one.

Everything else seemed manageable—everything—if she and Spike were okay. And there were things she'd waited too damn long to say.

"Spike." She tunneled her fingers through his hair and sucked on his lower lip. "Spike, I came here...to talk—"

"Mmm..." He began nibbling a path down her throat. "So talk."

"I...I can't when you're doing that."

"Got ourselves a right problem, then." He nipped at the spot where her neck and shoulder met, making her knees go extra with the wobbly. "Don't think I can stop."

"No. No, this is important." Buffy convinced her hands to stop gripping his head long enough to brace against his chest and push him away. "I have things I need to say. And you need to listen."

He looked a little drunk, eyes glassy and fixed on her lips. "Been thinkin' about you ever since I left, wonderin' if I did the right thing. Going outta my bleeding mind sitting here, goin' over everything. What you said earlier—"

"Spike." Buffy stepped forward and pressed her hand to his mouth. "I really need you to listen. And I mean without interrupting me. You might not like everything I say but I promise you'll like most of it. I... I just need you to listen through the stuff you don't like so I can get to the stuff you will, and if you interrupt me, it'll probably be to fight and didn't come here to fight. Okay?"

At that, he sobered and gave a nod. "Right."

"Okay." She blew out a breath, turned and closed the door. For a long moment, she stood with her back to him because—now that she

had his undivided attention—her mind was having a time trying to figure out exactly where to start. There was so much ground to cover and so many ways she could flounder and flub. Talking through her emotions had never been a strong suit and this might just be the most important conversation of her life, so the pressure was on the high side.

"I'm scared," she said. "Terrified, actually, of saying the wrong thing. Or something coming out the wrong way. I've never been good with words...or putting how I feel into them. If there was a class on it, I definitely skipped that day. So I'm gonna start at the beginning and just kinda word-vomit this out." She inhaled. "After the ghosts made us make out, I was...well, wigged. Because hey, still haven't gotten over my last creature-of-the-night boyfriend and suddenly I'm macking on not just another vampire, but you. Which...on the trippy side, is pretty far up there. And what scared me the most then was how much I liked kissing you. 'Cause I did. A lot. It made me feel like a girl again, for one thing. I mean, yes, of the wigged. That was definitely Buffy. And it wasn't like I hadn't had the occasional naughty thought about you before then."

A small smile quirked his lips. "You—"

She held up a hand, arching an eyebrow.

"Right." Spike shook his head. "No interruptions. Tell me more about these naughty thoughts of yours."

Buffy grinned in spite of himself. Figured he'd fixate on that. "Like I said, it made me feel like a girl again...and that was a big thing, especially since it felt like everything going on with Angel was a punishment for that. For being a girl. For wanting something for myself and actually going after it. Then you're there and the reason things started coming together was because you noticed me as a girl and...it was fast and dangerous and probably the wrong idea, but it made me feel kinda powerful again. And then the world came down on me again with Kendra and Giles and you and then I had to fight him and it was terrible all over again. I wasn't over Angel when I killed him and him getting his soul back at the end just kinda gutted me. But if I hadn't had to kill him, if I'd been given the choice... I don't know, Spike, I still might have left with you that night because I had feelings for you and

they weren't small feelings. I was confused and just...*beaten*. Then... Well, you know what happened next. And when I left that night, it was because I didn't have anything left. I kept thinking about how I couldn't do it again—go through the whole forbidden love thing with a vampire just to be put in a place where I might have to kill you, too." She swallowed, dropping her gaze to the ground, unable to take the intensity of his stare. "You know what happened next—the pain we felt because of the claim. I thought I was dying...and then you showed up again and suddenly it's better, and it's not just better because you're there but because I'd missed you. And then we discover that there's this mystical bond thingy we have? You told me that you were half in love with me before we left Sunnydale but I was such a mess I had no idea what I was. I knew I wanted you, that I had feelings for you, but they were tangled up in everything else that was going on."

She stopped talking for a moment, both to give herself a break and to see if Spike would interject after all. From the look on his face when she raised her gaze to his eyes again, he certainly wanted to, but he seemed to understand that he shouldn't. Instead, he regarded her with one of those oh-so-intense stares of his, the sort that did more speaking than words ever could.

"I couldn't trust myself anymore," Buffy went on, now a bit hoarse, though she wasn't about to let that slow her down. "Not with how I felt or what it meant, and yeah, what happened with Angel wasn't a small thing. That's why I needed to take things as slow. Be friends first. And when I was ready to stop being friends, I really meant it. That night after Dusk was probably the best of my life because I felt like I was in control again. And then Fred told me what the book said about the claim and took the rug out from under me just as I was starting to feel good about what was happening with you and me. I wasn't sure what was me and what wasn't, and yes, I thought about severing the claim. I did. For like a second, I thought about it, but I didn't want to. I never wanted to. I wanted what you felt for me to be real and I wanted what I felt for you to be real, too. Like I told you at Caritas that night."

At this, it seemed, his ability to hold his tongue met its end. "Slayer—"

"And you were right. I should have told you. Everything about the book, about the claim stuff Fred found, about all of these thoughts that were in my head—I should have come to you immediately, but I was terrified. That's not an excuse... I just didn't think I could do it again. If it turned out you wanted out—"

"You thought that?" Spike staggered a step forward. "You thought I'd want out?"

"No. Not really. I dunno. The whole thing scared me. And Fred knew I was afraid, but she didn't know about what because I didn't tell her that, either." Buffy balled her hands into fists, steeling herself. This next thing was what would make or break them. "Losing Angel the way I did nearly killed me, and the thing about it is, it was never *this*. It was never anything close to this. We weren't even friends—he'd just show up and tell me I was in danger and it seemed so romantic. But it wasn't. I got caught up in that and it got people killed. When I killed Angel, I killed that part of me—the part that was careless enough to get swept away in something that was fun because it was forbidden. That's part of why it hurt so much, because I never got to go back and be that girl. I couldn't think like that ever again, all heart and no head. I couldn't be a teenager anymore, Spike."

He nodded but miraculously did not interrupt again.

"I wanted everything in the claim to be real because that night after Dusk was when I realized for the first time that I'm in love with you." Buffy let the words linger, watching the light in his eyes, the way his face softened and his mouth fell slack. Watching as they landed and he understood. She offered a small grin and soldiered on. "I knew that night but I wasn't ready to tell you. And then Fred told me about the claim stuff and it was like...shattering. Thinking that it might not be real, worrying about it, and then we went to Caritas and we talked about the book and I believed you. I swear, I didn't think about breaking the claim at all after that and the reason I didn't tell you about it was because I was never going to do it. Fred does keep asking me but she doesn't know I'm in love with you. She's just...worried, because she saw the way it was for me before you showed up again when I was in so much pain it—"

"Slayer." Spike moved forward again, his voice thick. "Can you say that part again?"

Buffy breathed out, the tension wracking her shoulders loosening. "Which part? About the claim breakage?"

"You know bloody well what." Another step forward. Then another. "Tell me."

"I might not know, you know. My GED scores, while of the awesome, are misleading. You are indeed mated to a dunderhead."

Spike swooped in and wrapped an arm around her waist and hauled her to him, his eyes blazing. "Tell me you love me, Buffy," he murmured against her lips. "Tell me I heard that right."

Yeah, there went her stupid heart. "I love you, Spike. I have for... way too long without telling you."

"Mmm, right." He grinned—a wide, boyish smile that lit him up from the inside, made him vibrant, made him shine. The term *pure happiness* came to mind and she knew—*she knew*—that was what she was seeing. The thing that had stolen Angel's soul was in Spike's eyes right now, and he looked like he might burst with it. "Any reason you decided to keep me on tenterhooks?"

"Because I am a stupid Buffy."

"Not gonna fly, Slayer." Spike nuzzled her chin and began peppering soft kisses along her skin. "Got the scores to prove you're not."

"I just said they're misleading."

"You're off your tree. Worked bloody hard for those scores." His mouth continued its assault down her throat, then paused at the mark there—the one that had united them. "So just so I understand—you didn't tell me about breakin' the claim because you thought I might wanna do it?"

"It...crossed my mind. Which, I know, is of the wrong and—"

He snickered and looked up at her. "I take it back. You are completely toys in the attic."

"Hey!"

"And the *real* reason you didn't tell me you loved me until right now? And don't tell me you're gormless again because I know the better of it."

"What-less?"

He rolled his eyes and resumed assaulting her neck with his perfect combination of bitey kisses. "I don't buy that the reason you kept mum is because you're thick. So tell me."

It was a good question—one she'd asked herself more than once since she'd come to the realization, and especially since Spike had disabused her of the notion that the claim might be manipulating how he felt about her. The answer she'd landed on each time sounded weak to herself, but no less true because of it. The fear had been very real if nothing else. "I... Well, like I said, the last time I was in love with a vampire, it went about as bad as it could have gone. And I thought... I had a lot of thoughts. A lot of stupid Buffy-fears that made me think stupid Buffy-things." She swallowed. "Spike, the last time I told someone I loved them, we had sex and then he went evil. And I know I talk about that a lot but it was... For Big Damn Moments, it was the biggest and the damndest at the time. I also thought there was a chance that Giles would *make* me break the claim if he found out because coming back here was always inevitable and I just... I didn't want to hurt again because that was all love had been for me. Just pain. Knowing I loved you scared me enough. I was just...afraid."

Spike pulled back, meeting her gaze. "And you're not afraid now?"

"Did you not hear me when I said I'm terrified?" Her throat tightened, the day rushing to catch up with her all at once. Every step she'd taken, every pair of disappointed eyes she'd met, every person she'd loved who had yelled at her, screamed at her, come after her for her decisions and her relationship. "Today has...sucked beyond the telling of it. I always knew it would, that coming back here would mean facing a bunch of people that I've hurt, but... I never thought I wouldn't have you with me."

"Huss'at?" He frowned at her. "Right here, pet."

"But this morning? And earlier?"

"I was never goin' anywhere."

"But it *felt* like it. This newly minted worst day of my life—facing Giles and my friends, my mom. Knowing I'd hurt you with the claim stuff and not being able to...to get it all out. You telling me you didn't want me with you tonight—"

"Bollocks. I never said that." Those blue eyes of his were blazing

now, nearly on fire. "Never even thought it. Leavin' you there in the bloody crosshairs was the last thing I wanted to do."

"But you did!"

"Slayer, if you haven't cottoned on, I've read pretty much every letter you've tossed in the rubbish bin."

She narrowed her eyes at that. "Yeah. Invasion of privacy much?"

"You mighta been a bit more open these last weeks, but I knew you were holdin' back. Knew there was more you weren't telling me, and since askin' got me nowhere, I had to take what I could get." Spike shrugged, though he did have the decency to look at least a little chagrined. "So yeah, I snooped. Took in every bleeding word and then some. You were shy about goin' back to your watcher, but your watcher's not your mum. Wagered you two would have more time to chat it out if I wasn't lurkin' in the doorway. Take it you're bein' here means it didn't go well, then?"

"I'm here because I couldn't sleep without you." A pause. "Because I didn't want to. Because I needed our fight to be over. I needed you to know that I love you and that I hadn't ruined everything. And—"

Spike pulled her flush against his chest and swallowed her surprised gasp with a kiss, the sort that made her toes tingle and the rest of her burn. The next thing she knew, she was on her back on the bed, Spike standing before her, his eyes hungry and roaming.

"Was a prat myself, pet," he said, stripping off his tee. "Learnin' the claim could be undone, what it'd do to us. That I wouldn't be able to be near you at all. Touch you. That someone out there could take you away from me." He swallowed hard, his chin wobbling a bit. "Did things to my head. But none so much as the thought that you mighta been keepin' it in your back pocket."

"That was never it."

"Know that now. Though you might tell Fred that bit about you loving me so she leaves off suggestin' it."

Yes, that was most assuredly on her to-do list, though not a priority item. Now that her adrenaline was beginning to even out, Buffy figured there was a much better use of her time. "Do you want me to right now?" she asked, dragging her top over her head. Cool air touched her

breasts, making her nipples pucker, and Spike growled low in his throat. "I can go now...if you insist."

"You stay right where you are." This was followed by the sound of a zipper lowering and the familiar shuffle of denim being pushed to the ground. "Always had it in mind, see. Just what I'd do to you if you ever told me you loved me."

Buffy sat up on her elbows, and though the sight that greeted her was one she was now more than a little familiar with, she couldn't help the way her mouth watered. Lean muscle, that lickable chest, and his hard cock straining toward her, precum beading the tip. It seemed years had passed since she'd gotten her GED results and made the suggestion of celebrating at Caritas. Since they'd been here last.

Only *here* was a place they'd never really been before, and it was awesome.

"What are you going to do to me?" she asked.

Spike smirked, kneeling on the mattress and seizing her foot. "Slayer," he murmured, slipping his fingers over her ankle and under the fabric of her sweats, "let's just say you're in for a ride."

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He'd started the day feeling about as low as he wagered a man could get, beaten and heartbroken. Didn't seem real that he'd end it on the other side, with Buffy under him, around him, rolling her sinful hips and squeezing her muscles around him in time with his thrusts. That she'd be looking at him with those wide, trusting eyes, his name on her lips, and that when he asked her to tell him again, she did so without hesitation.

"I love you. I love you, Spike. I love you."

Yeah, it might make him a sentimental sod, but he couldn't help what those words did to him. How deeply they shook him, how every time she said them he felt like bawling like a bloody infant.

He hadn't been lying when he'd told her he'd had plans for what would happen if she ever managed to tell him, but those plans had changed shape a lot over the last few weeks. Sometimes she'd tell him she loved him when they were back-to-back in some cemetery, surrounded by vamps or some other nasty thing. In other scenarios, she whispered it after he'd tongued her to orgasm, whatever barriers she'd put up simply melted away by what he did to her. Sometimes they were fighting each other, taking honest swings meant to hurt—foreplay, in other words. She'd kick him in the face or do some other

fancy-dancy move that got his dick interested, then tell him she loved him before impaling herself on his cock and riding his brains out.

The way Buffy had told him... He hadn't had a fantasy for that. At the start of the day, knowing what he'd known, he'd have said the odds of getting those words had been pissed away completely. A few times, even, he'd wondered if he'd managed to hoodwink himself into believing she cared at all. That he'd wanted to see it so badly, wanted it so much to be the truth, that he'd started seeing things that weren't there, and wasn't that just a shame. Old Spike led around by the short-hairs, love's bitch through and through, always pining after a woman who liked him just fine but would drop him in a heartbeat if she got a whiff of something better.

But Christ, he felt it now. In the small gasps Buffy fed him, the way she clutched at him when he touched her, the kisses she tore from his mouth and how she sobbed and hugged him to her when he hiked her leg over his shoulder and began pounding into her in earnest, those magnificent muscles of hers clamping hard around his cock every time he struck home. The whine of the motel bed's springs colored the air along with their mingled breaths and the hard slap of flesh striking flesh. Buffy brought her face to his again to steal another kiss, hard and demanding as tears scaled down her pretty cheeks. Then she bit his lower lip hard enough to draw blood and sucked, driving a groan through his chest.

"Spike," she whispered, pleaded, blinking her wet eyes up at him. "Do it."

"Do what, baby?"

"Bite me." She turned, baring her neck, and he groaned again. "Claim me again."

Fuck. He buried his face there, driving harder into her pussy, and let his fangs descend. They hadn't done this once over the last few weeks —hadn't even toyed with it, despite the want, the need, festering so deep in his bones it had become something of a physical ache. But part of him had known that was a line he couldn't cross with her. Not until he had everything.

This, right now, was everything.

"Please." She scored her nails through his hair and nipped at his ear. "Make me yours."

And now he *was* crying. Couldn't bloody help it. Those words matched with the way she was, the way she held him to her, completely did him in. Spike groaned and danced his fangs up the column of her throat, determined to memorize everything about this moment. The sounds she made, the way she smelled, the sensation of her fingers along his scalp, her pussy clenching around his cock again and again, the hum of her blood, and...

"Buffy...say it."

When she spoke, her voice shook. "I love you."

Spike plunged his fangs inside her and everything in him went bright hot. A raw gasp rode off the Slayer's lips as she tightened even more, those miracle muscles of hers milking his cock. Fuck, she drenched him, spasming and trembling and clinging to him like he was what kept her tethered to the world. He drew in one mouthful of blood, then another, and it tasted so good—so perfect—that the rest of him gave up the fight. He moaned, pleasure alighting up his spine, and jerked as he emptied himself inside her.

At last, he pulled his fangs back and licked the place he'd bitten her. "Mine."

"Oh god yes," she answered at once, making his stupid tears start anew. "I'm yours, Spike."

"Fuck, Slayer..." He pulled back, shook off his demon face, and smiled. He knew he had to look a wreck, weeping like a git, but fuck if he cared. The anger and need that had driven him the last time around were far behind him. All he saw was her. Buffy looking at him with love in her eyes.

Love for him.

"I love you," he said before he could stop himself. Not that he wanted to stop himself. He'd sing it from the bloody rooftops if she asked. "I love you, I love you, I love you."

Buffy grinned at him, palmed his cheek and raised her head off the pillow to kiss him. "I love you too," she said.

Then, before he could blink, she latched her teeth into his throat and bit down hard enough to break the skin.

He'd been at half-mast, but the second he felt her bite, his cock hardened the rest of the way and he started thrusting again, chasing down blind need. And when she pulled back, when he felt her sucking his blood into her mouth, he thought he might burst.

"You're mine too, Spike."

"Oh yes," he replied, fucking her harder. "I've been yours since the first moment saw you."

Buffy grinned up at him, his blood staining her lips. Then she drew him down for a kiss, and it was all he could do to keep up with her. The headboard was thumping in rhythm again—hell, the whole bloody motel was getting an earful, but he couldn't give a toss. The woman he loved was his and he was hers, and everything that had been wrong was right again. Whatever happened next was incidental—he had the thing that mattered. He had her.

It was the best moment of his life. Which made sense, because she was the best part of it.

And like all good things, so incredibly worth the wait.

A NIGHT not too long ago, Spike had allowed Buffy to drag him under the spray of their shower at home. He'd been beaten within an inch of his unlife, black and blue in ways that made him look even deader than usual. She'd offered him her blood and he'd refused, for... Well, bugger, he didn't remember why anymore, only that it had seemed right important at the time. But when she'd started crying, touching the places that hurt and begging him to let her help, he'd caved and watched as she'd stroked herself to orgasm to tamp down on the pain.

Since they'd started shagging again, they'd shared more than one shower for reasons that had sod all to do with getting clean. And even though that particular shower hadn't been the first they'd taken together, it was the one that came to mind when he slipped behind the Slayer in the motel tub and cupped her ripe, luscious arse as she turned on the overhead nozzle.

"Hey!" She whirled around with a mock-scowl and an arched eyebrow. "I do not remember saying you could touch that."

"Don't remember askin'," he replied, grinning and pushing her under the spray. "Don't typically need permission to touch things that belong to me."

"You're going to be obnoxious about this now, aren't you?"

He chuckled, hiking her into his arms and lowering his mouth to her throat. "Probably," he said against the mark. "Can't blame me, though. And it's not like it doesn't run both ways." He seized one of her wrists and guided it between them until her fingertips were caressing the length of his hardened shaft. "By all means, Slayer, touch away."

Buffy glanced down, worrying a lip between her teeth, then seemingly decided to take pity on a poor bloke by fisting his cock and giving it a nice long pump. "You're a bad influence."

"Mmm, the baddest, baby." Shaking water from his eyes, he pushed her to the wall and nipped with a bit more bite at her throat. "Wannabe bad with me?"

"We should... The others. My mom."

He wondered if she just said that because she felt she had to—she certainly didn't seem keen on stopping. Rather, Buffy curled a leg around his waist and positioned him at her opening before shooting him a pleading look—like she needed him to make the decision for her so she was off the hook.

Spike growled and kissed her, water slushing between their bodies. She was brilliant like this—brilliant like anything, really, but there was something about the way her hair clung to her face and the pattern droplets made running down her exquisite body that made the thought of showering apart from her seem like a sodding crime. And while he might be evil, he drew the line at criminal.

And bleeding hell, she fit unlike anything he'd felt before. Granted, his sexual history, while long and sordid, wasn't as varied as some might think. He'd never been too wild about being with women who weren't Dru, even when she'd asked him to make the pretty dollies moan before they screamed. But all that experience amount to the same thing now, which wasn't much. No one had been hot the way Buffy was hot or made anywhere in the range of the sounds Buffy made. The way she clenched that bloody marvel of a pussy around his dick had him

thinking that, despite whatever he'd told her, his poetry days weren't as far in his past as he would've liked.

He had promised to share if he penned more. Might be worth it just to watch her go all rosy when she read how well she gripped his cock, especially considering how hot she went whenever he did anything so tame as saying the words.

"Always," he murmured as he began to move.

"Always what?"

"A bit of a surprise, how good you feel." Spike pressed his brow to hers, digging his fingers into her ass. "Tell myself I remember, 'cause how could a man forget? But it's always better—always."

Buffy whimpered, dragging her nails up his arms and his shoulders, then linked her hands behind his neck. "You too."

"Oh yeah?" He nudged her mouth with his, grinning. "Tell me how I feel."

While she went all gooey when he murmured little nasties to her, she wasn't brave about murmuring them back—some of the time. Get her in the right mood, on the right day, and she'd say things that would make a bloody fleet of sailors go ruby red. Then there were the in-between days when she'd give him words, but with an edge that told him she was going through a bout of self-consciousness but pushing through anyway. Those were his favorites—he got the best of both worlds. Buffy telling him what he wanted to hear but with a hint of that girlish innocence that had ensnared him from the bloody beginning.

"You're...deep." Buffy dragged her teeth over her lower lip, rolling her head back against the shower wall. "God, so deep."

He rewarded her with a particularly sharp thrust and groaned when she gasped. "You like me deep?"

"Oh, yes."

"What else, pet? What else does your Spike do to you?"

She didn't answer immediately, rather dug her teeth into his shoulder, and *bloody hell*, that was just brilliant. Spike growled and braced a hand against the wall beside her head, fully cupped her ass to leverage her into his thrusts. And that was brilliant, too. All warmth and goodness, his Slayer. All Buffy. He was addicted to all of it. Whatever sound

she made, however she moved, how her breaths seemed knocked out of her chest in rhythm to him pounding her against the wall, and of course every time she squeezed her beautiful cunt around him. It all came together, different sections of this orchestra, working over their parts so that the symphony played as it was meant to.

After a moment, Buffy unlatched her teeth and began dropping soft, sweet kisses across his skin. "Full," she managed between grunts. "Deep. Mine. My vampire."

"So fucking yours, baby." Spike tugged at her earlobe with his mouth, giving her a nip. "Make me so hard. All the time, pet. Want this, want you, always. How good you feel when you squeeze—oh yes, pet. Just like that. How wet you are. How wet I make you. How you taste." He nuzzled lower until he was hovering over the mark he'd reopened the previous night. "How biting you makes you come."

"Spike—"

"Wanna come, sweet?"

She nodded hard. "Please."

"Beg me, Slayer. Beg me for my fangs."

"Spike, bite me. Please bite me."

He brushed a kiss over the place and reveled in the way she shuddered and clenched around him. "My pleasure," he murmured, then let his fangs descend. He also brought his thrusts to a halt, pulling out of her with agonizing slowness that had every inch of him screaming its frustration. But it was worth it—so worth it—because Buffy began clawing at him, the noises she couldn't help but make becoming almost desperate. He rubbed the head of his cock up and down her slick slit, teased her for a few seconds. First nudging her clit and earning a cry so raw it made his balls ache, then down to her opening and up again.

"Spike, please!"

Fuck, he would never get tired of hearing that. Spike favored the mark on her throat with a long lick, then sliced his fangs into her as he slammed his cock home. And that was it for both of them—Buffy released something that could only be called a howl, trembling as her pussy spasmed around him, and he started moving again, jerking his hips as his cock pulsed and emptied inside her. He was still moving

when he felt her tense muscles relax, when she became pliant in his arms. Pulling out of her was always bittersweet.

That was, unless, a vamp had a mind to drop to his knees and make his lady come all over his face.

Which, as it turned out, this vamp did. Spike grinned and kissed her, not bothered when she seemed a hair too dazed to respond properly. If there was one thing he'd never tire of, it was shagging the Slayer boneless.

"Hope you didn't give me all of it just now," Spike told her as he pulled out, grinning when she offered a soft grumble of protest. "'Cause I'm nowhere near through with you." He lowered himself to his knees. "Got more I want."

"Oh god, you're gonna kill me."

"Not a chance, pet." He winked and lifted to drape one of her legs over his shoulder. "But I'll make you come until you beg me to stop. That just yet?"

Buffy blinked down at him, looking drugged. Then that inherent Buffy defiance that made her the most perfect woman on the sodding planet cemented behind her eyes. She dug her heel into his back and jerked him forward until his face was pressed flush against her slick, swollen cunt.

"Eat me," she said.

Spike drew her clit between his lips and sucked, making sure to hold her up as he did exactly as he was told.

He had no bloody sense of how long they'd played in the shower before the Slayer gave him the boot. Every time he asked her if she was ready to call it quits, she'd square her shoulders and favor him with that brassy, stubborn scowl of hers. Which was just fine—he wouldn't mind telling her chums, former or otherwise, that the reason Buffy was a bit useless today was his tongue and how often she'd ridden it.

It seemed impossible to consider that a short twenty-four hours ago he hadn't been on top of the bloody world. That he'd thought he

might lose everything. That he hadn't known how Buffy felt—that it hadn't been obvious.

"You want me to bugger off, you gotta stop snogging me," he murmured against her lips as she pushed him toward the door.

"Spike kisses good," Buffy replied before sucking his lower lip between her teeth and giving it a good bite, the minx. "Lips of good. I think that's what I called them."

"Want the tongue of—"

"Must. Get. Ready." She smirked, pulled her mouth from his and planted her hands on his chest. "We have things to do."

"Only thing on my list—"

"Work now. Play later."

He sighed, dropped his shoulders. "You're no fun," he informed her, then smirked and stole one last kiss before turning and heading back into the room.

And stopped dead in his tracks.

There was someone in the room. Someone who *couldn't* be in the room. Someone who was supposed to be bloody dead.

"Angel."

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"Ugh."

Buffy screwed up her face and tilted her head to get a better look at the tangled mess that was her hair. Tackling this sucker with a brush was going to hurt, slayer strength or not.

"With my luck, I forgot to *pack* a stupid brush," she grumbled, throwing open the bathroom door and stomping into the room. "Spike, I—"

That was as much as she got out before her gaze landed on the ghost standing by the door and everything in her went still.

Angel.

Angel was in her room.

It took a moment for sensation to return, for her to register the tingling in her fingers or the wild way her heart pounded against her ribs. A dull numbness balled in her center and spread out, her mind skipping on repeat over the immutable fact that *Angel was dead*. She should know, having been the one who killed him. Angel was dead and he had been dead for nearly a year, swallowed up by the stone demon he'd tried to awaken.

Except he was standing here, feet away from her, looking at her like somehow she was the one who didn't belong.

"I..." Her voice sounded like anything but her own. "Angel?"

At that, Spike whirled around, and the pressure in her head crescendoed until it popped. Just like that, she was back at the moment. Back...and very naked at the moment. Buffy glanced down and was greeted by the sight of her bare breasts, which were nice and swollen thanks to Spike's shower antics, and her nipples all pebbly compliments of the air conditioner. She squeaked and threw an arm over her chest, though it proved unnecessary as Spike released a very possessive growl and all but leaped in front of her.

She must have still been dazed, however, for the next words that bubbled off her lips were, "Did you know he was coming?"

Spike didn't respond, which was good of him because the question was ridiculous. Instead, he reached an arm back, hand out in offering, which she took with gratitude. Maybe he could help keep her grounded.

"Believe I asked you a question," Spike spat at the ghost. "What the bleeding fuck are you doing here?"

"That's your question?" Buffy said, her mind unfogging more by the second. "What's he doing here?"

Angel cleared his throat, which drew her gaze back to him, no matter how much she wanted to look anywhere else at the moment. It hurt looking at him, though she wasn't entirely sure why.

"Faith caught me up on your being in town last night," he said. "Joyce was worried, too. After...after she found your room empty."

Was this supposed to make sense?

"I told Giles where we were staying," Buffy said lamely. "And my mom. Pretty sure I left that in the note. And...and aren't you supposed to be dead?"

Angel looked at her head-on for the first time since she'd entered the room, his face so familiar yet not. Time had obscured a lot of the details regarding her first love. She'd remembered the basics—height, hair color, body type, and the angular lines of his jaw and brow—but everything else had become a bit of a blur, which now seemed ridiculous. Almost as ridiculous as the fact that she was looking at him at all. That he was here and not in some hell dimension or whatever had happened after Acathla.

A wave of dizziness crashed over her and her stomach twisted. This was *so* not the moment to puke.

"I came back," Angel said in that annoyingly neutral tone of his. "The Powers sent me back. Seems they weren't done with me."

Oh, well, wasn't that nice of them? Guess it was too much to hope those same Powers would have the courtesy to, say, drop her a line. "How long?" she asked.

"I think it was October," he said. "When I came back."

October. *October?*

"And you..." Angel looked down. "I—"

"Can we please put this on hold until some of us are dressed? I am feeling very naked here."

Angel snapped his jaw shut and nodded, turning on his heel and presenting her with his back. Just like that. No argument. For some reason, this annoyed the crap out of her—like everything is so easy for him. Things *shouldn't* be easy for Angel. Not after the mess he'd made of her life, leaving her broken and trying to pick up the pieces. Pursuing her relentlessly for months, keeping her at arm's length, letting her get swept up in romantic, girlish thoughts to the point where...where...*what?*

Thankfully, Spike was there to do the thinking for them both, because Buffy suddenly found herself unable to move, let alone remember where she'd left the bag she'd packed them. In a blink, he was in front of her, tugging a tee over her head. One of his, she noted absently, rather than hers. Spike was a lot of things, but subtle was nowhere on the list. After her front was covered, he dropped to his knees and tugged a pair of shorts up her legs. Only after she was dressed did he worry about himself.

"All right, Slayer?" he murmured as he zipped up his jeans, leaning forward so that his voice caressed her ear. "Sweet?"

Buffy swallowed and nodded, the motion automatic. In truth, she was nowhere in the neighborhood of *all right*. She wasn't even sure she was awake. This was the sort of thing more likely to happen in her dreams. And not the good ones.

Angel turned back around just as Spike tugged on a T-shirt, his expression stoic. "How did this happen?" he asked.

"You tell me," Buffy blurted. "You...being alive."

"I told you, it was the Powers."

"And you know that how?"

He shifted a bit, not betraying much. But then, he wouldn't. "I tried to kill myself at Christmas," he muttered.

"Really?" Spike asked. "Pity it didn't take."

Angel continued on as though he hadn't spoken. "As you can imagine, things here have been...tense since I got back. I was seeing things and... Well, Faith stopped me. Or tried to. Then it snowed. Hottest day of the year and it snowed. Giles took that to mean that I'm supposed to stick around."

"Giles did." The very same Giles who had, only yesterday, lectured her on her relationship with Spike. The Giles whose girlfriend Angel had murdered the year before. That Giles.

"Well, he wasn't wild about it," Angel replied in a low undertone. "I'm still not sure why he hasn't come at me with a stake. It's no less than I deserve."

"Least we're agreed there," Spike said with a nod.

"But..." Angel kept his gaze on Buffy, his brow furrowed in clear confusion. "Buffy, we all thought you were dead. That he..." He nodded at Spike without looking at him. "That Spike had killed you. And I find out you've been living in Los Angeles this entire time?"

The faint accusation in his voice went a long way in snapping her out of her stupor. Buffy shook her head, forcing the shrill screaming in her head to the back. She could deal with the fact that Angel was back from the dead later. Much later.

"If you're here to lecture me, could you, well, not?" she replied. "Believe me, I got the Buffy's A Big Disappointment memo yesterday."

"Well, what did you expect?" Angel asked, his tone even more the kind that he had so not earned the right to use with her. "My understanding is that you just disappeared and the last thing people knew about you was you were coming to..."

Buffy balled her hands into fists and stepped forward, vibrating with an energy that didn't feel entirely like it belonged to her, but she was grateful for it regardless. "Coming to what?"

Angel tightened his jaw and looked away. "You know what."

"Yeah. I was coming to save the world. From *you*. After you had kidnapped my watcher, terrorized my mother, killed one of my teachers on top of god-knows how many others, and—"

"I didn't have a soul!"

"Neither does Spike, and yet, he hasn't tried to end the world once."

"Not really my thing," Spike agreed from behind her, sounding amused, of all things. At least someone was enjoying himself. "Fancy it just the way it is."

Angel glowered at them for a moment, and at that moment, Buffy took inventory. Maybe it was because she was pissed about having been blindsided, maybe time had just uncolored the rose-colored glasses she'd worn, or maybe it had to do with the claim she shared with Spike, but it was hard, as she looked at Angel, to call to mind what it was that had drawn her to him in the first place. There was the whole forbidden angle that had been super mysterious and also with the majorly annoying, and the hunky dark brooding thing, but Angel was closed off in ways Spike never had been. Not even when it would have been easier or more convenient, for him to hide the way he felt. And this wasn't a new thing—this was the way it had been with Angel every step of the way. That much she remembered. Getting Angel to do more than glower at something intensely had been like pulling teeth, though it had made every time he'd shown an ounce of emotion feel like a personal victory.

"And that's how this happened?" Angel asked, gesturing between them. "Because Spike *hasn't* tried to end the world?"

"It happened because of you, actually," Buffy said before she could stop herself. Not that she would have, given this had the added benefit of being true.

"That's right," Spike said, coming up so he was beside her again. He wound an arm around Buffy's middle and pulling her to his side. "Owe it all to you, Gramps. Went out one night to see a lady about a vamp. Turned out to be the best bloody decision I've ever made."

"I remember you and Buffy had teamed up. Remember you came to the mansion one night smelling like..." He glanced at Buffy, his expression guarded. "But...even if that was to take me down, how did it

become this?" A pause. "How could you *let* it become this, Buffy? After what happened between us?"

Well, that did it. The last of the numb sensation ebbed away almost immediately, leaving her simmering with something else.

"I'm sorry, what?" Buffy barked, her feet again carrying her forward without care. "What the hell does Spike have to do with us?"

"Well, like you said. He doesn't have a soul."

"That's it? That's your ace in the hole?"

Spike snorted behind her. "Pillock."

Buffy straightened her shoulders. "Ten bucks says you're still the person in the room with the freshest kill, so what's your point?"

"Is that what he told you? That he's stopped killing?"

"No, he didn't tell me that. He *has* stopped killing. And it's none of your business."

"None of my business? Buffy—"

"Got somethin' of substance to say, wanker, and we're all bloody ears," Spike snapped, coming up beside her again. "Said you came to make sure the Slayer was all right. She look all right to you? Report on back to her little chums that she hasn't pulled a runner, though after yesterday's madhouse, the lot of you are lucky we both don't do just that."

Angel's eyes darkened. "Were you expecting a parade? Either one of you? Honestly, Buffy, what did you think would happen, showing up like that with *him*? Your friends, Giles, everyone has thought you were dead for almost a year. Then you walk in like nothing happened?"

"That's not what happened," Buffy shot back, her blood heating. "I didn't just... Do you have any idea how difficult that was? Of course I brought Spike! I brought others, too. Fred and Gunn from LA. I brought *help* for this mayor thing. Walking into that library was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do, so don't you dare stand there and act like I just... I don't know, didn't care."

"But that's exactly what it looks like. When you don't call or write or let the people that love you know that you're alive, it looks very much like you don't care."

"Let's recap everything that happened that might have made Buffy

think it was a good idea to leave town, starting with when your girlfriend killed Kendra."

Angel rolled his eyes, dropping his hands to his sides. "*My* girlfriend? If we're going to do this, at least be honest about it. Dru was Spike's."

"Oh yeah?" Spike replied, his voice pitched an octave higher than usual. "Since when?"

"Seriously?"

"Dru was never *mine*," he snarled. "I was hers, sure, but she was never mine. That honor was always yours, but then you never cared to take responsibility for her, did you? Didn't matter that she hung on your every bloody word, screamed for you in her sleep. You'd shag her sideways and get her to beg for it, and now you wanna play semantics? Dru was always yours and you bloody well know it."

"So is that what this is, then?" Angel shot back, his tone unlike anything Buffy had ever heard from him before. Cold and dangerous, more like the soulless counterpart, only not at the same time. Worse in a way. A lot worse. "I did yours so you do mine?"

The next thing she knew, Spike had torn from her side, his movements a blur. The hard smack of flesh striking flesh rang through the air, and then Angel was across the room, having crashed into the door hard enough that it bowed under the impact. Bits of light leaked in through the cracks at the sides, prompting Angel to bound to his feet in a hurry, lest anything valuable start to burn.

Buffy was glad for it, glad Spike had provided a distraction so she wouldn't have to dwell on what Angel had just said or the sick feeling spreading through her insides.

"Not yours." Spike's voice was low and thick, the way it got when he was speaking around his fangs. "Never yours. Not in any way that counts, you bloody bastard. Mine's the mark that counts, you hear? She's *mine*."

Angel blinked rapidly, wiping at his lower lip, which had split open. He stared at the blood on his fingers for a second before looking up again. "So it is true," he said. "You are...mated."

"Bloody right we are. Had the sense to know what I have."

"And that's why you stayed away," he went on, looking now to Buffy

as though Spike weren't in the room. "That I can understand, Buffy, but you should know there are options. Ways of breaking it. It's painful and complicated, but—"

"Shut your bloody gob!"

"Nothing's being broken," Buffy said, grabbing hold of Spike before he could lunge again. Another throw would likely send Angel out into the sunlight, and despite the hurt lacing her insides, she didn't think she could stand to watch him go up in a cloud of dust. Her mind still hadn't fully accepted that he was here at all. "The claim wasn't a planned thing but it happened and...and it's what I want now."

A long, stunned pause. "You can't be serious."

"I am all with the serious. I am serious Buffy." She reached up to the mark Spike had left against her throat last night—and again in the shower—and a thrill rushed through her at the contact. "I love him and the claim is going nowhere. Not now. Not tomorrow. Not ever. So do us all a favor and never mention that again, okay?"

Angel stared at her a long moment, one of those soulful stares that used to have her quivering in all sorts of girlish ways. Only there was no warmth there, none of the barely masked longing that had kept her up more nights than she wanted to admit. At length, he sighed and shook his head, tearing his gaze from hers. "I can't believe this is you."

"You can't believe it's me because you don't know me," Buffy shot back, trembling. "I'm starting to wonder if you ever did."

"So am I." He looked down. "I'll tell Giles you're fine. You should go back to your mother. You owe her that."

"You are the last person on the planet to tell me what I owe my mother."

"Which one of us has been there for her all year?" he shot back. "Which one of us held her while she was crying over you? Reassuring her that Spike would have at least been sporting enough to make sure you didn't suffer when he killed you because he wasn't a monster *like me*." He curled his lip. "Turns out he was worse. I would never have condemned you like this."

"Condemned me?"

"It's eternity, you understand. Eternity tied to him. Eternity

watching all the people you love age and die, fighting the same battles over and over again. It's—"

"And how the bloody hell would you know?" Spike spat. "Didn't have people you love, did you? Abandoned your family, spent decades lurkin' in alleys and eatin' rats. You wallowed and—"

"I had a soul!"

"And that made you allergic to personal hygiene, I suppose."

Angel took a step toward them with something Buffy *so* didn't like flashing in his eyes. In a blink, she was moving too, shoving her ex-boyfriend back before he could get close enough to so much as pluck one of Spike's hairs.

"We're not doing this," she informed him. "Yeah, Angel, I know it's eternity. But eternity is just one day at a time and so far so good."

"So far so *good*?"

"Well, I went from having a life expectancy of, say, *now* to a life expectancy of *kiss my ass*. So yeah, so far so good." Buffy spread her arms. "I'm eighteen! Still got a lot of mileage in me and no deadline on when I need to think about eternity. So next, please. Unless you don't have a next, and if that's the case, then maybe we put the happy reunion on hold until a time that's later."

Behind her, Spike released a long, shuddery breath—the sort she felt ripple through her as though it were her own. "Fuck, I love you," he swore.

The corner of her mouth twitched but she didn't look at him, rather kept her gaze on Angel so he could see just how serious she was.

"You want me to go," Angel said slowly.

"I think that'd be good."

"Are you not even a little happy to see me? You thought I was dead."

"You thought I was too."

"And I discovered you're mated to Spike."

"And all the happy went away?" Buffy looked away now, not wanting to see the answer. The borrowed bravado that had shoved her shock aside was starting to wane, and any minute now, the walls were going to crumble and she would go right with them. He needed to get the hell

out of here before then. "Maybe that's for the best. Get too happy and the mayor is the least of our problems."

"That's not fair."

"Isn't it?" She drew in a breath, steeling herself. "Angel, killing you was one of the hardest things I've ever done. It... *You* broke me. Everything that happened broke me. I don't even know where my head was after Acathla but I felt like I was drowning. And I might have if it hadn't been for Spike. I don't expect you to understand—I don't expect anyone to understand. I don't expect anything, actually. All I want is to help keep whatever big evil plan the mayor has from happening. Once that's done, I'll be out of everyone's hair and you can go back to thinking I'm deluded or brainwashed or dead. Right now, we're here to help and that's what we'll do. So you can go tell them that. Okay?"

Angel just looked at her the way Fred might look at a particularly interesting lab specimen. It was familiar in ways she didn't want to consider, familiar in ways that drove home just how real this was. That he was here, taking up space in her motel room, feet away from the bed where she and Spike had made love until the early hours of the morning and beyond that. Where she'd stood last night, telling Spike at last that she loved him—given him the words she'd kept at arm's length because of how terribly things had gone the first time she'd let herself love a vampire. And again, she thought of the night she'd run Angel through with a sword, how disconnected she'd felt from the world, how abandoned, how isolated. Spike had led her from the mansion to his Desoto and offered to take her anywhere she wanted to go. She'd left Sunnydale as one version of Buffy and come back as another.

"I'll tell them," Angel said at last. "But you need to tell them too."

"The lady needs to do precisely rot," Spike replied in a low, dangerous voice. "Tried to make nice yesterday and they tossed her out. The old man wants her, he knows where to find her."

"There was no way that meeting was going to go well. Maybe if you'd called—"

"Oh, stuff it, you overgrown ponce. Just said it yourself. No

bleeding way the meeting would go well. She coulda taken out a sodding advert and it wouldn't have made a difference."

"Spike's right," Buffy said before Angel could jump back in, doing her best to keep her tone level. "I know I didn't do everything right, but I had my reasons and...and I stand by them. I did what I needed to in order to survive. Giles and the others want to think the worst of me...fine. That'll just make it easier to go home when this is all done. But if they want to know why I made the decisions I did, they know where to find me." She glanced pointedly at the door, then at the sun still leaking in through the edges, and furrowed her brow. "How did you get here, anyway? Last I checked, the sun and you are of the nonmixy."

"Sewer access, plus..." Angel leaned over and plucked something up from the floor beside the bed. The *something* turned out to be a long black trench overcoat and a matching fedora that she was sure hadn't been in the duffle she'd packed. Still, it wasn't until he slid the coat on over his massive shoulders and fitted the hat on his head that she understood.

And couldn't help the laugh that bubbled off her lips.

"Are you for real?" she asked, and giggled again when he scowled and tugged a pair of thick leather gloves from the coat pockets. "You look like Goth Dick Tracy."

Beside her, Spike released a high-pitched titter.

Angel's scowl deepened. "I had to find ways to get around town during the day," he said. Then, to cap it all off, slid on a pair of sunglasses. "Faith isn't a student and is prone to getting into trouble when left to her own devices, or going off on her own. I had to find a way to stay with close."

Buffy blinked. "You...and Faith?"

Angel looked down quickly. A little too quickly for his next words to be believable—as though he didn't want her to see his eyes, but had forgotten about the sunglasses. "No. Not like that," he said. "Anyway, I... I'll get going." His mouth twitched as though it was trying for a smile but had forgotten how. "It is good to see you, Buffy." A pause. "Spike."

"Wanker," Spike replied in kind.

Angel's jaw tightened but he didn't take the bait, rather turned and yanked the door open. Sunlight spilled inside, sending Spike back toward the bathroom with a muttered curse, and then there was a slam and they were alone again, engulfed in a deafening silence.

A beat passed. Then another. Then the swelling storm she'd managed to push back gave a mighty shove forward without warning, and the room seemed to tip sideways. Without defensiveness and indignation to keep her shielded, Buffy felt it very possible she might just dissolve. In less than twenty-four hours, her world had spun wildly out of control, and every time she thought it might be slowing enough that she could grab hold of something, the whirl began anew.

Angel was alive. Alive and well. And apparently, unless she'd read him wrong, he'd found himself a replacement slayer to moon over. Just like her friends had found a replacement slayer to rally around. It was no small wonder Faith hadn't moved in with her mother.

"Slayer," Spike said, pressing his hand to the small of her back. "Buffy, are you..."

"I'm fine."

It was hearing her own voice that did it. The uncertainty there, the hurt, and all the things she hadn't let herself think about. Everything surged to the surface without warning, so the only recourse she had was to give in and cry.

52

SPIKE HAD NO BLOODY IDEA WHAT HIS ROLE WAS IN THIS PARTICULAR play. He'd been prepared to face down a lot in coming back to Sunnyhell, but watching the woman he loved fall to pieces after her resurrected ex walked out on her had sure as hell not been in the script.

The past few hours, ever since she'd returned to him the night before, had been the happiest he'd ever experienced. Hearing her say the words he'd started to think he'd never get from her, feeling how much she meant them in the way she looked at him, kissed him, in how completely she surrendered herself—all of that had been torn right from the pages of his deepest fantasies. And he knew she'd meant it, could feel how much. Buffy was honest if nothing else—she said nothing she didn't mean, even when he wished she would.

All that to say, he knew he was being an unreasonable git to resent the tears she'd shed over the ponce once he'd left. No matter what Angel was to her now, he'd been something else at one point—something a girl couldn't be expected to just put behind her like it was nothing. He supposed if he heard somewhere down the line that Dru had snuffed it, he'd feel a twinge of something. Might even find himself in a right state for a day or two, no matter that the twisted bitch had run him through with a sword and left him for dust. He might not love her

anymore but the time they'd been together would never be something he'd begrudge. After all, she had brought him to Buffy.

Spike knew this, recognized it, yet he couldn't help the way the beast in his chest raged at knowing his mate was crying over the berk. Couldn't help that every bloody tear made him want to add a new hole to the wall or finish the job on the door, which would need to be replaced before he cozied up with his honey tonight.

Buffy didn't cry all that long, even though it felt like ages, though what came next was hardly any better. After her tears dried up, she retreated within herself, reminding him painfully of the state she'd been in when he'd first ushered her into the Desoto last spring. That vacant detachment that had chased them almost all the way to Los Angeles, her being there without really being there. He didn't much think she'd pull a runner now—things were different now and she loved him, after all—but the stasis he found himself stranded inside while she worked through whatever was going through that head of hers was intolerable. He didn't know what to do and the link he shared with her wasn't helping at all. From her, all he felt was empty.

Finally, after the sun had gone down good and proper, he managed a soft, "Should get some food in you, pet. You've gone all day without any nosh. Feelin' peckish?"

There was nothing for a moment, then Buffy nodded and stood from where she had been reclining on the bed. She didn't look at him, rather dressed—a flowy type skirt and a strappy camisole number—slid on her shoes and moved toward the door as though in a trance.

Spike swore under his nonexistent breath, threw his duster over his shoulders and tore after her. He was about to climb behind the wheel when Gunn popped his head out of the neighboring motel room.

Fuck. He'd forgotten they'd traveled with accessories.

"Ya'll off?" the demon hunter asked, casting a wary glance to the door Angel had more or less destroyed by being a big surly git. "Where we goin'? Gotta plan?"

"Slayer needs to put somethin' in her belly," Spike replied. "Bastard of a day, yeah?"

Gunn looked surprised by this. "Has it been? From the sounds you

two were makin' last night, we kinda figured you'd be *resting* up after *making* up."

Spike snorted. "That why you didn't try to knock down the door all day?"

"Naw, Fred and me hit the town, tryin' to dig up stuff on—" He caught himself before he could yell anything incriminating across the parking lot, showing smarts Spike sometimes forgot he had. In a softer voice, Gunn said, "She went back to that high school to see about makin' peace. Think I'm gonna hit the graveyard and see what all the fuss is." He let himself out of his room, started forward then stopped again when he caught sight of the damaged door. "That a sex thing or did you guys start fightin' again?"

Spike glanced at Buffy, who stood somewhat blankly by the passenger side. For a moment, he wasn't sure she'd even heard the question, but then she cleared her throat and said, "Visitor of the unexpected variety. Things got a little...throwy."

Gunn frowned, looking from her to Spike and then back again. "Ya'll good?"

"We're fine," Buffy replied, and Spike was relieved to hear she sounded sincere. Not that he was worried, except he was worried because old habits died bloody hard.

"You sure?"

"The visitor was an ex. An ex we both thought was dead." Her lips twitched in some semblance of a smile. "Turns out nothing around here stays dead very long, be it human or vamp."

Gunn released a low whistle. "Damn, Slayer, that's heavy. This the dude you ran through with a sword?"

"The very same," she replied, deadpan. "We haven't eaten so we're going to get some food. You be careful if you're patrolling. LA has nothing on the Hellmouth."

From the look on Gunn's face, he was eager to be made a believer. "Can't be too bad if you're lettin' me go out on my lonesome."

"You can handle yourself better than most," Buffy replied. "You said Fred's at the school?"

"Knockin' heads with that Wes guy. Doin' her computer thing to

dig up info on what mighta happened the last time this Ascension shit went down. Ya'll wanna meet up somewhere?"

Spike glanced at Buffy, arching his eyebrows, eager to keep her talking now that she'd started.

"The Bronze," she said after a beat, her tone somewhat vacant. "Since I'm hitting the highlights, we might as well go there. And the others... They might be there, too. Which, yay confrontation, but it's better to get all of this in the open than sit and wait for them to decide whether or not we're going to be of any use." She pressed her lips together and looked away, then slid into the passenger seat without another word, apparently through with the conversation.

Spike looked back to Gunn, unsurprised to find his eyes wide with concern.

"She okay?"

"Slayer's a survivor above all else," Spike said, going for what he hoped was a decently casual shrug. "Wager it was all gonna catch up with her—comin' here, seein' her chums, her mum. Then her bloody ex shows up."

"But you two are good? 'Cause porno sounds aside, you were aimin' to take each other's heads off just yesterday."

"You a sodding couple's counselor now?"

Gunn brought his hands up, all innocence. "Gotta keep tabs on whether or not your British ass is stakeable. She suddenly tosses you to the curb and it's open season on Blondie."

He couldn't help it—he snickered. While he and Gunn would never be bosom buddies, the last stretch had convinced him that even surly demon hunter types had their uses. And casual death threats aside, the fact that the bloke had volunteered to come stand behind Buffy gave him high marks in Spike's book. So he didn't snap back or inform him that he could rip off his head anytime he liked, rather flashed him the two-finger salute. "Wanna make yourself useful, mate? Go tell management we need a new door by the time we get back."

"Damn, now you have me runnin' interference?"

"If the chap gets lippy, I might have to eat him, so you're savin' his life."

Gunn snorted and waved a dismissive hand. "You two go do your freaky codependent thing. Leave cleanup to the grownups."

Spike smirked. "Thanks ever so," he called cheerfully, then slid behind the wheel before the other man could get in another word.

He'd hoped that Buffy would start yammering immediately the second it was just them again, but the drive into town was as quiet as the last bit in the room had been, which put him back at square bloody one. He tried not to take this to heart—after all, everything that had happened before Angel had flashed his ugly mug had been brilliant. Furthermore, Buffy was his. She loved him. Had told him so over and over last night, had begged him to make it all official-like more than once, like she couldn't get enough of his fangs. Learning the sod that had shattered her heart wasn't getting the stuffing ripped out of him in Hell had been a blow, sure, but one they would address together.

The next hour, though, seemed to crawl by. He escorted her into a diner far from her mum's side of town, to a corner booth in the back. When she neglected to pick up the menu, he went ahead and ordered for her, all the while trying to ignore the faraway look on her face. The one that reminded him again of the state she'd been in after killing Angel last year—how she'd gone quiet on him, waging some private war that had all but torn her apart.

Half a dozen times, he thought about broaching the subject. Wanted to, the silence was driving him out of his head. Seemed a bit off that she'd talked to Gunn but hadn't managed to say more than a word to him since Angel had split. But there had to be a reason for that—something he wasn't seeing. Whatever else, this *wasn't* the girl from that night a year ago. That girl had been broken and bleeding and hadn't the foggiest idea what lay in store for them. That he'd intended there to be a *them* at all, beyond the truce that had brought them together.

He needed to be patient. Trouble was, patience was one of those things he'd never perfected.

When the food arrived, Buffy dove right in without so much as batting an eye. Double cheeseburger, mound of fries, and a strawberry shake—all gone in under ten minutes. He would have laughed but didn't dare. It was good to see her eat. After asking if she wanted

anything else and getting a solemn headshake, he drew out some dosh from his pocket, tossed it onto the table, then led her back out into the open, hand on the small of her back.

He'd almost made it all the way to the passenger side when she whirled around and seized him by the lapels of his duster.

"Buff—"

But he didn't have time to get anything out. The next thing he knew, she'd tugged him down and attacked his mouth in a bruising, biting kiss that had him practically sagging with relief. This was her, the girl he knew. The girl who'd learned just how he liked to be kissed, touched. How to press herself against him in ways that had rational thought melting into nothing, right along with the scenery, so he didn't care about anything so much as he did getting as close to her as possible. Absorbing her scent and taste and feel and whatever else she would give him.

She broke away far too soon, in his opinion, breathing heavily and keeping her eyes closed. He wanted to chase her, capture her again before she flitted off, but something told him to wait. Instead, he drew in the picture she presented—hair a bit wild, lips a bit swollen, a soft smile curving her lips and, best of all, the rigidity from just seconds ago having vanished.

Then she opened her eyes and looked at him. "Thank you."

"What for?"

"For...letting me to do that."

"What? Snog me?" This time he couldn't help himself and neared to take a nip at her lips. "Nothing for it, pet. Could spend the day doing nothing else."

"Seeing Angel was..." Buffy trailed off, rocking back on her heels. "I kinda went blank."

Yeah, that much he'd noticed.

"It was just... He was there. I spent so much of the last year thinking about that night at the mansion. Wondering what I could've done to... Well, it doesn't matter." She swallowed and looked down. "I felt guilty for killing him."

"Prat was tryin' to end the world, love. It's not like he gave you much option." Not to mention if she hadn't killed Angel—or run him

through with that blasted sword—there was a very good chance she wouldn't be here with him. "Can't say I'm sorry it happened the way it did."

"I'm not either and that... Realizing that just kinda freaked me out. I'm sorry for what happened to Angel but I'm not sorry for what happened to me, and what happened to me could have only happened because of what happened to him." Buffy released a whimper and met his gaze again, her own pleading. "Is there any chance any of that made any sense?"

He couldn't help his grin. "Not a lick."

Buffy glared at him, leaving him no choice but to kiss the scowl right off her face. She put on a good show of being brassed, but when he rumbled against her lips, she caved and they were off to the bloody races once more, and it was all he could do to keep up.

The rush that had chased him all bloody day, the same that had faded the instant he'd stepped out of the loo and spotted Angel, revved back to life without warning. He wasn't sure if it was that Buffy had told him she loved him or the fact that he'd claimed her again several times over the last few hours, but there was something different in touching her now. Sure, he'd been an addict from the first, and time had only intensified the craving, but she was no longer a drug. Just as potent but a thousand bloody times more vital. Something he needed like he needed blood. It made pulling away seem damn near impossible, which was fine with him since pulling away was the last thing he wanted to do.

Eventually, though, he had to break from her. Give the girl a chance to breathe.

"Slayer," he murmured, drinking her in.

"Vampire."

"Mine."

She nodded, dropping her gaze to his mouth again. "Uh huh."

Then she was kissing him again, hard and hungry, and his resistance melted. In seconds, she had him all but splayed across the hood of the Desoto and was doing her best to crawl into his lap. Something that hadn't gone unnoticed, he saw when Buffy broke from his lips. Seemed a few of the diners from the restaurant had turned voyeur

and were watching the show with their noses pressed against the glass.

He snarled and let his fangs descend, clutching his oblivious slayer to him as she began nibbling her way down his neck.

"Buffy, pet. Might oughta—"

Her teeth skimmed over the claim mark, and Spike promptly forgot about their audience or protecting her modesty. Instead, he rolled his head back, debating the virtue of flipping her over, hiking up that skirt of hers, and giving her exactly what she was asking for right here in the parking lot.

"Spike," she whispered into his neck. "Do you feel that?"

Well, she was astride him, rubbing herself along his cock like a bitch in heat. Safe to say he felt it.

"I think it's stronger," she went on, dipping a hand underneath his T-shirt and dragging her nails along his belly. "Does it feel stronger to you?"

"Slayer, unless you fancy giving those blokes a peepshow, better stop now."

Buffy blinked and pulled back almost instantly, the fog in her eyes dissipating. She hesitated a moment, then looked around with wide eyes, a delicate blush spreading across her cheeks. When she turned enough to catch sight of the patrons still gawking at them from inside the diner, she gave a little squeak and immediately slid off his lap. Which, of course, left him lying across the hood of his car, sporting an obvious stiffy and on full display.

Good thing he wasn't a self-conscious bloke. Spike just smirked and lifted himself onto his elbows. "The claim, you mean?" he asked, perhaps a bit too much laughter in his voice. "Yeah, now that you mention it."

"Don't," Buffy said, stomping to the passenger seat. "Just...get us out of here."

Spike chuckled again and slid to his feet. He favored the patrons a jaunty wave as he rounded to his side—couldn't help it.

"She really fancied the shake," he called. "Strawberry. Highly recommend."

"Shut up!" Buffy yelled from inside the car. By the time he was

behind the wheel, she had her face buried in her hands and was muttering about how it was a good thing she didn't live here anymore because there was no way she could be seen in public again.

"Oh, cheer up, love," Spike said brightly as he keyed up the car. "Coulda been worse."

"Shut up."

"Worse things to be caught doin' than snogging."

"Snogging? I was completely outta control back there."

"Did you hear me complainin'?"

"This is exactly the kind of claim stuff that Giles and my mom would not get in a million years," she muttered, crossing her arms and sinking deeper into the seat. "I barely understand it. Why would it be like that?"

"Like you not bein' able to keep your mitts off me?"

"Well, we've been of the claimed for a while now, Spike. That hasn't happened before."

Spike snorted, making a right toward the Bronze. He didn't know if hitting the place was still something she wanted to do and didn't ask. As much as he'd love to take her back to bed and shag until the bloody Ascension was over, he couldn't help but worry she'd retreat within herself again if given the opportunity. "Hasn't happened? If you say so, love."

"Am I forgetting something?"

"Went a bit feral back when Charlie's old huntin' partner turned me into a pincushion. And the night at Dusk."

"But that was—"

"Violence, yeah. Nothin' to say it doesn't count for the other." He tossed her a glance. "Mighta been feelin' a bit territorial t'night, if you wanna know the full of it. Could be you tapped into that."

"Territorial?"

He swallowed, nodded, and reaffixed his attention on the road. "Know you love me," he said, that giddy rush that had torn through him the previous night warming him all over again. "And... I've known for a while. Or thought I did, before I learned about the reversal. Thought I felt it when we were together."

"It has been a while, Spike. I was a chicken."

"None of that." He took her hand and brought it to his lips. "Got here in the end, didn't we? But knowin' that Angel was part of the reason you held back and seein' him all whole today threw me for a loop."

"You and me both." A pause. "So you're saying you were feeling insecure and I felt that and that's why we nearly had sex in public?"

Spike's lips twitched. "Dunno how it all works, but yeah. Sounds likely."

"That is so screwed up." Buffy aimed him a glare. "Don't do that again."

"Oi! It's not like I did it on purpose." Though he also wasn't about to complain; intentional or not, that little snogging session had been the first bright spot in his day since Angel had made tracks. "Reckon you and me got a bit more to suss out about this claim business, yeah? Could be that book of yours turns out to be helpful after all."

Buffy didn't answer right away. When he stole a glance at her, he found her frowning the way she did when she was untangling a problem. After a moment, though, she sighed and sank a bit into the seat. "This is where it'd come in handy to be on speaking terms with my watcher," she muttered. "I miss going to Giles for answers. He was my walking encyclopedia of all things vampy."

"Sittin' right here, you know."

"Yes, and that would be a good point if you hadn't told me a thousand times that you know diddly more about the claim than I do."

"Bite your tongue."

"I don't need to. That's why I keep you around."

Spike glanced at her again. "Be careful, pet, or I'll pull over and do just that."

To his delight, she responded with a smirk. "Promises."

"Don't tempt me. Not unless you wanna ditch your plans."

She seemed to consider this for a second, then shook her head and sighed. "No. We better Bronze-it. Not sure if any of the others will be there or not, but it's worth a shot. They've had a day to get used to the idea of me being not dead and with you, so maybe we can actually talk and figure out how to stop this Ascension thing."

He nodded. It was no less than what he'd expected. "Whatever you

fancy, pet."

"I *fancy* this being over with and us going home and never coming back."

The words sounded brave and forceful, but Spike wasn't daft enough to believe them. As well as he knew Buffy now, it didn't take much to guess when she was trying to talk herself into something. All this rot with her old friends and her mum hadn't really had the chance to crash down on her yet, worried as she'd been about their relationship, and then distracted with the reappearance of the ex that was supposed to be dead. She'd been in a state after leaving the school yesterday, hyped on nerves and adrenaline on the way to see her mum. Then today she'd received another blow, one he knew would take a minute to shake off.

He wasn't sure she'd ever be ready to leave here, no matter what had been said. Doing it the first time had been hard enough on her.

Buffy released another long sigh, then said, as though sensing his train of thought, "If yesterday was the worst day of my life, today is the weirdest."

"Watch it. Think yesterday was rather brilliant, myself."

She groaned and threw her head against the seat. "It ended good. I'll give you that."

"Just good, pet?"

"Stop fishing. You know what I'm talking about."

Yeah, he did, and given the fact that she was talking at all, he wagered he ought to let her have the stage.

"You never said how it went with your mum."

"It really didn't. I did give her the letter and it kinda... Well, it took the wind out of her sails—her thinking that I hadn't thought of her at all in the time I was gone, at least. She couldn't argue that anymore. Though I probably made it worse by sneaking out again." Buffy drew up a leg so she could rest her elbow against her knee. "I dunno. Maybe this isn't something that can be saved. So much has changed and she... I hurt her a lot, but she hurt me too. I know I made mistakes and yeah, maybe I should've tried to get in touch. Let them know I was okay...but I was going through something *I* barely understood and none of them seem to get that."

Spike waited for a beat. "Don't think any of them deserve you," he said. "After this is over, pet, and you decide you wanna leave and never come back, I'm all bloody for it. Only good thing this place gave me was you, and I get to take you with me."

"I sense a *but*."

Turnabout was fair play, he supposed. He honestly didn't know if what he was about to say stemmed from genuine belief or if he was feeling her end of the claim. Could be a bit of both—his instinct with her was to be selfish, keep her to himself. That was what he wanted, at least, but every time he chased the urge, something pushed back against it. If it was her end, it was only fair.

"But I watched you this last year, didn't I? Useless lot that they are, you missed them."

"Well, yeah."

"Don't feature that goin' away anytime soon. If anythin', might get worse if we up and take off after the battle's won. 'Specially if you haven't had the chance to make it right."

She was quiet for a moment. "So...what are you saying? That maybe we should stay here? Where literally everyone I know hates me?"

"I'll do what you want, pet, whatever that is."

"Holy non-answer, Batman."

Spike sighed, pulling up to the curb near the Bronze. He wasn't sure how to say this without sounding like a git, and still a bit uncertain about the need to say it at all. Only that it seemed important and he didn't think he could just swallow it. He killed the engine and just sat for a moment, hands curled around the steering wheel, mind racing to untangle itself.

"You and me got forever," he said finally. "We've figured that. And forever's a bloody long time to regret somethin'. Guess I just don't fancy the idea of you wakin' up one day down the line and kickin' yourself for not making nice with your friends and mum while they were here."

The silence that answered him was the sort he hated the most—the sort full of noise. But he felt better for having said something. At least then he could refer back to this moment, should she decide to

shake the dust of this sodding place off her shoes for good, and know that he'd tried.

Fact of the matter was, no one really had a concept of what forever really meant, though he came closer than most. And he knew what it was like to live with regret over actions taken and not taken. One of these days, the Slayer's mum would be six feet under, and no matter how contentious their relationship was now, if things weren't patched up when that day arrived, she might never forgive herself.

"I don't know what I want to do," Buffy said at last, her voice strained. "I don't know if things can ever be made right. I hurt them—hurt Mom, and I get it, but... They hurt me, too. Yesterday they acted like it was worse that I was alive than it would've been if you had killed me. They didn't even try to understand what might have happened that I stayed away. They barely let me speak at all." She paused. "And my mom... I'm not sure there's healing that, either. I gave her the letter before I went to bed, and it shut her up about my not thinking about her while I was gone, but I'm not even sure if she read it. Or if it made a difference if she did. But I want things to be okay there. With her and the others. I just don't think I should have to be sorry for *everything*."

"Not the kinda thing that just heals itself, Slayer. Might take a stretch."

"In other words, home sweet Hellmouth?"

"In other words, you decide you wanna try and mend fences, you and me'll find a right cozy place here. Stay as long as you want—or not. We got nowhere to be."

"And just...leave LA? Our apartment? Fred and Gunn?"

"Nothin' keepin' us from keepin' it."

Buffy looked at him from the corner of her eye. "More ill-gotten money from your demon gambling friends? Just how much do you bet during these games?"

He smirked at that. "You get in with high enough rollers, pet, the sort addicted to it, and you can sweet talk them into just about anythin'. Kept us comfortable, hasn't it?"

"I think what's kept us comfortable is me not asking too many questions."

The girl made a fair point. Spike chuckled in spite of himself. "Wasn't thinkin' anythin' of the sort, you'll be happy to hear. Can't swindle enough dosh to keep a place in LA if we're also here and since you insist on doin' most things above board, a fella is left with no choice but to consider perfectly boring means."

"Like what?"

"Believe you call it sublettin'."

Buffy blinked at him.

"Y'know," Spike went on, starting to feel a bit self-conscious, "have some other sod move in and pay rent knowin' we could give them the boot anytime we fancy."

No response. Just more of that blank staring. Spike looked down and sighed, trying to fight against the swell of irritation that threatened to take him over. And here he'd thought he'd done it proper—had been right proud of himself for coming up with a solution so quickly that didn't involve eating the landlord. Granted, he was nearing a year, himself, on the last time he offed a pulser, but the urge to do so would likely never go away. Turned out life was all right when he was walking the straight and narrow—so long as he got in a decent spot of violence, that was.

"What if they didn't want to move?"

He swung his head up. "What's that, pet?"

"Say we get someone to sublet. They move in. Things here go badly and we decide to hell with the Hellmouth. What if whoever's in our apartment decides they like it there and hey, they've been paying rent and they decide to stay. What happens then?"

Well, that was simple enough. Spike shrugged. "Flash 'em some fang and threaten to rip out their entrails."

"Spike, be serious."

"Perfectly serious, pet. Not sayin' I'd do it unless they really brassed you off, but it'd light a fire under most people."

This didn't earn the grin he'd been aiming for, though she didn't roll her eyes or snicker. Rather, the look that fell over her face was thoughtful, if not a bit uncertain. And he decided to leave it at that. No sense chasing her down for an answer she wasn't ready to give yet. There was plenty of thinking to do about the future and no rush on

coming up with a solution. If she chose, in the end, she'd rather stay in good ole Sunnyhell, then they'd figure out the details. If she decided to give this place the kiss-off for the second time, well, he'd do what she wanted.

But, he thought as he slid out of the car to meet her on the sidewalk, he found himself hoping she decided to give Sunnydale a fair shake, despite however much he loathed the place. Fact of the matter was he knew all too well what it was like living with regret, knew the cost of the wrong call. And though these last few months had had incredible highs, a part of her had remained right here through the lot of them. He wagered she'd never really be happy if she never made things right.

That was a problem for another day, though. Right now, his job was to get her smiling again.

"This is where we met, you know," Buffy said as they neared the entrance. "You told me you'd kill me."

"Did a lot of that back in those days." He placed his hand at the small of her back. "Had to talk tough, see. Remind myself why I was here."

"You forgot?"

"Told you as much last night, didn't I? Wanted to fuck you from the start. Was a very taken man then, too, so it threw me off my game." Spike turned to her, grinning, and tugged her toward the entrance. "Bloody goner, I was. The second you started shakin' that pert little arse of yours on the dance floor. Think I can get you to move like that against me? Do a bit of a recreation? Could be fun to relive that night with a better ending."

To his delight, her eyes went bright with challenge. "You're asking for a dance?"

"Not just one, love. All of them. Everything you've got."

Buffy pressed close, whispering her lips along his. "If anyone could handle everything I've got, it's you."

Spike leaned in to kiss her, but, saucy minx that she was, she pushed him away and sashayed her way into the club, leaving him staring at her arse and wiping up drool.

Fuck, if he wasn't the luckiest bloke in the world.

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Of all the stops Buffy had made around town since returning to Sunnydale, the Bronze was the only one that didn't seem all that surreal. Not like walking through Sunnydale High toward the library, like it was any other day and she had training with Giles after her last class had let out. Not like standing outside her mother's home or trying to sleep in the bed that hadn't been hers for nearly a year, either. While Buffy didn't make with the partying in LA, she tended to drag Spike to Caritas at least a couple of times a week. She felt safe there—safe with Lorne and the knowledge that a fight *couldn't* break out anywhere on the premises, therefore she was afforded a genuine night off. That was something the Bronze couldn't give her, but being that it was a place with music and refreshments, the scene didn't feel quite as foreign.

The band on stage was familiar. Apparently, the Dingoes were still going strong. Or Oz was going strong with them. And in true Oz fashion, when he made eye contact with her, he acknowledged her with the barest tilt of his chin, his expression not changing. Buffy found herself grinning and couldn't help but give him a little wave.

And if Oz was on stage, Willow was almost certainly in the crowd. And, sure enough, Buffy spotted her once-friend over at one of the

high-top tables, along with Xander and Cordelia. All three of them were favoring her with a death glare—well, not Cordelia as much, but she seemed a little miffed, though knowing her that could just as easily be because Buffy had returned at all. Cordelia had never been among Buffy's fans, which probably had a lot to do with the fact that her boyfriend had, as Spike had put it the day before, been less-than-attentive when Buffy was around.

Damned if you do and damned if you don't. Though part of the reason she'd suggested coming here had involved the possibility of running into her former friends, she wondered if swinging by the Bronze hadn't been a great idea after all.

As though sensing the thought, Spike rubbed the small of her back before leaning in close and murmuring, "All right, love?"

Buffy swallowed and nodded, tearing her gaze away from her glaring non-admirers. "Do you see Gunn? I kinda thought he'd be here by now."

There was a pause. "Worried?"

"Well, it is the Hellmouth and it's apocalypse season."

"You wanna head out, then?"

The answer was yes, though she wasn't entirely certain if she wasn't using Gunn as a convenient excuse. In truth, she more or less trusted him to handle himself—yeah, Sunnydale was a different beast than Los Angeles, but Gunn had been fighting demons and vamps even longer than she had, to hear him talk. Except there was always that last battle that no one saw coming.

Buffy had all but convinced herself to backtrack when her gaze landed on a certain someone's shiny bald head bobbing around the dance floor. A place she would never have thought to look for him—for whatever reason, she hadn't pegged Gunn as the type to pull on his dancing shoes. But there he was, and looking like he was having the time of his life, grinding against some girl with an enormous rack.

The other slayer. Faith, or whatever.

"Never mind," Buffy said dully. "I found him."

Spike must have seen him too, for he released a low chuckle that rumbled against her back. "Good on him."

"What?"

"Oh, come on. Not like the boy's had it easy the last bit, is it? She looks like the type of bird who could show a fella a good time. Just what our Charlie needs."

It was stupid and irrational but knowing that didn't make the thought go away. Buffy scowled and twisted around to aim a glare at her vampire. "She your type?" she asked before she could stop herself. "She looks like she is. All boobs and leather."

Spike stared at her for a moment before his face split into a grin that made her want to punch him. "Why, Slayer, are you jealous?"

No. *Jealous* would imply that she had something to worry about, which she so did not. Spike couldn't be any more hers if he got a tattoo of her face on his chest, but that didn't mean she had to stand around and watch him appreciate other, curvier women. Women who were probably a thousand times better at sex than she was and into all kinds of wild stuff that she hadn't been adventurous enough to try out.

Her expression must have not been very convincing, for the next thing she knew, Spike's voice was right by her ear. "She's got nothing on you, love. Not a blessed thing."

That was the right thing to say and she believed he meant it, but somehow her mouth fired off without her permission. "But if it weren't for me, you'd probably be all over that."

"Love this color on you. It's most fetching."

"Spike—"

"Not gonna play that game. I've got much better things to do with you."

"There's a *yes* if I ever heard one," Buffy muttered, not resisting as he pulled her toward the dance floor. She was beginning to understand the primal urges that had nearly had them arrested for public indecency earlier—just being around the other slayer had her pulse racing and her heart thundering. Like she was in danger and needed to be ready to protect herself. Or stake her claim, whichever made the most sense.

"Not a yes," Spike said, tugging her to his chest as he began to move in time with the music. "Only girl for me is right here and I don't much wanna waste time thinking about a world where that isn't true. Now I believe you said you'd give me a dance."

The music, his voice, and the way the lighting brought the mark on his neck into sharp relief combined forces to have her calling off her inner rage monster, though Buffy couldn't deny part of her wanted very much to make with the public declaration. So she offered a small smile and wrapped her arms around his neck, enjoying the way his eyes darkened when she pressed closer and started rubbing against him.

"That's it," he said, gripping her by the hips and dragging her close so she could feel just how hard he was. "Show me how you move."

Buffy lowered her mouth to his neck and began to nibble. "There's a good way to get us thrown out."

"Christ, you're killing me."

"Already?"

He snickered. "Pet, I was close to shagging you on the hood of my car not a bloody hour ago."

"I was close to letting you," she replied before whispering her lips over the mark. It was dangerous and stupid, but hell, she was allowed to be dangerous and stupid every now and then, wasn't she? And there was something a bit liberating about doing this here. Provoking him, getting him to make the noises that she typically only heard when they were alone. Heat pooled in her belly and spread, reminding her just how turned on she'd been earlier.

Earlier, her surroundings had blipped away, incidental to what she wanted. It was different here. If anything, her awareness that they were in a throng of people had the throb between her legs intensifying. Buffy sighed and twisted in his arms so her ass pressed against his cock, and stretched her hands high above her head before allowing them to curl around his neck once more.

"You're askin' for it, pet." He nipped at her earlobe, then sucked it between his teeth as he dug his fingers into her hips. "And if you don't watch it, I'll give it to you."

"Here?"

"Ooh, I felt that. Your heart kicked up." Spike dropped kisses along her throat, each caress creating its own little fire. "Someone's gotta naughty streak."

"I do not."

"It make you hot, knowin' your friends are watching us?"

Oh god, she'd forgotten about them. Buffy darted her gaze to the table where she'd seen the others and, sure enough, all three of them were gaping at her. An earlier incarnation of herself would have been mortified, she knew, but all she could summon at the moment was amusement. The girl she'd been when she'd seen them last had been a little on the risqué side, sure—she'd rubbed all over Xander one time to make Angel jealous and gone and had sex that had inadvertently triggered the apocalypse— but on the whole, she'd been rather reserved. Naïve, even, bordering on innocent. Not a girl who would let a vampire finger her in front of a demon even with the goal of infiltrating a slave trade. Not a girl who would ask that vampire to finish what he'd started before they had the big fight, or would beg later for his fangs in her throat.

It was funny—she knew she and the others were the same age, but she felt far removed from them. Older in ways she couldn't have anticipated. Even more than Cordelia, who had always seemed to be a bit ahead of the curve when it came to things like, well, sex and relationships. Perhaps not in practical experience but in her take-no-prisoners attitude—she'd seemed like she knew more of what she wanted than anyone else, and furthermore how to get it.

Not anymore. They all looked young to her.

"Does it, Slayer?" Spike asked, jarring her back to the present.

It took a moment before her sluggish brain could dreg up the question. "If you're asking if I'd like an audience while we have sex, the answer is no."

"No sense of adventure to you, is there?"

Buffy snickered and twisted around again, enjoying the sensation of her nipples dragging along his chest, his thigh ready to position itself between her legs. He favored her with a lascivious grin, dragging his tongue over his teeth in that way he knew she liked. "Reckon you could get yourself off like this, pet?" he asked, pressing hard against her sex. "Right here. I'll hold you through it. No one will be any the wiser."

Somehow she doubted that. "Spike—"

"Unless you start screamin' that, of course. Can't help you there."

"You're very bad."

"Oh, fancy I can get you to say that again? Preferably when I'm buried inside that hot little—"

Buffy cut him off with a kiss, which seemed to be the best move at the time. Strategic failure. The second he had her mouth under his, Spike proceeded to use every trick in his considerable arsenal to drive her out of her mind, nipping and pulling and sucking and biting and doing things with his tongue that she seemed to feel against her clit. Like before, the edges of her reality began to go a bit fuzzy, the Bronze and the music growing distant as she focused on the way he felt and tasted. How he always seemed so starved for her, even if they had spent all last night and a good part of the day in bed.

In fact, Buffy had so completely forgotten where they were that, when Spike ripped his mouth from hers and started snarling, it took her brain an embarrassingly long time to snap back to attention and register the sensation of a hand on her shoulder that definitely did not belong to Spike.

"You want your limbs to stay attached, mate, you bloody well keep them to yourself."

"I need a word," Angel said from behind her, tightening his grip. "And you two need to remember you're in public."

Spike snarled again, his eyes burning yellow now. "Hands off the lady."

"You want a reason to take a swing at me, boy, I'm right here."

Okay, that was enough. Buffy jerked away from them both, though came around to Spike's side before turning to glare at her ex. "What the hell do you want, Angel?"

"A word, like I said."

"Well, you've had a few now."

"In *private*."

Spike snickered. "Yeah, I'll just bet. Can't stand the see the girl's traded up, can you?"

Angel didn't respond, didn't even make like he'd heard. Instead, he kept his gaze intent on Buffy, calm and stoic. "Just a moment, then you and Captain Peroxide can go back to breaking every decency law in the state."

"I'm not about to be lectured on *laws* by someone who murdered my teacher and dumped her body in my watcher's bed."

At that, Angel had the good sense to look a little chagrined. He glanced away, his jaw tight. "You're right," he told the space to her right. "I shouldn't have said that. But this is important."

"Nothing's stoppin' you from blabbin' right here, Pops."

But that wasn't going to fly. Whatever Angel wanted to say to her, he wanted to say to *her*. Not Spike. That much was painfully clear. And dammit, she couldn't deny she was curious. Blowing out a deep breath, Buffy turned to Spike and seized his wrist. "Balcony in ten?"

At first, he didn't seem to follow, then he scowled. "Buffy, I'm not—"

"I'll be fine," she told him. "It's fine."

It took a moment, but eventually, the hard distrust in Spike's eyes began to give. Little by little, like melting an ice sculpture or something. There was wariness in his gaze, yes, but something else that was more powerful. Something that had been there for weeks but never as strong as it was now. Something she was sure was trust.

At last, he gave her a short nod, then leaned in to steal a kiss. "Ten minutes?"

"I'll come find you."

"Bloody better." He kissed her again then, with one last scathing look at Angel, stalked off toward the bar.

Leaving her alone with Angel for the first time since the night when he'd taken her virginity. The knowledge had Buffy going a bit hot in the face. She didn't want to think about that or about anything that had followed. She'd devoted enough headspace to Angel over the last year, let him take up too much of her mental and emotional real estate, used him as a litmus test for her feelings and an excuse as to why she kept herself at arm's reach.

Whatever he had to say right now was almost certain to piss her off. Hopefully, he'd just get on with it.

"Well?" Buffy said, crossing her arms. This might have come off as a stronger show of nonchalance had a dancing couple not bumped into her backside and sent her stumbling forward a few steps. Angel reached out as though to steady her but seemed to think the better of

it—likely because she made a face like his hands were acid and did a sort of spastic dance move to avoid being touched by him.

Angel sighed and dropped his arms to his sides. "Come with me," he said, then turned around and marched off toward the stairs that Spike had just climbed, holding what looked like a whole bottle of something.

As long as he shared whatever it was, she wouldn't bust his chops for lifting it. He hadn't been over at the bar long enough to have paid like a people.

Angel turned when they were ensconced in shadows, far enough away from the dancers to avoid being trampled on and, to her relief, also out of her former friends' line of vision. She didn't think she could take getting the stink eye from all angles. For a moment, he just stared at her, which went from unnerving to annoying pretty damn fast. He was the one who had insisted they talk.

At last, Buffy sighed, crossed her arms again and rolled her head back. "Believe it or not, the whole broody stare thing does not do it for me anymore, so if it's all the same to you, I'd appreciate it if you and the point had a meeting of the ways sooner rather than later."

He snorted. "It's clear Spike has been a fantastic influence."

"Oh, don't even. I've been Little Miss Quippy ever since you met me. Again. Point. I assume you had one."

"It's the claim, Buffy. What do you know about it?"

More than he probably thought, but she opted not to say that, rather thought it might be better to see which angle he meant to play. "Means we're married, or as good as. Only better because there is no divorce."

"That's what you know."

"Well, we're putting it together as we go. The claim itself was kind of an accident."

Buffy hadn't been sure it was wise to admit that much, and from the way Angel's face lit up, she could have kicked herself.

Stupid mouth running away with its stupid self all the stupid time.

"An accident? You mean—"

"I mean exactly what I told you this afternoon. I love Spike and no

matter how it happened, I'm happy it happened. Let me make that perfectly clear."

"Okay," Angel agreed, though from his face, even choking out the word cost him something. "Okay. But what I said earlier about it being forever... You realize this means that you'll watch your friends and family die. That—"

"No, really? I'm eighteen years old and a vampire slayer. Please explain dictionary words to me."

"You don't need to be so obstinate—"

"And you don't need to be so condescending. And yet."

"Look," Angel said, his voice sharper, "I just wanted to let you know that there is a way out. I believe it that Spike didn't know anything about claims because it's information that doesn't get spread around. I'm pretty sure Giles has one of the only books that contains the full history of claims and how to break them. The claim's root is in blood magic, meant to help vampires control other vampires. Giving Spike that kind of power—"

"Shut up."

"You deserve to know, Buffy. You think you know who he is, but you don't."

"You're going to tell me I don't know the man I've been living with for months, nearly a year. The man who came to me to stop *you* from ending the world when he had no reason to? The man—"

"The fact that you're calling him a *man* at all tells me everything I need to know," Angel said hotly. It was the most animated she could remember seeing him with a soul, and that much was enough to take her by surprise. "And no reason? No reason, Buffy? Were you even listening earlier when he started in about Drusilla? He came to you because he was jealous. When it came to her, he was always jealous."

"And I suppose you did nothing to encourage that?"

He blinked at her. "Is that what he told you?"

"Believe it or not, Angel, we don't spend a lot of time talking about you. Not exactly a happy subject for either of us." Buffy rolled her eyes so hard she was surprised when they didn't fall right out of her head. "If you can imagine. But I know enough about the way you are soulless to know that if screwing Dru hurt Spike, you'd screw the hell out of

her. And I didn't need *anyone* to tell me that. Got the lesson up close and personal when you left my watcher's girlfriend in his bed."

She wasn't sure whether to be pleased or annoyed when he tore his gaze away. There was shame there, she saw it plainly, but anger too. That tight, reserved anger that was so familiar to her—the way he'd held back in pretty much everything. It had bothered her before but now it just pissed her off. Like he had any right to try to score sympathy points when he was the one with blood on his hands.

"I did," he said finally. "When I was soulless, Dru was always special to me, and I enjoyed using her to hurt him. But maybe he hasn't told you that he considered me his teacher. He tried to emulate me—do what he thought I couldn't, which is how he got on slayers in the first place. And why, I believe, he sought you out. I gave him the idea."

Buffy snorted. "So now you're the reason he came to Sunnydale at all? You drop him a postcard or something?"

"Not to Sunnydale—to *you*," Angel shot back. "Why he went out to find you that night that you two first... Well, I don't know what happened then, but I do know that I had told him that loving you was the key to killing you. Spike has always taken things to the extreme and he's...more suggestible than most other vamps, not to mention he gets carried away with things he thinks are romantic, so it doesn't really surprise me that he would decide he's in love with you. But that's all it is—a decision he made. The same way he decided he was in love with Drusilla, who—"

"Shut up."

"I know you don't want to hear this, but I also know the way this will go with him. You become his whole world to the point where he has to keep you to himself. Taking you away? Keeping you from your friends and family? He wants to be just as much your world as you are is. Hell, it's probably worse this time around because of what happened with Dru. Like I said, he didn't know anything about claims, except that they were a way to tie them together, a way to own her over me. She'd never allow it." Angel stared at her for a moment, and by virtue that her mind was stuttering beyond reason, she didn't take advantage of the silence. "I know this is a lot to take in. I *know.* And I know you... feel something for him and that's natural, too, especially after every-

thing that happened last year. But to give him your entire future? To let him take you away from your family?"

"That is so not what happened."

"Like I tried to tell you earlier, claims are reversible. The process is painful but more than effective and Giles has a book that will walk us through the steps." He gave her what he must have thought passed for an encouraging smile. "There's a way out, and your friends, Joyce, all want you home. You can come home, Buffy."

Buffy nodded, sucking in her cheeks and trying—*trying*—to push down on the rage swelling in her chest. Somehow, despite the screaming in her head, she managed to sound reasonably calm when she spoke next.

"So you think Spike is the reason I haven't been back."

"I know it is. And it'll take time, but the others will understand and forgive you."

"That's bull."

"Well, they're angry, but they—"

"No, Angel, it's bull. All of it. Spike didn't keep me away. That was my decision. Everything that has happened since I left Sunnydale has been my decision."

The look he gave her was pitying. "I'm sure it felt like that but—"

"It felt like that because it *was* like that. We stopped at a motel after Acathla. When we got into a room, *I'm* the one who made the first move. He was all about giving me space, getting me fed, asking what I wanted or needed, and I jumped his undead bones and practically begged him to fuck my brains out." She paused, biting back a smirk. The nauseating pity on his face had faded, replaced with naked shock he couldn't hide. And hell, she understood. She didn't think Angel had ever heard her drop an f-bomb. "When I decided I needed to get away from him, he let me go. Hell, he gave me enough money to survive. When I told him I wanted to just be friends while we figured the claim stuff out, he didn't push me, and when I decided I was ready to start something real with him, he didn't push me for more. He asked me over and over if I wanted to come home—to see my friends and my mom. When I knew I wasn't going to come back to graduate, he helped me study for the GED which, by the way, I aced. Yesterday, he

told me to stay with my mother rather than go with him back to the room—he saved a letter I'd written to her and gave it to me to give to her so she'd... And just now when he knew you were going to say something like this, he went upstairs to let you do it. So go on, Angel. Tell me more about how controlling Spike is, how he's the reason I stayed away as long as I did. Tell me how he's trying to keep me to himself by offering to move back to Sunnydale, where everyone hates him, just so I can try to make up with my friends. Tell me how this fits into your theory. I'm dying to hear it."

But Angel didn't say anything. He just stood there, gaping at her, an absurdly blank look on his face.

"Spike doesn't want a puppet," Buffy continued, emboldened. "He doesn't pull on my strings to make me do his bidding. He never has. He wants a partner. In other words, Spike isn't *you*. And that's exactly why I love him."

It wasn't often she got to wield words like she did weapons, and even less often when she felt she did a good job articulating herself, but Buffy knew the second they hit the air that she'd molded something special with that one. The shock on her ex's face morphed into a wince, like she'd landed a particularly hard kick. The kind he'd be walking off for days. And maybe it wasn't sporting, to continue kicking after she had the upper hand, but she couldn't find it within herself to stop.

"Also?" she went on. "I've known the claim could be broken for a while now. One of the reasons I stayed away was I knew someone would try to get me to break it. Sure, my money was on Giles, but I didn't know you were back. So whatever this is—whatever you've told yourself about me and Spike, it's crap."

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"Okay, yes, I get the picture. You and Spike are...whatever you and Spike are." Angel looked down, his shoulders bunched, every visible inch of him wrought with tension. "I think I knew it, too. I just didn't want to be right."

"Sorry, Angel. After everything...it was never going to be you and me again."

"I know that." This he barked almost defensively, swinging his head back up, his eyes at once ablaze. "And believe it or not, Buffy, not everything revolves around you. This had nothing to do with whatever you and I were—not that it concerns you, but I'm in love with someone else now anyway. But that doesn't mean I stopped caring about you."

Buffy arched an eyebrow. "Would that someone else be Faith?"

Angel didn't respond, but his answer was in everything he didn't say. And as before, she felt a surge of something—something ugly that wasn't jealousy, closer to resentment that she'd been so easy to replace for everyone. That her friends and watcher and ex-boyfriend could make her feel like a criminal for having stayed away but also so incidental to their everyday lives that her absence had barely been a blip. Everything was status quo. Scooby meetings were ongoing, big evil was fought, and Angel was in love with the Slayer.

She'd been recast in her own life.

Granted, this was her doing as much as theirs. She'd had no way of knowing that the next slayer would be Sunnydale-bound, or that all the important people in her life would rally around said next slayer. And staying away *had* been her decision—and the right one, Buffy believed. She believed this more and more with every minute that ticked by.

"If that's all, I have a vampire mate to find," Buffy said. She turned and started toward the stairs without awaiting a reply.

Angel didn't call her back or try to stop her.

And she knew, as she climbed the stairs to join Spike, that she was leaving behind a version of herself. She was glad. That version had clung to her for too long, refusing to be shaken off no matter how fully she'd outgrown her. The version that had been in love with something that wasn't real and never had been. The last of the sniveling girl who had entered Sunnydale High one night heartbroken and desperate, full of so much self-loathing she could have drowned in it.

That girl was a survivor now. And she was on the other side.

At long last.

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Spike made it as far as the car before the thing in his chest snapped and took his control with it. If he wasn't inside her within the next sixty seconds, he was fairly certain heads would roll.

Leaving her alone with Angel had been one of those moments that had the power to redefine his understanding of himself. Each step he'd taken away from her had resonated within him like a blow. More than a century of instinct and resentment had been at war with the things he knew to be true, namely that the girl was his and would never *not* be his. That Buffy loved him and wanted him, had chosen him when she'd had the choice to walk it back. The insecurities that his past had informed and nurtured were unfortunate but baseless.

Still, it was Angel. The ghost that had lived with them for nearly a year was here in the flesh—a ghost that had a history of mucking up what Spike considered the best parts of his life. He'd known, logically, that nothing would come of whatever the sod had to tell Buffy, but the heart didn't give two figs about logic when it sensed danger. So Spike had done what any self-respecting vampire would have done in his place—found a spot on the balcony where he could be sure to overhear every word the wanker had to say.

More importantly, every word Buffy had to say back.

Which was how Spike found himself shoving the Slayer into the backseat of the Desoto not three minutes after she'd come to find him. Between the need that had split him apart earlier, the provocative way she'd grinded against him on the dance floor, and hearing her lay into the ponce like no one else could had him on the edge of bloody oblivion. The girl didn't want to be shagged in public, fine, but he didn't think he would make it back to the motel without bursting. The car was the next best bet.

"Turn around," he said gruffly after breaking apart from her lips. "Face against the seat."

Buffy was either shaken, dazed, or as desperate as he was, for she didn't hesitate or ask questions, rather turned to do as she had been ordered. Heady as fuck, that. Telling her to do something and watching as she obeyed. The girl could hardly be told to tie her shoes without pitching an argument, so the fact that she wasn't mouthing off or telling him to slow down had to mean she was as desperate for this as he was.

Then he had her skirt bunched up around her waist, her panties in his pocket, and her cunt squeezing his cock as he slid home. Only hours had passed since he'd last been inside her, but tell that to the demon raging under his skin. A long moan tore through her throat and her muscles worked around him, and he was a bloody goner. Spike dug his fingers into her firm, luscious hips and set about a bruising rhythm. The soft, tender lovemaking of earlier had been a right treat, but fuck if he didn't love this too. That he could have it both ways with her, desperate and hot and needy and frantic and sweet and loving, that she seemed to know when one was needed over the other. That her hunger matched his in ways, because *bloody hell*, it did. All it took was a few pumps before Buffy was shoving back at him, begging him to take her harder.

Something Spike was more than willing to do.

The car rocked and whined with the force of his thrusts, and he spared a moment's concern that the bloody thing might just fall apart around them but found he didn't care much. The old thing had served

him well for years and if it had to go, might as well send it off with style.

"Spike," Buffy gasped after a few minutes, "Spike, I want..."

But her words rode off on a groan and it took a few seconds for the fog surrounding his head to lift.

"What's it you want, pet?"

"Want...to see you."

Spike wouldn't have thought it possible for his heart to melt just then, but melt it did. He found the strength to pull out of her, then shifted so that she was on his lap, her knees bracing his thighs. Then he watched hungrily as she impaled herself on his cock, her eyes never leaving his.

"Better," Buffy gasped, rolling her head back, and yeah, this was better. There was the mark—the one that made her his. Nice and visible against her pristine skin, calling to his fangs and his dick in equal measure. "I like seeing you."

"Slayer..." Spike cupped the back of her head and pulled her to his mouth, sighing into her when she began to rock against him. "Fuck, what you do to me."

She favored him with a particularly impish grin, the sort that could drive a sane man absolutely barmy. "What do I do to you?" she asked against his lips, her breaths coming out heady little gasps.

"Think you know."

"Think I'd like to hear it."

"Ooh, baby wants to play, does she?" He dug his fingers into her hips and began pistoning inside her, harder, faster, relishing the sensation of her pussy hugging his cock, the way she clenched and squeezed and flexed muscles he hadn't known to miss before her. "Make me hard, for one. Feel that? Feel how hard you make me?"

Buffy released a mewl at that, nodding, following his lead as he helped her bounce on his cock. "Uh huh."

"Wanna do right by you, pet. Be what you want. What you need. Then you go and do things with this magnificent mouth that make me forget all that. Till all I want is to be inside you. Like this." He worked a hand between them to nudge her clit on the next downstroke. She

always acted surprised when he touched her like that, and he loved it. Loved how wide her eyes went, the perfect circle her mouth made, how her heart would jump and she'd start moving faster as though afraid the sensation would get away from her.

"Spike..." She linked her hands behind his neck and pressed her brow to his in a soft, tender way that was at complete odds with how hard she was riding him. "Spike, I want..."

But he knew what she wanted because it was the same thing he wanted. The same thing he always wanted. Spike drew her hair over her shoulder and kissed a line across her chin and down her throat until his mouth was at the mark. And god, what a mark it was. There, bold and perfect for all the world to see. There and proclaiming her as his.

He pressed his lips to it hard and groaned when she responded by clenching around his cock, then kissed it properly. Got the skin nice and wet, knowing he was driving her out of her mind and loving every second. Seemed fair to give some back of what she gave him, after all.

Buffy was hot all over, but the place on her throat positively burned. Like it had a life of its own, and maybe that was right—it felt right. It had, after all, given him a new one.

"Spike..."

"Baby need somethin'?" He grinned, pressed a hand down on her ass as he thrust up inside her, and pinched her clit at the same time. "Tell your Spike what you need, Slayer. I'll give you whatever you ask."

"Fangs."

"Fangs where?"

"In throat."

"In whose?"

"Mine." Buffy pulled back just enough that he caught the flash of green that was her eyes. "Always mine. Only mine."

Fuck yes. "Say the words, kitten."

"Bite me."

Those words were his bloody undoing. Spike held her gaze as his fangs descended, felt the rush that tore through her body at the sight. How her hot, perfect pussy tightened around him. How she let out the

sweetest little gasp. And she started moving faster now, needier, hungrier, working her hidden slayer muscles around his cock every time she sank back home. Like she was racing him, and maybe she was. The best experiences with her were competitions, but this was one he was determined to win.

Spike growled and lowered his mouth to her throat, then brushed a kiss against the mark. The salty-sweet taste of her sweat hit his tongue, turning the growl into a groan. Then his fangs were skating along her slick flesh, and she felt so good, her cunt fisting his cock again and again, her breaths hitting his ear, ruffling his hair.

"Tell me," he whispered against her skin, so low he wasn't sure she'd be able to hear him over the sound of their bodies slapping together.

But she did.

"I love you."

Spike pierced her throat with a growl of triumph, digging his fingers into her hips as her blood filled his mouth and she trembled and convulsed into orgasm. And bloody hell, his eyes near rolled out of his head, because the combination of having her in his mouth and around his dick was more than he wagered anyone on this planet deserved to experience.

And she was all his.

"Mine," Spike whispered against her throat, his stupid eyes starting to sting. It was like last night all over again, only there was something more now. Something even he hadn't registered he'd needed until it had happened. Until there had been that one last hurdle to put his mind and heart to ease for the rest of eternity. While he'd known that how she felt about him wasn't at all tied to whatever she'd had with Angel, the part of him so conditioned to being second would have always doubted. And now there was no doubt—it was just him and her, and Buffy breathing his name as he bucked and came inside her, whispering over and over that she was his. That she chose him. That she loved him.

It took a while for his mind to rejoin his body, to register that the world had stopped moving. Buffy had collapsed against his chest, panting and clutching the lapels of his duster as though he was what

anchored her here. The bite on her throat was open again, twin lines of blood dribbling down her pristine skin. A slave to sensation, Spike lowered his head and lapped every ruby-red drop. Which, naturally, had Buffy trembling in ways that his cock, still buried inside of her, couldn't help but appreciate. And when she whimpered and wiggled against him, it was all a bloke could do to keep from shoving her against the seat and fucking her until the wheels on the Desoto popped off for good.

In fact, he might have done just that had the space by his head not exploded with the intrusive sound of someone pounding on the bloody window.

Buffy jumped in his lap but he didn't have time to appreciate the sensation. Standing two feet away, peeking in through the streaks of black that adorned the windows and wearing a broad grin that just begged to be smacked, was the other slayer.

"Now that was hot!" the girl—Faith, or whatever—said, giving them a thumbs-up before throwing Buffy a wink. "Never thought I'd see the appeal of fangs, but *damn*."

Spike might have popped out of the car and killed the bitch on principle had a pair of hands not shoved the girl aside. A pair of hands belonged to Charlie, who looked more tickled than he reckoned the bloke had ever been in his whole sodding life.

"Beginnin' to think you two get into fights just to go at each other like dogs," Gunn said loudly. "Get into another tiff in there? That why British was snarling at anything that moved on that balcony?"

Buffy groaned and rested her brow against Spike's shoulder. "If I say it's okay, can you at least make his death quick and painless?"

Gunn whooped and spread his arms. "Well, I think the whole goddamn block heard ya'll makin' up!"

"Never mind," Buffy said in a low growl. "Make it messy. And painful. And draw it out."

Annoyed as he was, Spike couldn't keep from snickering. Something about watching the Slayer go all hot in the cheeks made most anything worth it. Mindful to keep from shifting her so much that she toppled off his lap—he didn't much care if anyone else saw his goods

but he reckoned she wouldn't like giving the other bird an eyeful—he reached over and started cranking down the window.

"Gotta air out the love nest," Faith said, elbowing Gunn in the ribs and giving him a wink. "Hope you and the scientist got a different ride back to LA 'cause damn, I've sat in some sticky places but it's always better if it's me who made them sticky."

Spike wouldn't have believed it if he hadn't seen it with his own two eyes, but Gunn actually guffawed at this. Doubled over, hands on his knees, trembling with the intensity of his mirth. It was such a stark dichotomy from the demon hunter he'd come to know he wasn't entirely sure what he was looking at.

"It would be wrong to kill her, wouldn't it?" Buffy asked in a low undertone.

"Askin' the wrong bloke," Spike replied. "Not in my nature to let the Slayer live."

"That's exactly why I'm asking you."

Faith snickered and brought her hands up. "Hey now, fangs in. I come in peace." She paused, her smirk broadening. "Well, if I'm particularly unlucky. Charlie here's gonna try to help me hit some high notes later and there won't be nothin' peaceful about it."

"So much ew," Buffy said.

"B, seein' as you got vamp dick up your snatch, don't think you're in a place to comment."

All right. This Faith was right entertaining, but if she started making the Slayer all self-conscious, he'd definitely have to off the bird. Spike let loose a low growl, pulling Buffy closer to his chest. "If you fancy that tongue where it is, pidge, I'd watch how you wag it."

Faith rolled her eyes. "All right, all right. Look." And now she shifted her focus to Buffy. "You and me got the raw deal, sis. Yeah, you took off, and it was all very tragic and your little Buffettes never got over it. Yesterday was a shitshow—no sense pointing fingers 'cause honestly, not big on the caring. All I know is I ain't about to turn down free help when it comes knockin' and this mayor shit's about as nasty as I figure it gets. So whaddya say we have a powwow without the deadweight and see if we can get this motherfucker in the bag?"

He felt Buffy's pulse begin to race as her heartbeat picked up speed. She licked her lips. "The others—"

"Will fuckin' deal if I tell them to deal."

"You get them to listen to you? Lucky."

"End of the day, this shit's on my head, not theirs. They can talk about it in committee all they want, but you and me are the ones with the power to do anything." Faith winged her eyebrows upward. "Interested?"

Buffy glanced at Spike, then back again, calmer now. "Yeah. Let's talk."

"Somewhere that's not your fuck car or your fuck room, preferred." Now the other slayer was smirking again. "Let's go grab us a shake."

Spike thought of the diner where he'd nearly shagged his girl on the Desoto's hood and couldn't keep from chuckling.

"All right," Buffy said dryly, carefully ignoring him, "but I pick the place."

As it turned out, Sunnydale didn't have much in the way of options when it came to diners that were willing to stay open past sundown and risk patronage from the nonhuman population. Which was how Buffy found herself wedged into a corner booth of the very establishment where she had nearly given the earlier crowd a very raunchy eyeful. Fortunately, that crowd had already dined and departed. Unfortunately, the same could not be said for the staff. The waitress who served their shakes couldn't quite stop snickering, particularly as she placed a large strawberry concoction in front of a hot-faced Buffy. Spike likely didn't make matters any better by winking.

"You guys seem popular," Faith said, dipping a fry into her shake. She'd ordered a big plate and proceeded to demolish about half of it three seconds after it had been placed before them.

"Swung by earlier," Spike replied as he draped his arm across Buffy's shoulders. "Mighta given them the preshow for what you and Charlie caught in the car."

Oh my god. She was going to stake him. "God, Spike!"

"Started a bit like that, yeah, now that you mention it," he continued unrepentantly. The jerk even had the audacity to blow her a kiss when she slapped his arm.

Faith barked a laugh. "B, you wild child, you ain't at all what I pictured." She leaned over the table, lifting a hand in expectation.

Buffy gave her and said hand a glower.

"Aww, come on. Don't leave me hanging."

She concentrated on the whipped topping of her shake for a second, hoping the moment would pass. It didn't. With a sigh, Buffy rolled her eyes and favored the other slayer with the high-five she wanted. "I believe you wanted us here to talk shop," she grumbled, sitting back.

"Actin' mighty prudish for a girl we just found getting serviced in a car," Gunn drawled. He had one leg drawn up on the seat, his arm resting on his knee. And he looked about as relaxed and, well, happy as Buffy could ever remember seeing him. The only explanation for this was the girl at his side, which she supposed should earn the other slayer some points, but she wasn't about to start making nice while others were making jokes at her expense.

Even if, yes, she'd brought it on herself.

Faith polished off another fry, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, then leaned forward. "First—just so we're all clear—your ex-honey ain't my anything."

Buffy blinked. "Huh?"

"Angel," the other slayer said. "He told me you two talked and you guessed that he had a thing for me."

"Well, he told me he was in love with someone else now."

Faith rolled her eyes. "He *thinks* he's in love with me. Some shit about the Slayer being his ticket to redemption. Since banging you turned him all evil, he figured he got his wires crossed and lost his head for the wrong slayer. Flattering, right?"

That news hit Buffy like a blow to the gut. "He what?"

"Look, it ain't nothin' to me. I've made it clear I got no interest in a guy who can't use his dick without goin' homicidal. Turns out he thinks that's what makes us the perfect fucking couple. He can't screw and since that don't interest me much, he gets to think he's bein' all noble

in how he helps out." Faith snorted, dipping another fry into her shake. "Granted, he can be one moody motherfucker when a girl looks to get her kicks elsewhere. Pretty sure one of the reasons he pulled you off Blondie here was 'cause he hoped it'd make me jealous."

For a moment, Buffy thought she might actually explode with anger. It seemed a real possibility. The notion that, on top of everything else, Angel had used her was one that had her staking-arm aching for some exercise. That sanctimonious little speech of his about how Spike was manipulating to keep her all to himself and he was pulling the wounded puppy act to score points with his unrequited crush?

Just as abruptly, though, the fire died. Whatever else, if Faith was right, then Angel was just sad.

"Don't get me wrong," Faith went on. "He definitely don't like you two together and about hit the ceiling when G spilled the beans about you bein' all mated up, or whatever it's called. Could be he's just all torn up now 'cause we thought you were dead and now that you aren't, he doesn't know what to think."

"Faith, when it comes to Angel—and I can't emphasize this enough—I don't really care," Buffy said, and was relieved to discover this was true. Maybe she'd feel differently if the conversation at the Bronze hadn't happened—if she had been left with the image of him disappearing into the sunlight in his ridiculous daytime garb when she'd been so overwhelmed by his reappearance that she'd had little choice but to break down. "So if you are together, it's... Well, apparently he has a thing for slayers and his bedside manner can use a little refining. Sleep with a stake under your pillow."

Though her mouth was full, Faith cackled. It made her look bizarrely childlike, which in turn made the looks Gunn was shooting her seem inappropriate and gross.

"I think you and me'll get along just fine," Faith said after she swallowed and again wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

"Really?" Buffy replied, crossing her arms. Just because this girl was ready to play nice didn't mean she had to go along with it. "After yesterday, with the throwing of you into the desk and the threats to stake Spike? I don't seem to remember you rolling out the welcome mat and you don't even have a reason to have a problem with me."

The mirth in Faith's eyes had vanished. "You think so?"

"Again with the threatening to stake Spike."

"B, I dunno what you were told when you got this gig, but in my case, it was vamps are dust unless you wanna end up dead. So you wanna tell me how you woulda reacted after spending months with a bunch of boot-lickin' high schoolers who, every time you try to go knock a bitch down, are just achin' to give you advice based on what *Buffy woulda done*?" Faith crossed her arms as well, the *do-you-wanna-fuck-with-me* look she'd worn the previous day once again on her face. "So yeah, you come trailin' in after I've been forced to listen to nothin' but stories about Little Miss Perfect with a vamp on your ass and I'm gonna stake first and ask questions later, especially when it turns out Little Miss Perfect ain't the little miss I was led to believe. Don't help your boy started makin' threats, himself."

Spike slammed his hands on the table and rose to his feet. "Reckon I was just supposed to stand there and let her mates tear into her like it hadn't taken a piece outta her to walk into that room?"

"Oh, pipe down. Bygones and all that."

"Sod your bleeding bygones, I—"

"Look, Blondie, sit your British ass down and put a sock in it." Faith rolled her eyes and refocused on Buffy. "We got our issues and shit but me? Willing to put all of that aside so we can get to the other side of this Ascension bullshit. After the mayor's in the ground, we can fight it out if you're achin' to have that self-righteous ass of yours kicked. Your vamp I'll do for free."

Spike swelled up even further, a low growl rumbling through his lips. "Just bloody try it."

There was a part of her—a big part—that wanted to sit back and let this unfold. After Angel, after everything, Buffy couldn't deny she needed an outlet. An outlet beyond getting pounded by her vampire mate, though another round of that definitely wouldn't hurt. Sure, this new slayer hadn't done anything wrong—technically—but that didn't mean she wouldn't enjoy the hell out of watching the girl's egotistical ass being handed to her.

The rest of her, though, wanted to put as much distance between herself and her former life as possible. And the only way she could do

that and live freely was if she knew she'd kept the others, the world, safe.

So Buffy seized a handful of Spike's duster and tugged him back to his seat, her gaze not leaving Faith's.

"All right," she said. "Talk."

Nothing for a moment, then Faith's mouth curled into a smirk and she sat back again. "Like I was sayin', B. Think you and me are gonna get along just fine."

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Though she knew it was going to be different this time, Buffy couldn't keep from trembling as she approached the swinging library doors. Faith had said she planned to tell the others what they'd decided so no one would be caught unawares, but given that Buffy didn't know the other slayer beyond their mostly non-hostile chat over milkshakes, she wasn't sure how much stock she could put in Faith's promises. There was every chance she was walking into another disaster.

Plus, Gunn and Fred weren't with her now. Hell, Buffy didn't even know whether or not Fred had come back to the motel the night before. Gunn hadn't, but that much wasn't a surprise. After agreeing to try her luck again with the Scoobies, Buffy had turned to Spike and asked if he'd do a quick sweep of the cemeteries with her, knowing he would. Faith had thanked her for the night off then practically flown toward the door, dragging Gunn behind her.

In that moment, Buffy had been so reminded of herself she'd almost started crying. Back when she'd been the Sunnydale protector and would have done anything to score a rare quiet evening. Time to herself to just be a teenage girl, nothing else, and possibly mack on a

cute guy in the process—though she was fairly certain Faith planned on doing more than mack on Gunn.

"Slayer?"

Buffy gave her head a shake and snapped back to herself. "Sorry. Just...trying to psych myself up to go in for another round of abuse."

"They start in on you and I'm offing the lot of them."

"That's sweet, but no you're not."

Spike smirked. "Can always try and stop me, pet. Been a minute since we last danced. Think we're overdue. Point of fact, might just have to try and take a bite outta Harris so you can leap into the rescue and remind the ungrateful wankers how a real slayer moves."

Buffy straightened her shoulders, trying and failing to keep from grinning. Even if everything went south today like it had two days ago, she'd walk in and walk out secure in the knowledge that she and Spike were okay. Better than okay, in fact. And that gave her strength.

As Spike made to push the door open, Buffy grabbed his hand and tugged him back. At his questioning look, she shrugged and said, "Love you."

The smile he gave her could have melted polar icecaps. Then, just to be an ass, he replied, "Loved you first," before leaning in to steal a kiss.

Yeah, this was nothing like the last time. Buffy drew in a deep breath, squeezed Spike's hand, and shoved the door open.

It seemed their arrival had indeed been anticipated, judging by the way most activity and conversation in the library ceased the second they stepped inside. Buffy allowed herself a moment to take inventory. There was Giles in the doorway to his office, holding a thick book open in his arms. Willow, Xander, Oz and Cordelia were stationed at a table but appeared to have been chatting rather than researching, and went comically still when Buffy looked their way. Angel stood by the check-in desk, looking sour as ever, his arms crossed and his face fixed into a scowl.

Fred, who was at another table and practically on top of the mini-watcher was among the only people who didn't look up. Even at a distance, Buffy could see that she was in the midst of a Fred-tangent,

speaking a mile a minute and in a language that only bore a passing resemblance to English. And Gunn and Faith were over by where Giles kept the weapons, talking in low undertones.

That was until Faith saw Buffy, and lit up with a wide grin. "Yo B. Glad you could make it."

"Thanks. That makes at least one of you."

"Oh, Buffy's here!" Fred sprang to her feet. "Buffy, I think we found it. Or something that'll be of use."

"'We'?"

"Wesley and I," she explained, walking around the table, shaking with what Buffy had come to assume was overexcitement. "Combined with the research these guys had put in before we got here, I think we have an idea about when the mayor might be vulnerable."

"Hey," Xander snapped. "You don't get to just swoop in here and claim all the credit, missy."

The beaming smile on Fred's face vanished in a blink. "What? I... I wasn't trying to claim anything. But—"

Willow, though, had slapped Xander's arm. "No need to be rude to *her*. She's been here pretty nonstop for thirty-six hours." She turned back to Buffy and her scowl deepened. "Unlike someone else who claimed to be here to help."

Spike released a low growl, squeezing Buffy's hand hard enough to hurt.

And that was it. The end of her rope. She was done.

"You know what, Will? You can save that attitude of yours for someone who gives a damn." She turned to Xander, whose face had bloomed a bright, furious red. "You too, Xan. Actually, everyone in this room is hereby invited by me to shove it."

Faith took a step forward, her grin having faded. "Ain't exactly what I had in mind when I told you to swing by today, girlfriend. Thought the idea was that you'd kiss and make up."

"I am more than willing to apologize for the things I'm actually sorry for," Buffy replied. "Things like not calling or dropping a postcard. You're right—all of you. That was crappy and I am sorry for making you worry, for causing you pain. But I am not sorry for leaving

town or staying away. I am not sorry for Spike. I am not sorry for doing what I needed to do to...to get better after everything that happened last year. I am not sorry for worrying about what would happen if I did come back, because you guys wouldn't get what was going on with me and Spike. Giles, everything that happened a couple of days ago—the way you looked at me when you found out... Every time I thought about coming home, I'd think of what you'd say. I felt like a failure and I couldn't..." She was losing steam, and Spike must have sensed it, for he squeezed her hand again. Just the one time, like all he wanted was to reassure her that he was there. She took the strength he offered with gratitude. "I'd already failed once. I failed with Angel and then I had to kill him. I worried it'd be the same thing with Spike and I knew I wouldn't survive it. So yes, I stayed away. I gave myself time to figure out what I was thinking and feeling and experiencing apart from you guys. None of you would believe me if I told you Spike hasn't killed anyone since before our truce—and even if you did believe it, it wouldn't matter to you. Because of Angel."

"Damn straight, because of Angel," Xander snapped, rounding the table now too, heaving deep breaths and looking as close to a violent outburst as Buffy had ever seen him. "Are we supposed to feel sorry for you? You screwed the undead and people got killed, and instead of learning your lesson, you turned around and started screwing the undead *again*. Only this time it wasn't enough—you had to leave all of us thinking that you were dead. We thought you were *dead*, Buffy. And this entire time you were just *sorting things out* in Los Angeles."

"And she said she was sorry for that," Spike said in a low, dangerous undertone. "Not the lady's fault if you haven't cleaned your ears out."

"Oh, she's sorry. You're right. That makes everything better."

If she wasn't careful, she might actually hurt someone. "Nothing makes everything better!" Buffy shouted, fighting back tears. "Don't you think I know that? Nothing I can say or do will make everything better. You want me to be sorry and I am. You want me to apologize and I do. And I understand that...that the way you guys feel about me now is my fault."

Spike released her hand and seized her wrist. "Slayer—"

"But I will not apologize for taking my mother at her word that she

didn't want me to come home," Buffy went on, building up steam. "Not after what happened after Hemery when she and Dad thought I was crazy. And maybe when someone you loved starts killing people and tries to suck the world into Hell, only to come back to himself the second before you have to kill him or let the world end, you can tell me how I should have reacted. What I should have done. And after you've done something that's harder than anything you've ever done before, and someone who cares about you offers to take you away, maybe you can tell me then how to say no. How to *keep* putting other people above yourself without needing a break." God, the tears had won the fight and she hated it—hated that she cried when she was angry and that there seemed to be no stopping it. Buffy sniffed and wiped at her cheeks. "I didn't leave here that night thinking I'd never come back. I wasn't thinking *at all*. And things happened that I didn't mean to happen, but I couldn't undo. Things I would never undo now but scared me at the time and..."

And she was tired of justifying herself. Tired of trying to explain. Trying to make them understand what they never would understand. Buffy looked back to Spike, who was studying her with naked concern—concern and plenty of anger there frothing beneath the surface. The sort of anger that burned hotter because it was for someone else—anger that came from love.

"And I get that it's not enough," Buffy said, turning back to her former friends. She met Giles's gaze. "I get that it won't ever be enough. That you won't understand—and maybe you're right. Maybe it is all on me."

Spike scoffed. "Rot."

Though tempted, Buffy didn't crack a grin. "But the way you guys feel about me doesn't matter. I'm here to help with the mayor. After that, we'll be out of your hair."

"What?" Willow blurted, the fire in her eyes flickering out almost instantly. "You're just going to leave again? How is that supposed to make anything better?"

"How is *anything* supposed to make anything better?" Buffy fired back. "Tell me. I'd love to know."

"Well, maybe giving it more than just a day and a speech on how

much we suck."

"Right," Spike drawled, snickering again. "Like the lot of you rolled out the bloody welcome mat. First thing that happened when we came in here is you jumped down her throat. Didn't even try to let the girl explain—"

"Think they've been lectured enough," Angel said, pushing off the check-in desk.

"Think if I want your opinion, you'd know it. The flying swine oughta tip you off."

Buffy held up a hand, certain her ex-boyfriend would ignore it and pleasantly surprised when he didn't. "I wasn't trying to lecture or tell anyone they suck," she said. "I just... I know I broke something by not coming back. I know there's no fixing it. I can only say I'm sorry for the things I'm sorry for and for everything else, ask you to try to understand."

Xander huffed and crossed his arms. "You want us to understand? Well, good luck."

"So you'll just go back to LA," Willow said. "Leave behind your friends and family, not to mention *school* all over again?"

"Do I have friends here?" Buffy replied, and was somewhat mollified when the redhead flushed. "All of this is beside the point that is the Ascension and what we need to do to stop it."

"Plus, she already has her GED," Fred said, spinning to face Willow. "She aced it. Like, super aced it. We actually just got the scores back a couple of days ago. Depending on where she applies, she might even already have a couple of college credits under her belt."

Buffy bit her lower lip to keep from grinning. Whatever else, her former friends and watcher had most certainly not expected this. She was fairly certain she'd told Angel about the GED the night before, but she'd ended up shouting so much at him it was hard to remember the things she'd actually said versus what she'd wanted to say.

"You completed your GED?" Giles asked, and for the first time since she'd returned to Sunnydale, there was something other than anger in his voice. "Buffy, that's...commendable."

"Well, when it became clear I was going to miss senior year, I wanted to make sure I could go to college if I wanted to." She paused and rubbed her suddenly sweaty palms against her hips. "It took a while to figure out what I wanted to do—after the bombshell that was I'm going to live forever—"

"You're what?" Willow's eyes had gone saucer-sized. "How?"

How? Buffy frowned and glanced to her former watcher. "Did you not tell them?"

Giles exhaled and looked down. "I had rather hoped I wouldn't have to," he said. "That after Angel shared that there is a way to break the claim, you would—"

Spike snarled, gripping her hand so tightly now she thought her bones might actually creak. "Next wanker who suggests that's gonna get my fangs in their throat, and bugger the rest."

"Yes, a point Buffy made very clear to Angel last night," Giles continued, his voice clipped now. "She has chosen to maintain the bond, no matter what it costs her."

"This is that blood connection, right?" Xander asked, looking to Giles. "You said...it joined their lifelines. And by that you meant it joined...their lifelines." His expression, in any other context, might have been funny. He turned back to Buffy, eyes wide and jaw slack. "You're immortal now?"

"Well, as immortal as Spike is, I guess," she said. "Not like the Unkillable Buffy or anything. Which was one of the many things I had to come to terms with over the past—"

"And you don't want to undo it?" Willow blurted, and it was impossible to tell whether she was disgusted or amazed. Maybe it was both. "You want to stay claimed to Spike?"

"Damn." Faith crossed her arms, smirking. "B unlocked the key to stayin' young and pretty forever. The tweeds never told me it was that easy."

"Faith!" The other watcher, Wesley, bounced out of his seat. "You must understand the unique and extraordinary circumstances that surround vampiric claiming."

"You must understand that you just used two words that mean the

same thing," Buffy muttered, and grinned when Spike chuckled and winked at her.

"The history is complex at best," Wesley continued, now storming around the table and stopping at Fred's side. This might have looked accidental had he not torn his gaze from the other slayer to make sure that Fred was watching him. Seeing that she was, he swelled up importantly and continued, "The ability to claim mates is not a universal trait. The vampire in question must be descended from one of the lines whose origins can be traced specifically to the line of Aurelius." He paused, glanced to Angel, then straightened again. "As far as we know, at least."

"The vampires in my line apparently have a history of pissing off the wrong magic users," Angel said, briefly meeting Buffy's eyes before fixing his attention on Faith. "Which limits your options."

Spike threw an arm around Buffy's shoulders to steer her more firmly into him. "But there's no need for the spare to look so glum," he said, nodding at Faith. "By my count, Angelus has at least three other brats runnin' around, so you got options. One made *after* he got that useless soul stuffed up his arse." He arched his eyebrows and turned to the other vampire. "Reckon that made a difference, Gramps? You ever check in on the boy?"

Wait, what? Buffy frowned and blinked at Angel. "You...made a vampire after the soul? *After* the soul?"

She wasn't sure she would have believed it had she not been looking at him. He wasn't quick enough to hide his guilt.

"This is beside the point," Angel said, brushing past her and approaching Faith, who favored him with a curled lip that did more than words to express just how unimpressed she was with this news. "Buffy was made aware that there is a way to break a claim. She says she doesn't want to do it."

"You...*want* to live forever?" Willow asked. "With *him*?"

"Is that what you decided, Buffy?" Fred offered a small, supportive smile that quickly turned into one of the beaming variety, and Buffy felt something in her chest loosen. Not that she'd been worried, per se, but given how often Fred had asked if she'd reached a decision about

the claim, she hadn't really known what her friend's response would be to the answer.

"Yes," Buffy replied. "It's what I decided. And I should've told you sooner—I was just afraid."

"Told me what?"

She glanced at Spike, whose expression had softened into that tender look she was pretty sure he reserved solely for her.

"Told you that I never seriously thought about undoing it," she said, turning back to Fred. "When you told me that morning after we raided Dusk about all of this, it was... There were a lot of thoughts and all were pretty much of the massively wigged. Because if there was a way out then Spike might want to take it."

Spike snorted. "Off her rocker, this one."

"And I wasn't sure how much of what he felt was claim-influenced and what was just him."

"Slayer's a bit thick, see. Too daft to have noticed I was hers from the first time I laid eyes on her."

"Being that you immediately threatened to kill her, I can see where the confusion comes in," Xander drawled.

"Of course I threatened to kill her! She's the bloody Slayer, isn't she? Didn't matter that she was the most gorgeous thing I'd ever seen or that all I could think about was gettin' her under me. Point of fact, that brassed me right off 'cause it had never happened before. Not with either of the slayers I'd offed before." Spike turned to meet her eyes, a smile tugging at his mouth. "Ask Angel over there how many times I strayed from Dru."

Angel sighed. "I wasn't with you through most of—"

"Guys," Faith snapped, storming into the center of the room with her hands up, "riveting as all this history is, it ain't what we're here for. We got an Ascension to stop and a mayor to put down, and if B here is as good as you guys have told me she is, we don't got the luxury of turning down free help. Which is why I asked her to come here today. So"—she rounded on Willow—"shelve whatever your problems with her are. We survive the Ascension and you guys can after-school-special this to your heart's desire. Now..." Faith shifted her focus to

Fred, who went bright red under the scrutiny. "You say you found something?"

Fred shot a look to Buffy, then to Wesley, who gave a bright, pompous smile and an exaggerated nod. "Okay, to bring you up to speed," she said, turning back to Buffy. "The mayor's plan looks to be to turn into a demon. Like a real demon, which, I guess, is different from the ones you've been slaying."

"Indeed," Wesley said, grasping his suspenders—Buffy only realized now he was wearing suspenders—and pulling on them with a look of smug superiority that would have been annoying were it not so damn funny. "The demons your average slayer encounters are human hybrids. Like vampires, or that vengeance demon Faith dispatched earlier this year." He sighed and shook his head. "Posing as a student, of all things. The chaos she could have reaped might have eliminated the concern regarding the Ascension altogether."

At this, Faith swallowed, met Angel's gaze, and looked away again just as quickly. When she saw Buffy studying her, her expression hardened, becoming defiant. As though daring Buffy to call her out.

That was interesting.

"Thing is," Fred said, snapping Buffy's attention back to her, "there is an account of an Ascension that took place in 1723 in Sharpsville. Mr. Giles has the journal where that is recorded—and the town was wiped off the map, so we can only assume that the Ascension went through without a hitch. Wesley—I mean, Mr. Wyndam-Pryce—"

"You may call me Wesley if you wish," Wesley blurted, seizing her arm and abruptly releasing her again. "I mean, carry on."

"Bloke needs to uncork, and badly," Spike muttered. "Wager little Fred will put him outta his misery?"

Buffy bit the inside of her cheek to both keep from laughing and to prevent herself from slapping her vampire. She loved Fred, she did, but she really didn't need the mental image of her friend getting grindy with the mini-watcher. Or anyone.

"Mayor Wilkins is, as of right now, unkillable," Fred continued, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. "The Books of Ascension spell that out as one of the steps to becoming a pure demon...but they don't say anything about what happens after."

Buffy crossed her arms. "I'm not following."

"Sharpsville was wiped off the map. But *only* Sharpsville—I cross-referenced the dates with the most likely location and whatever did the map-wiping either retired after Sharpsville or was stopped. To me, this would suggest that once the Ascension occurs, whatever makes the mayor unkillable will be lifted." Fred pressed her lips together. "But that's dangerous itself because—"

"You're saying in order to beat the mayor, we have to let him win first," Willow said.

Fred winced but nodded. "Essentially yes...and if the books are to be believed, that'll make the mayor massively...massive. Like King Kong or Godzilla. Or maybe Mothra, if we're really unlucky and he has wings." She shot a panicked look to Wesley. "Do you think he'll have wings?"

"I assure you he will not," Wesley said automatically. And again, Buffy killed a grin. She didn't know Wesley well—make that at all—but she felt she could say with confidence that there was a slim-to-none chance he even knew what Mothra was.

"And what are you basing this assurance on?" Giles asked, big buzz-kill that he was.

Again, Wesley swelled up again, eyes sparkling with defiance. "If the beast is winged, Winifred, I will protect you."

Cordelia coughed an insult into her hand, though Buffy couldn't tell which one. And actually, now that she looked at the cheerleader, she noted that Cordelia—when she wasn't sniping at Xander about something—was glaring daggers at Fred. Which was weird because, well, who in their right mind would glare at Fred?

"B," Faith said, drawing Buffy's attention back to her. "I had this idea before you and your pals crashed the party the other day. A few weeks back, Wilkins—that's the mayor—tried to turn Angel bad. Lucky for the home team, the guy he hired to do the soul-ectomy happened to owe G a favor."

Buffy blinked, shooting a glance at Angel, who was carefully studying the ground. Just how loose was that soul, anyway? She'd barely known Angel for a year before he'd lost it before. Now twice in two years? Even if the actual soul removal hadn't gone as planned, that was

way too close for comfort, especially after more than a century evading attention.

"I asked Angel to see if he could get some info off Wilkins, play the part and all that," Faith continued. "The Buffettes weren't in favor."

"Call us crazy, but reliving last year wasn't high on the to-do list," Xander replied defensively. "Still not sure what he's doing here to begin with."

"He's here 'cause he has my back and if I have to remind you one more goddamn time, I'm gonna have to go after the family jewels, Harris," Faith spat, that steel that had been unmistakable in her manner and voice a couple of days ago in place. The girl just had a way of saying things—an aura of authority—that Buffy felt she'd never even come close to touching. No requests, no suggestions, just *this is the way it fucking is so fucking deal with it.*

"Anyway," Faith drawled, slowly pulling her glare away from Xander and meeting Buffy's eyes again. "Since you can see how popular he is here, I thought it might be worth sending Angel in."

"Angel in...where?"

"She wants me to approach Wilkins and tell him that I'm pro-Ascension, soul or not," Angel said in a tone that all but shouted how little he liked this idea. "That the events from last year made working together impossible and, out of bitterness, I've decided to help him achieve his goal."

"Small and petty," Spike muttered. "Sounds about right."

Angel took a few heated steps forward. "You want to talk petty, boy?"

Oh, this was going nowhere good fast. Buffy clamped a hand around Spike's wrist and tugged him back before he could get up in Angel's face. "Wow with the not helping," she told Angel, glaring.

"What? He said—"

"I know what he said. How was it wrong? If you went to Wilkins because no one here forgave you for nearly ending the world that one time, that would be *small* and *petty*." Buffy shifted her focus to Faith, ignoring the sensation of Angel's eyes on her. It was a familiar sensation, uncomfortably so. "So is that the plan? Send in Angel?"

"What do you think?"

Buffy blinked, surprised. "You...want know what I think?"

"Why you're here, B. Ain't just another pretty face." Faith came close enough to give said pretty face a few affectionate pats and winked. "Can use a second opinion from the only other warrior chick in the room."

Damn. Now she was going hot in the cheeks. It was impossible not to feel the stares of her former friends, of her watcher. Buffy cleared her throat, stole a glance at Spike, who blew her a kiss, and back again.

"It's a good plan," she said. "Though I'm not sure it'd work all hitchless. Maybe if Angel had played Angelus a bit longer... Granted, if that was going on, Spike or I probably would've staked him if we didn't know it was pretend."

"You would have tried," Angel muttered.

Buffy rolled her eyes. "Who ran a sword through who? I rest my case."

"No, not you. Him. I..." Angel scowled, then turned away, apparently giving up. "Never mind."

"Why did you guys give up the soulless angle, anyway?" Buffy asked. It seemed ignoring the byplay between Spike and Angel was best. "That could've been a long-haul plan."

"Wilkins caught wise," Faith replied, shrugging like it was no big deal. "Or one of his aides did. Noticed that Angel wasn't chowing down on the civvies they brought in for mealtimes and decided to follow him. Caught him and me chatting all not-mortal-enemy like and the gig was up. So you think that plan's a bust, huh?"

"Well, it seems like you guys have kinda played the Angel card to the max. And"—Buffy gestured at Fred—"we might already have everything we need based on what she found and her amazing powers of deductive reasoning."

"So you want to take it on faith that Wilkins will become soft and killable after he's a huge scary demon?" Xander demanded. "Anyone else have a problem with this?"

"Winifred raised an excellent point," Wesley fired back. In any other era, he might have marched over and smacked a glove across Xander's face, demanding satisfaction. "If Ascension has been achieved before, it stands to reason that the full-bodied demons were

stopped as well since you don't exactly see them roaming around now, do you?"

"Wow. Pretty competent use of sarcasm there, Wes," Cordelia chimed in, and either to drive Xander mad or just be obnoxious, batted her eyes. "I like a man who thinks things through."

At that, Wesley was seized by a coughing fit. The only person who seemed to notice was Fred.

"Xan," Willow said softly, "I'm with Fred on this. We know Wilkins is impervious now and we also know that there are no Ascended demons running around out there eating Tokyo. So...maybe we wait until he's a big demon to make a move."

"Okay, but if he becomes this huge massive monster, how are we expected to—"

"Rocket launcher," Buffy said, straightening.

Faith blinked. "All right. Jealous. Where do I get my hands on one of them?"

Buffy ignored her, focusing instead on Xander. Her former friend who could now hardly look her in the eye. "Do you still remember your army stuff from last year?"

"The whelp was in the army?" Spike asked.

"Remember Halloween, when we all turned into our costumes?" Buffy asked. He should remember, considering he'd cornered a sniveling, pathetic version of herself and nearly torn her throat out. "Xander turned into army guy. Which helped take out the Judge."

At that, Spike looked down, rubbing the back of his neck. "Bloody right. What wanker put him together?"

Buffy patted his shoulder. "Pretty sure that was you, sweetie."

"And this is how you remember a big Frankenstein that could burn the humanity out of people," Xander said dully. "Spike put it together and you call him *sweetie*."

"Spike also helped me learn enough English and literature to know that your Frankenstein comparison is off base," Buffy replied sweetly, holding in a laugh when Spike chuckled beside her. "Frankenstein was the mad scientist, not the creature."

It might have been in her head, but she could have sworn she heard Giles snicker.

"And so not the point," Buffy went on. "Could you still put together a rocket launcher?"

Xander frowned, glanced at Faith and then to Willow as though to confirm he had the group's blessing to provide her any information. Which just figured. Jump down Buffy's throat? Xander's there with bells on. Be vaguely helpful? Better make sure his permission form was checked.

"Hey," Faith barked after a moment, "believe the girl asked you a question. Like I said, this ain't the time or the place to air your personal problems. Assume that when B asks you something, I'm asking you too. All right?"

That was both a comfort and annoying, which Buffy knew was petty. Not being in charge, not being the one they looked to, was a role she didn't know how to fill. It was hard not to resent Faith for having replaced her or her friends for having had her replaced. But the fact remained that this library, this group of people... This wasn't her ground anymore. She was a guest, an interloper, a ghost from their past that had taken form. The possibility of coming back here, of reinserting herself into the Sunnydale scene or doing any of what Spike had suggested earlier had never seemed more remote.

"Right," Xander said, then cleared his throat and met Buffy's gaze. "Yeah, I remember. It's not as fresh as it was a year ago, but if you think we need firepower, I can deliver."

Buffy forced herself to nod her thanks, then looked to Gunn. "You said the vamp that warned you about the Ascension said that it was going to happen around Graduation. Or am I remembering that wrong?"

"Naw, that's right."

"Gels with what Angel was able to learn when he was playing his evil twin," Faith said. "Right?"

Angel nodded. "I wasn't there long enough to get much useful information, but we have been working with the idea that whatever Wilkins is planning will be centered around Graduation."

"He's scheduled to give a commencement address," Willow piped in. "And the Books of Ascension mention, well, a spell is the last part of the process. Maybe he means to do it then."

"Then we need to fight fire with fire," Buffy said. The plan, large and foolhardy, was unfolding fast, like part of her brain had just been waiting for her to wake up and start using it again. "If that's when he makes his move. It can't be before then if he's planning on giving a speech and if it's after... Well, we'll deal when we deal."

Faith perked her eyebrows. "Whatcha thinkin', B?"

"I'm thinking we're going to need a bigger rocket launcher."

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It had been the right thing to do, mention the ways he and the Slayer could return to Sunnyhell. See about setting things right with her mum and her mates. Still, that didn't mean the idea of waiting out the next sixty or so years around this lot wouldn't drive him up a sodding tree. Just a few hours with them had been enough to make falling off the wagon for an evening almost seem worth the consequences. Fuck, he wasn't even sure Buffy would mind if one or two of them kicked it—Harris especially. How the cheerleader put up with his sorry arse was one of life's great unsolvable mysteries, Spike supposed, especially with the way the whelp responded to everything Buffy said as though she were more than just a friend who had vanished for a bit. More like a scorned lover, and being that was a role Spike had played more than once, he felt he ought to know.

Suffice to say, by the time he and Buffy arrived back at their room —its new door in place and a rather angry note from management— Spike was contemplating just how much booze a bloke could go through to make this crowd tolerable. The sneers and jeers he could swallow just fine so long as they were aimed at him. Didn't matter a lick whether or not a bunch of teenagers thought he was dirt. It was

when they turned that attitude on Buffy that he felt he might lose his grip on his fangs.

Buffy snatched the note out of his hands and gave it a quick read. "They're charging us for the door. Note to self—replacing things is expensive. Try to keep from throwing exes around."

"Be a bit easier if he wasn't such a prat."

"And so say we all." She offered him a sleepy smile that didn't quite reach her eyes, dropped the note on the small table by the window. "I know we took the world's longest shower this morning, but I think I need to take another one."

"Singing my tune, pet."

"This shower might just be for the regular reasons." Buffy sighed the sigh of a much older woman's burden. "Think I might actually be too tired for more sexy times."

Considering they'd spent all that day up until Angel's appearance fucking like rabbits, plus the tryst in the car, Spike couldn't say he was surprised. Still, he poked out his lower lip and gave her a good sulk. "You're no fun."

Buffy rolled her eyes and stripped off her top without ceremony. "Aren't you afraid you might get tired of it?"

"Tired of what?"

"Doing...stuff."

"Stuff bein' you."

"I mean, yeah." She wrinkled her nose and gestured at herself, and he took it for the invitation it was and looked his fill. Christ, he could do nothing but watch her for days on end without getting bored. The marks on her throat were enough to keep a man captivated, never mind the rest of her.

"Forever being forever," Buffy went on, reaching around behind her to unhook her bra. "You don't think you'll get tired of me?"

The level of comfort she had with him was something he vowed he would never take for granted, but watching those luscious tits of hers sway with her every movement made it difficult to remember that she meant no funny business in the shower.

"Never," Spike said, stripping off his own shirt. "Never get tired of any of it."

"Why are you getting naked?"

"Gonna shower, aren't we?"

"I said *just* shower."

"Right, so I know you'll keep your mitts to yourself." He waggled his brows when she rolled her eyes, then made quick work of his boots and jeans. And she might play like this was all business, but Buffy kept stealing glances as she stripped down, looking away every time their gazes met as though she'd been caught doing something scandalous.

Fuck, he loved this girl. He hoped this part of her never went away, and though the fact that it hadn't in the months they'd been together boded well. He'd fucked her every way she'd let him, teaching her a few things about herself in the process. Like that she had an affinity for bondage she hadn't yet fully realized but was slowly coming around to. Yet no matter how often they came together, she still managed to turn a bit red whenever presented with how much he wanted her. It was intoxicating.

By the time he was starkers, his little Slayer was outright staring, her gaze lingering on his cock long enough that it had no choice but to react.

"You do not have good intentions," Buffy said, then swallowed. "You have very, very naughty intentions."

"What do you expect when you ogle at my parts like that?"

"Well, you got all naked!"

"So did you." Spike arched an eyebrow and fisted his cock before giving it a good, long pump. "What do you think, pet? Wager you'll ever be bored with me?"

"What are you doing?"

He smirked, clenching his hand around the tip of his cock. "What's it look like?"

"Being bad."

"You like me bad. It's how I keep things interesting." He started stroking faster now, addicted to the way her eyes widened and darkened, the way she seemed intent on watching him. The air thickened with the scent of her arousal, something else he'd never get tired of. Truthfully, he'd only intended to tease her a bit, but now...

Well, if she didn't want to get shagged in the shower, he supposed he could put on a show.

"What do you say, Slayer?"

Buffy blinked, not looking up. "Huh?"

"About gettin' bored with me. Is that somethin' I oughta worry about?"

She stared for another long beat, then shook her head and raised her gaze to his. "I don't think you could be boring if you tried."

There was such conviction in her words that he couldn't help but swell up a bit. "Good to know. Wanna come over here and give us a kiss?"

That was her cue to snap out of it, reel back and roll her eyes at him before sashaying her lovely arse into the loo. Instead, Buffy started forward, focused on his cock once more. And hell, Spike couldn't help himself if he tried. He pulled harder at his dick, edging on desperate now, the air filled with the tempo of his pumps. Seemed a mite ridiculous that he could still be so starved for her after the day they'd had, but he was. Reckoned he never would stop.

"Buffy..."

Then the heat of her skin caressed his flesh. She pressed close enough he could taste her but didn't touch him. Not quite.

"You're a bad influence. My mom warned me about boys like you."

"No boys here, baby. All man."

Buffy looked at him, her face angled downward and giving her the appearance of a bloody nymph. "Oh, well, in that case..."

And without ceremony, the saucy bitch dropped to her knees and sucked him between her lips. Spike's hand fell away almost at once, his head rolling back as his fingers wove through her hair. No one in the whole bloody world had a mouth like his Slayer's. Or a tongue nearly as hot or wonderful, that knew just how he liked to be explored and stroked. He gripped her head, unable to do anything but, and began rocking himself into her mouth, feeling that every part of him was on fire, but it didn't matter because this was worth dusting.

"Fuck. Buffy..."

Buffy hummed around his cock, fisting the base with her small but lethal hand to stroke in rhythm with her mouth, and he wasn't going to

last. Just having her cross the room while staring at his prick would have been gotten him there in a flash. Watching as she hollowed her cheeks, as she bobbed her head, as his cock, slick with her saliva, plunged between those plump lips of hers, was something else entirely. Spike groaned, fisted a handful of her hair, and tensed as he spilled himself down that delectable throat of hers.

Fuck, she was perfect. His perfect. His forever.

"Buffy," he said, panting.

"Like I was saying..." Buffy pulled back by increments. "You're a bad influence."

She then leaned in to give the head of his cock a soft, almost comically chaste kiss, which, naturally, had him swelling up again in a flash.

"Spike!"

"What?" He tugged her to her feet, grinning like a loon and not giving a bloody damn.

"Again?"

"That's not my fault, pet. You kissed it." He nipped at her lips, still grinning. "And you're naked. What do you expect?"

"You're impossible."

"Do you have any idea how many chits would kill to have a bloke who'd be ready to go again after busting a nut?" Spike shook his head and decided this was a conversation better had while soaking wet. Besides, he was a giving sort of bloke and he could smell how ripe the Slayer was for it. He threw his arms around her and hauled her over his shoulder, treating her luscious arse to a good smack when she squealed and started to wiggle.

"Spike, put me down!"

"No. Don't think I will." He marched them into the loo, inhaled a lungful of air that still smelled like them, then headed straight for the shower and pulled the correct levers until a stream of reasonably warm water was splattering against the tub.

"I swear, don't make me kick your ass."

"Oh, please do," he purred, giving her arse another long stroke. "Know just how to get me goin'."

"Ugh, I stand by my earlier assessment—you're impossible."

He chuckled, setting her onto her feet right in the pathway of the

stream. She glared at him under a cascade of water, looking far too cute to take seriously. A dangerous thought to have around the Slayer, he knew, but he was used to living on the edge. Wouldn't have it any other way.

"Oh, come on, pet." He crowded into the shower after her so she had no choice but to walk back. "What's the hurt? Thought you wanted to wash off."

"I told you I was too tired."

Spike blinked. "Yeah, then you got on your knees and sucked me off. Gettin' some mixed signals."

"That was not an invitation to share my shower."

There were times he wagered she was contrary just for the hell of it, or because she got just as hot fighting him as he did her. Or perhaps he had actually crossed some barmy line she'd drawn just for kicks. Might be some twist of female logic that could have her going from giving him a blowie to being brassed that he'd decided to join her in the bath.

"Won't touch you," Spike said, reaching for the soap and rubbing his hands into a good lather. "Gotta wash-up myself, don't I?"

The look on her face was a mixture of irritation, exasperation, and frustration. Her brow furrowed, her adorable little nose scrunching up and her eyes going dangerously narrow.

"Something on your mind?"

"You're not gonna..."

"Not gonna what?"

"I dunno." She wiggled, drawing a clump of wet hair out of her eyes. "You make me crazy sometimes. Like, I was really tired. Super tired. Wow with the exhaustion. And now..."

Spike arched an eyebrow. "Now?"

"Now I'm still exhausted, but also like, why aren't you on your knees already?"

"Bit hard to get a proper wash if I'm on my knees." He waited, rubbing soap into his chest and enjoying the way her gaze followed the motion. "Though the view would be spectacular."

"Spike—"

"Unless that's not what you meant."

"Just—"

He tossed the soap onto the ledge and hiked her into his arms, swallowing her surprised gasp with a hard kiss, one that had the stiffness in her limbs melting within seconds. And he decided that sometimes Buffy just didn't know what she wanted. Or thought there were things she thought she should do—or keep from doing—that were at odds with her innate drives. She could talk herself into or out of just about anything.

"Baby need something?"

"You're going to get tired of this," she whispered against his lips as he slipped his cock along her slick flesh, her thighs parting in welcome. "If we do it too much, you'll get tired."

"Is that what you're worried about?" Spike kissed her again, burying himself inside her with a sigh. "Never get enough of this. Enough of you. It'll never happen."

"How do you know?"

"'Cause I'm in love with you, you daft bird." He gripped her hips, pressed her up against the wall, and set to driving her as barmy as she did him on any given day. And after a few seconds, he felt her go slack in his arms, felt the rest of her tension roll away as she shed whatever it was she'd brought with her into the shower and melted into him. "You and me will see a lot," he whispered into her ear, timing his words between his thrusts. "Whole civilizations rise and fall, I wager. Only thing that won't change is that I love you. Only bloody sure thing in my world. Forever and ever."

Buffy clutched at him, squeezing her legs around his waist and dragging him down for a kiss, and that was the end of it, whatever had been going on in that beautiful head of hers. Then it was all sighs and moans, whimpers and gasps, focusing on how she squeezed her pussy around him and bit into his shoulder as he pounded her into the shower wall. Spike growled and nipped at her throat, digging his fingers into her soft flesh, leveraging her into his thrusts. And when she asked for his fangs, he was all too happy to provide and moaned into her throat when she convulsed around his cock.

"Do you think," she asked after reclaiming her breath, "that we'll ever be able to have a shower that's *just* a shower?"

"Bloody hope not," he replied, reluctantly slipping out of her. "What about you?"

"Me too." Then she gave him one of her brilliant Buffy smiles, stole a kiss from his lips, and set about the task of scrubbing up good and proper.

How this girl could think he'd ever get tired of her when he could barely keep up with her fluctuating moods was beyond him. Something Spike decided was better kept to himself. For now, at least. He wagered her former mates had done a job on her back at the school, insistent as the lot of them were to remind her exactly what *forever* meant. Though he reckoned that this was a conversation they needed to have—the sort that would nag at her, the way the book and everything else had, until she had no choice but to explode with it.

Spike just wasn't sure that was a talk they needed to have right then. After the day she'd had, it seemed reasonable that all she'd want to do was curl up and get some kip. The big battle was still ahead of them and she had already taken her fair share of friendly fire.

So he didn't talk. He just watched as she went through her normal bedtime ritual post-shower. Combing through her hair—cursing herself, and him, as she did because apparently it was bloody wrecked for the second time that day—brushed her teeth, cleaned her face, and piled all of that golden hair on top of her head in a messy bun.

That he could be completely entertained just watching her go through her girly ritual ought to tell her all she needed to know about how in it he was.

"It's wrong to sleep through the apocalypse, isn't it?" she asked as she finished admiring herself in the mirror.

"Evil sorta bloke here, pet," he said, his gaze tracing a line down the curve of her spine right to her biteable arse. There was a slight bruise on her right cheek where he'd slapped her a bit too roughly, and staring at it gave him and his cock ideas. "Not the type you want answering that question."

She stuck her tongue out at him—tactical error that was, something he would have made abundantly clear over the next hour or so if the air hadn't split with the sound of someone pounding on the bloody door.

Spike went still. Good fucking god, what *now*?

Buffy froze, holding her breath and squeezing her eyes shut. "Do you think they'll go away if we ignore them?"

"Buffy?" came the muffled voice from the other side of the door. "Buffy, if you have a moment, I would very much like to talk to you." A pause. "Please."

"Oh god, Giles." Buffy looked down as though to verify that clothes hadn't spontaneously decided to cover her tasty bits. "I have to get dressed. *You* have to get dressed."

"Or we could just tell him to sod off."

But the words were wasted, as he'd known they would be. All of a sudden, his girl was in full flight mode, flitting out of the loo and into the main room. He followed just in time to watch her luscious and love-bitten tits disappear under one of her frilly camisoles before she dove for the bag she'd packed them.

"Ugh, we're going to need to borrow someone's washing machine," she said, fishing out a wrinkled pair of sleep shorts that ought to be criminal. "I think I only have enough to get us through another two days or so." She whirled around, pulling the shorts over her hips, and her eyes went wide. "Spike! Pants!"

"Buffy?" came from the other side of the door.

"Uhh, yeah!" she called back, not taking her gaze off Spike. "Just a second!" Then she scowled at him and mouthed, "Pants!" again.

Spike rolled his eyes, half a mind to argue just to be contrary—wasn't like he was the one who had shown up uninvited when most decent people were thinking about saying their prayers and tucking into bed, never mind that neither he nor Buffy were altogether decent and sure as fuck weren't ordinary—but decided not to waste time arguing. So he grabbed a pair of jeans and begrudgingly covered himself up.

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When Buffy was reasonably certain Spike wouldn't scandalize her former watcher, she edged the door open, holding her breath.

For what felt like a long moment, Giles just looked at her. And it wasn't like the looks he'd given her earlier. Or any look, really, that she

could remember. There was softness there, and sorrow, as well as a healthy amount of regret and love. Every coiled, wound nerve in her body relaxed, despite the sudden thundering of her heart.

"May I come in?" he asked, and there was such hope in his voice she nearly started to bawl.

But she didn't bawl. Instead, Buffy nodded and stepped aside, opening the door wider to allow him entry. Giles released a long sigh and crossed the threshold, only to stop suddenly when he and Spike locked gazes.

"Oh, err. Yes." Giles cleared his throat. "Spike would be here too, of course."

"Yeah," Spike said slowly, an unmistakable undercurrent of warning in his voice. "Funny thing, that. Turns out I'm not the sorta bloke you can just wish away."

Buffy moved forward to put herself between her vampire and her former watcher. "Spike, it's okay—"

"The bloody hell it is!" Spike didn't so much as look at her, kept his hard gaze on Giles. "You have any idea what it took her to come back to this pissant town? How much she sodding *missed* the lot of you ungrateful bastards? And to what? You all actin' like it'd be better if I had drained her and left her for dead. Why she gives a rat's arse about any of you is beyond me, but she does, and you tossin' her out like you did—"

"Spike." Buffy tugged on his shoulder. "I can handle this."

"Never seen her cry like that. Not even for bloody Angel. So give me one good reason not to shove you out the way you did her."

"I'm giving you the reason." Exasperated, Buffy seized Spike's jaw and forced him to meet her gaze. The hardness in his eyes, the fury on her behalf, both made her love him so much she thought she might burst with it and want to punch him into the nearest wall. "Thank you but I... If Giles is here, I want to hear what he has to say. Okay?"

The look he gave her was downright mutinous but reflected the answer she knew to expect. After a moment, he offered a clipped nod and stood back, crossing his arms, practically vibrating tension.

Once Buffy was relatively certain her vampire wouldn't lose his

cool, she turned to Giles and offered what she hoped was an encouraging smile.

"He means well," she said.

Spike snickered and muttered something at a volume too low for her to hear.

"Well, he doesn't mean well to you, but to me. And...he's right. I was kind of a mess after we left yesterday."

God, had it just been a day ago? So much had happened in the hours since they'd first rolled into town.

"Ahh, yes." Giles shot a glance at Spike as though to gauge he hadn't moved before turning his focus on Buffy entirely. "Yesterday was...well, the term *bloody disaster* comes to mind. I... Do you mind if I sit?"

The options for sitting were on the sparse side. There was a table and some rickety-looking chairs by the door and the unmade bed where Spike had screwed her until midday when they'd finally moved to the shower. Buffy nodded at the chair and plonked herself on the mattress before Giles could think to claim that seat.

Once Giles was situated, though, he seemed to hit a wall. He would meet her eyes then look away again, open his mouth only to snap it shut, shuffle against the chair, resituate, and start the process all over again. If Buffy had ever seen him more uncomfortable, she couldn't recall a time, and given that one of her pre-Angelus favorite pastimes had been to make Giles scowl at her, that was saying something.

But he was here, and if he was here, that meant he was trying, didn't it? At least he hadn't started yelling again. Though that might be because Spike would eat him if he did.

"Giles," Buffy said at last, "I assume you had some reason to come to visit."

Her former watcher's cheeks went red and he gave his head a shake. "Yes, of course. I..." Another pause, then he sighed, his entire body deflating like a parade balloon. "I was not at my best when you first arrived."

Spike scoffed. Buffy waved to shush him.

"Buffy," Giles continued, "I have... For the last year, I have believed that I had finally realized every watcher's worst nightmare. The events that followed Acathla are still hazy. I know Xander helped me to safety.

I know Willow was successful in reensouling Angel. I know the world didn't end. But when we went to look for you and you weren't there... Well, we all had reservations about your alliance with Spike and, given his history, it seemed likely that once he had what he wanted, he had behaved the part of the monster."

There was nothing to say to that. It wasn't anything she hadn't thought herself, at least insofar as her friends and family were concerned. When she hadn't returned, it had only been natural for them to assume the worst.

Granted, that didn't explain why they had seemed put out to have been wrong, but she'd hold her tongue.

"I wasn't certain. I couldn't be. Predilections for seeking out slayers aside, William the Bloody has never been known to torture his victims —at least not without a railroad spike."

"Bugger that," Spike snapped. "Tortured plenty in my time. Her ex-honey showed me how to make it hurt. Keep 'em alive while we're at it. Stop them from bleedin' out before I was done with them."

Buffy gritted her teeth and glared over her shoulder.

The resentment on his face faded immediately and he went ramrod straight. "Not my kinda thing, though," he hurried to add. "Never had the patience for it. Would more often than not just kill them and have it over."

"Not better, Spike." But also not the vampire he was anymore and not the subject at hand. Buffy inhaled deeply and forced her attention back on Giles. "You were saying?"

Giles just stared at Spike for a moment, then surprised the crap out of the both of them by barking a laugh. "He is nothing if not honest."

"Sometimes to a fault," Buffy agreed dryly.

Spike shrugged. "You learn to love me."

"I will take your word for it," Giles said before the mirth in his eyes faded. "I tell you all that so you can understand how...*elated* I was when I saw you walk through those doors yesterday. That's what it was—elation. Like something out of a dream."

"Gotta say, mate, you chose a helluva funny way to show the girl you gave a damn."

"Yes, well, learning that she... This entire time, all those days and

nights of worry, of Joyce's phone calls and visits, doing my damndest not to snap at her that she wasn't the only one who had lost you—getting my hopes up every time I thought I might have discovered a lead on your whereabouts... I will not pretend that was easy." And she saw the truth of that when he looked at her, the solemnity of his expression, the heaviness in his eyes, and felt a similar heaviness in her chest. "It rather felt like you had... That you hadn't cared at all about me—*us*—if you could walk away and return so easily and with your new friends. I admit I felt rather...replaced."

"Bollocks."

Buffy released a shaky breath and threw Spike a look of warning. "Don't."

"No, pet, that's absolute rubbish. If this git knew you at all, he'd know just how bleeding hard it was for you to—"

"He's allowed to be mad at me."

Spike glared at her, his nostrils flaring and his cheeks pulled tight. "Your mum tossed you out—I was there, I saw that. The whole bleeding town thought you offed the other slayer and you—"

"We really don't need to go through this again. Giles knows what happened."

"I did," Giles agreed softly. "All of those things I knew about. I worked with the Sunnydale Police Department to see that the charges against you were dropped. The Council stepped in, actually, pulled some strings...though I don't know that they would have done that had they not been similarly convinced you were dead. I spoke with Joyce, tried to explain... Well, so many things. I blamed her, myself, for a while. She confessed to me some of what happened in Los Angeles, before she..."

Buffy worked her throat and looked away, her heart skipping. The last thing she wanted to do was think about how her mother had submitted her for psychiatric evaluation after the incident at Hemery, or how very alone she'd felt then. How she'd wondered after her own mental fortitude, having watched Merrick die, being cut off from her friends and the life she'd thought she'd had. The insanity plea had seemed a lifeline then, because if she was insane then at least she wasn't the Slayer.

"All this to say, I did not react appropriately when you walked through those doors. I should have known that there was something more."

Spike scoffed and rolled his eyes, muttering something she was sure she would have punched him for if she'd heard.

"Do you truly plan on returning to Los Angeles when this is over?" Giles asked a second later, his gaze fixed on the floor.

"I think so," Buffy replied. "We hadn't really talked about it. About what would happen after... I dunno, really. Coming back to Sunnydale was like a big black spot in my head. I couldn't see past it. But now that I'm here..."

Now that she was here she felt out of place—an interloper whose presence was tolerated but not welcome. Even if having Giles here, saying things that made her think there might be a path to normal, she wasn't sure she wanted to go down that path. If there was anything left he could teach her that she wasn't capable of teaching herself.

"This doesn't feel like home anymore," she said after a moment. "And...and I don't know if it can again."

Giles nodded, not meeting her gaze, his own still locked on the floor. "I understand. The welcome you received could hardly be called warm." He rose to his feet and released a long sigh. "But you should know, you always have a place with me. And..." He paused, glanced at Spike. "I am glad you haven't been alone."

She supposed that was the closest she'd get to Giles saying anything nice about her vampire. It was more than she'd expected.

Buffy walked Giles to the door, oddly aware of herself, of the moment. Something throbbed in her chest, something that wasn't quite sadness but a close cousin. There were things she regretted, missteps she'd made, and choices she'd rethink were she given the chance to do it all over again, but the closer she drew to seeing her former watcher out, the more her current reality seemed to cement. The throbbing in her chest that wasn't sadness seemed to radiate its own energy.

She loved Giles. She loved her friends, former and otherwise, and she loved her mother. But she'd come too far to start backtracking now. And maybe that was it—the bittersweet knowledge that perhaps

the decision to return wasn't a decision at all. Buffy no longer lived here.

"One other thing," Giles said, pausing at the door. He turned and looked at her directly. "When you and Angel were becoming close, I took it upon myself to familiarize myself with his, err, history, especially after we discovered his lineage went to the Master. The Aurelian link to vampiric claims was of particular concern to me, as they had, in the past, been used to control and subdue, and Angel's reputation as a soulless creature was such that, well, I worried such a bond might be an obstacle."

"You thought he'd try to claim me?"

"It crossed my mind, yes." He swallowed. "Your friend, Winifred, shared some of your concerns with me—"

Buffy groaned. God, she was so going to fit Fred with a shock collar. "She had no—"

"She loves you, Buffy, and she has been worried. I am most glad she is in your life." A pause. "Vampiric claims cannot manufacture emotion of any sort—when the spell was reversed upon them, it was intended to be a punishment for those of the Aurelian line, tie them forever to someone who would most likely hate them." Giles offered a small smile. "In case that was still a concern."

Buffy didn't know what to say, so she didn't say anything. Rather, she threw herself into Giles's arms for a hug that probably creaked his brittle old-man bones, even if he didn't complain. Instead, he squeezed her back, shaking slightly, and that not-sad pain rose up again, only this time closer to actual hurt.

There were things about this life that she had missed beyond reason.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"Not saying I approve," Giles muttered back, though there was a smile in his voice. "Though I suppose he is a step up from the last one."

"He loves me."

"I know. I rather think I would force the issue of breaking the claim if I wasn't convinced of that." He pulled away, glanced in Spike's

direction and nodded—some man nod that likely had all kinds of hidden meaning—then disappeared out the door.

Buffy stood still for a long moment, unaware that her eyes were stinging until she felt Spike tug her into his arms. Her mind was all over the place at the moment and she was in no mood to follow it, focused instead on the confused tangle of her emotions, unsure whether or not she wanted to start to unravel it.

"You really love me," she said at last, her voice somewhat muffled by his shoulder.

"Not exactly news, pet."

"He said it was real."

"Bugger that. *I* said it was real."

"I know, but..." Buffy pulled back. "It means something to me that he said it too."

She didn't know how else to explain herself, so she didn't try. Just rested her head again against his shoulder, and focused on the feel of Spike's arms as they tightened around her once more.

Perhaps she would never be able to explain it fully, but part of being with Spike was knowing she'd never need to. Not really. He'd understand enough, even if he didn't entirely.

He'd understand her. He always had.

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"So are we agreed?" Buffy asked, scanning their faces—and not realizing until she met Xander's scowl that she'd again spoken out of turn. She looked away quickly, clearing her throat. Old habits, it seemed, were impossible to kill, even ones about a year out of use. "Sorry. I'm... I'll let you do this."

Faith shrugged a shoulder, throwing her a wink. "You were doin' fine, B. But yeah—what she said." She turned to the others, crossing her arms. "This is the *speak now or forever hold your ass* moment or we're goin' forward."

Buffy held her breath and again surveyed those congregated in the library. The past few days had consisted of planning, planning, and more planning. Willow, Xander, and Cordelia had taken it upon themselves to recruit most of the student body to throw in with the fight, aided—whether they wanted to admit it or not—by the fact that Buffy and Spike had been patrolling near the school on prom night, when some kid named Tucker had decided it would be a good idea to unleash a bunch of hellhounds on the senior class. She and Spike had crashed into the auditorium, cleared off the dance floor, and... Well, that was one way to announce that the original Slayer was back in town.

That they'd been greeted with enthusiastic applause was one of those things her former friends seemed determined to ignore.

Then there was planning the attack itself. According to the Books of Ascension, there would be an eclipse that would put Spike and Angel back in the action, which was good because the Mayor had a hefty supernatural posse of his own, and there was only so much Buffy and Faith to go around. Even better if there was a way for Oz to access his wolf on command and maintain his human sensibilities, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

The *coup de grace* was a boatload of explosives that would be laid throughout the school. How to get the Mayor into the school after he Ascended was another question, though Faith thought she had that covered, thanks to intel she'd received from the deputy mayor before Wilkins had discovered the man had sold him out.

"He sees me as a threat," Faith had explained. "Not a big one but enough that he'd want to address it all personal-like. Been messin' shit up for him ever since I rolled into town and he ain't too happy. Think if I lure him away from the others, he'll follow."

Buffy had shrugged. "Only thing that might piss him off more than one slayer is two."

"And he knows you by reputation," Faith had replied, grinning wide. "Told Angel all about it when he was doin' his spy thing. Some shit about all that went down last year and how he woulda had to interfere if you hadn't been on top of things since the whole damn world going to Hell woulda messed up his big plans."

"I'm confused. Is he a fan or not?"

"Gonna guess not, but if you wanna try out for His Gal Friday, I won't stop you."

So that was the plan. The student body was involved in the hand-to-hand, Spike and Angel to lead the charge once the eclipse was in full effect, and Faith to lure Wilkins into an explosive-laden Sunnydale High, with the added benefit of Buffy by her side. Two-for-one deal for the resident bad guy.

"Not a deal most could turn down," Spike had said when Buffy had relayed it to him. "He gets in a good day and he ties up my tally in one go."

Buffy had arched an eyebrow, planted her hands on the library table to dip forward just far enough to give Spike a good peek down her shirt.

"Then it's up to you guys to make sure me and Faith don't give him a good day," she'd said.

"Slayer, I believe in your ability to ruin the plans of any two-bit villain you come across," Spike had told her breasts. Then he'd dragged his gaze upward and winked. "Good thing you got me nice and whipped now, right?"

"Are you calling yourself a two-bit villain?"

"Fuck no. That's the point, sweets. If I were the villainous type anymore, I'd give you a run for your money."

"And yet history is not on your side."

"Well, someone's askin' for a spanking."

Their battle of quippage had been interrupted then by a series of loud coughs coming from the table where Xander, Willow, Cordelia, and Oz had set up camp. The same place they were now, and had been every day Buffy had come into the library. They had their corner and more or less stuck to it, whereas everyone else seemed comfortable comingling.

Particularly Wesley and Fred, which Buffy found almost too cute for words. The mini-Watcher was a bit of a joke—major with the pompous and self-importance and always barking out orders at Faith that Faith seemed perfectly happy to ignore. Still, watching him go absolutely gaga over Fred was incredibly satisfying, particularly because Buffy wasn't sure Fred had ever received so much attention in her life.

Faith and Gunn seemed to have a wager going on, too. Namely how obnoxious could they be with each other in public before someone sprayed them with a hose. Like the other day, when Faith had mentioned that she'd had an idea about the signal to give the senior class if it turned out Graduation was indeed when Wilkins planned to Ascend. She and Buffy, she'd said, needed to be somewhere behind the stage, within view of the crowd but out of sight where Wilkins was concerned.

"When did you think of that?" Gunn had demanded.

"Last night when your tongue was up my snatch," she'd replied.

Spike had barked a laugh. "Not doin' your job if she can still think straight, mate."

Buffy shook her head and drew herself back to the moment. Since no one had spoken, it seemed they were a go with the current plan... which, given that tomorrow was Graduation, was probably for the best. It seemed a bit late in the game to switch things up now.

"All right," Faith said, clapping her hands together. "B and me will do what we can to get behind that podium. As soon as things start to go dark, the vamps'll need to be front and center. You two can take a beating better than most."

"Just avoid anything sharp and pointy and made of wood," Buffy interjected, settling her gaze on Spike. "Or fiery."

"Don't worry, Slayer," Spike replied, smirking with his lips but smiling with his eyes. "Got me lots to live for, don't I? If that mob in Prague couldn't take me out, nothing bloody can."

"You realize you just jinxed yourself, right? You're standing on the Hellmouth and you jinxed yourself." But maybe acknowledging the jinx was enough to trick Fate into not throwing a stake her vampire's way. "If you get yourself dusted, I am going to so kick your ass."

"And what do I get if I'm a good boy?"

Buffy pursed her lips together, considering. "I'll think of something."

"Can you make them stop?" Xander asked, his hand in the air. "'Cause I really enjoyed dinner and would appreciate it if it didn't make a reappearance."

God, she was so over this. Buffy released a deep sigh, rolling her eyes. "Don't worry, Xan," she said brightly. "This time tomorrow, we'll either be dead or on our way back to LA, so you won't have to worry about seeing either of us ever again. Win-win for you, right?"

Xander flushed. "You are so out of line."

"The only thing I'm out of is patience," Buffy shot back. "What exactly do you think I owe you?"

Nothing for a moment—her former friend just stared at her, his jaw clenched and his left eye twitching. At length, he tore his gaze away, fixed it on the floor.

"Wow," Cordelia drawled, "that was dramatic." She rolled her eyes

and offered Buffy a wide, fake grin. "I, for one, am all about Los Angeles. And hey! When I move there this summer, I'll know someone to avoid in the city!"

"You're moving to LA?"

"I'm going to be an actress. Duh."

Spike snorted.

"Hey!" Cordelia snapped. "I can act my butt off."

Buffy bit the inside of her cheek to keep from saying something snide—and yay her, that was some personal growth.

"It's a big city," she said instead, not quite succeeding at keeping the laughter from her voice. "And I think it's safe to say we'll travel in different circles."

"One can only hope," Cordelia murmured. She glanced at Xander and away again quickly, leaving Buffy to wonder if Queen C had even bothered sharing her plans to relocate post-graduation with her boyfriend. Not that Cordelia and Xander had ever seemed like the sort of couple that would be telling their grandkids about how they'd been high school sweethearts—hell, Buffy was somewhat surprised that they'd lasted as long as they had.

Faith clapped once, loudly. "If there ain't any questions, I'm gonna split. Big world-savin' kinda day tomorrow and this girl needs one more lay before everything goes to shit." She glanced at Gunn, smirking. "Assuming you're up for it."

"Baby, I am more than up for anything."

"Then let's go ride 'em, tiger."

The other slayer looped her arm through Gunn's and half-ran, half-dragged him toward the swinging library doors without so much as a goodbye. And for a moment, Buffy wondered how things might have been different if she'd taken a page out of Faith's book and just not given a crap about what others thought. Because it was clear that, whatever else, Faith didn't care if she made friends or broke hearts—particularly that last thing, if the way Angel had stared at her as she made her exit meant anything.

Buffy blew out a breath and turned her attention to Fred. "You heading out here, too?"

Fred glanced at Wesley, going a bit pink. "I think we're going to

grab dinner," she said and started gathering up her things. "And Wesley was going to show me how to use the crossbow pistol he has at his place. The one here keeps firing prematurely."

Spike snickered loudly. So did Giles.

Wesley drew himself up, as he was wont to do whenever anyone made the slightest slight against his masculinity. "It has a sensitive trigger," he said, his voice bordering on shrill.

"They make little pills that are supposed to help with that," Spike said, drawing to his feet. He met Buffy's gaze, grinning his orneriest grin. "Least that's what the bloke on the telly says."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," Wesley replied, though his was blushing now too, and pointedly avoiding eye contact with everyone in the room. "Fred, if you wish to accompany me, I believe I will take my leave now."

Fred pressed her lips together, looking like she was choking back laughter herself, but didn't hesitate in joining him. Whatever premature issues Wesley might have weren't enough to scare her away, it seemed.

"I might be late," she called over her shoulder.

"No sense gettin' out in this town after hours," Spike called after her. "Ask Trigger Happy there if he can spare a bit of couch since he's gonna keep you out. If he's a real gent, he'll let you take the bed."

Wesley was careful not to say anything else as he all but sprinted for the door, Fred rushing to keep up with him.

"Think I'll get her home, too," Xander said, carefully not looking at Buffy as he ushered Cordelia forward. "Big day and all."

"Like I need your help to get home," Cordelia drawled, rolling her eyes. Then she paused. "Granted, I don't mind if others see me in your car. It's—"

"I know, I know, the only reason you date me."

"The only reason I *haven't* broken up with you." Cordelia turned to address Buffy directly. "He got a car while you were gone. A really hot set of wheels. I think he knew I was about to dump him for Larry Blaisdell and had to level up."

"Cordy, for the last time—"

"That was before I knew he was gay!" She huffed. "Anyway, he has a car now. So he has that going for him."

"People don't care, Cor," Xander said, but he couldn't seem to keep himself from looking in Buffy's direction before he and Cordelia were on the other side of the swinging doors.

"I'll go too," Angel said. He made it halfway to the door before pausing. "Buffy...be careful tomorrow."

Buffy frowned and glanced at Spike, who rolled his eyes. "I...will be," she said, not knowing how else to respond. "You, too, Angel."

He was still a moment longer before continuing on, perhaps hurrying up a bit when Spike yelled, "I'll be careful too, Grandpap! Don't want you worryin' over me!"

Buffy wasn't sure, but she could have sworn she heard Giles snicker again. When she looked to confirm, she found her former Watcher had his nose buried in a book, though his shoulders were trembling as though he were trying to hold something back.

"Buffy?"

She started and twisted around, not bothering to hide her shock at seeing Willow standing so near. Ever since the second meeting, when Faith had lain down the law, her former best friend had been rather adamant about not making eye-contact unless absolutely necessary, and making herself scarce the second any such meeting adjourned. Any time they were forced to acknowledge each other, Willow's expression remained firm and shut off.

It didn't look that way now. If anything, the redhead seemed close to tears.

Buffy blinked, unsure of what to do or say, then shifted her attention to Oz, who stood a few feet back, his face impassive.

"C-can we talk?" Willow asked hoarsely, wiping at her eyes. "Just us?"

"Umm..." She glanced again at Oz, somehow not surprised when he met her gaze and offered a solemn but unmistakable nod. "Sure."

"O-okay. Umm, this way." Willow turned jerkily and started for the door, moving in swift, hurried footsteps.

Buffy released a deep breath. "Be right back," she told Spike before rushing to catch up.

Willow had chosen an empty classroom—the same empty classroom Buffy had chosen a lifetime ago when Spike come to her after the night that had first brought them together. He'd shown up, all swagger and confusion, and she'd shoved him in here to give him a good talking-to that didn't involve his mouth on hers. For very good, not-at-all stupid reasons, she was sure.

Standing in here now was a bit surreal, because the girl who had been here before had been so young and foolhardy. Fast-forward a year and behold the changes. That both versions of herself could occupy the same space was a little trippy.

Willow walked as far as the chalkboard then whipped around, shaking hard and wearing an expression full of misgiving, but seemingly determined all the same. "I read about claims," she said in a rush, and likely louder than necessary. "A-after Giles explained what that meant. He lent me one of his books and I read and...talked to Fred a bit because she apparently became Ms. Authority on the whole subject—"

"I asked her to," Buffy said, a bit at ease now that she had an idea where this might be headed. "I... Some bad stuff went down in LA. Gunn's sister was killed and turned, and there was this whole...underground vamp human trafficking thing going on. It's a long story but I found a book that mentioned claims and kinda just ripped the pages out. It was the first time I'd seen anything in black and white about it, and since Spike and I were both equally clueless on it... It just seemed like a good idea."

She forced herself to stop talking, but only just. There was no earthly reason for *her* to be a rambling mess. She'd already apologized for the things she'd needed to apologize for.

"It made sense!" Willow agreed, nodding. "That you'd need time to figure that out. That you wouldn't get what was happening to you."

"But it was more than that, Will. Finding the book didn't magically make my decision." No, but it had helped cement it. "I tried to leave him—Spike. I *did* leave him. We got to a motel and... It was intense. I was not in a good place and I just wanted him to take it away. All of it. And he did—or he tried. He claimed me by accident. I left after that and it was just...awful."

Willow nodded her encouragement, her eyes sparkling. "Yeah, it would've been. You were stretching the bond right after it was formed."

"Right." Buffy pressed her lips together. "He found me pretty quick after that, which was good but he didn't really understand what was happening, either. Spike knew a little about claims—not a lot, but enough to tell me that he'd essentially tied us together to infinity and beyond and made me all Forever Young. And I had no idea how I felt about that—I'd just barely started to process what happened with Angel and everything, and what it would mean if Spike fell off the wagon because I'm still the Slayer, right? And things with Spike just... I can feel what he feels sometimes, and he can feel what I feel. It's not a lot but it's there."

"I-I know. I mean I know as much as I can know, which isn't a lot —I know—but more than other people know." Willow sniffed and looked away, a tear spilling down her cheek. "I've missed you. A lot. This past year has been all with the crazy. With Faith and Wilkins and Angel coming back and... You know Xander and I almost had a thing?"

Buffy blinked. "No way." Though part of her had always thought it possible that Xander would wake up and smell the hottie after Willow became less the girl who made puppy eyes at him and more the girl who had her own boyfriend, nothing that she'd seen over the last few days had suggested that anything untoward had happened. She honestly couldn't imagine Cordy sticking with Xander if she'd so much as sniffed infidelity, especially not after the way she'd forsaken her own popularity to be with him.

"Way," the redhead replied miserably. "Something about getting us in formalwear and we were all with the handsy. I ended up doing this delusting spell thing to make it stop because, well, Oz." She offered a weak smile. "Things got a little messy. A lot explody. Heavy on the Giles helping me undo it and big conversation with Oz about all of it that he took...hard, but we worked it out. I don't think Xander ever had the talk with Cordelia, but they're not..." Willow gestured vaguely. "I mean, she's moving to LA and I think they've just decided to break up without talking to each other about it."

"Considering that it's Xander and Cordy, probably for the best."

"Right!" Willow grinned, but it faded just as quickly. "I... Buffy, when you came through those doors, I was so happy and then... Learning you stayed away from us on purpose, after how *terrible* this year has been, just...hurt. I was mad. I still am kinda mad but I get it. You were dealing with something huge and scary. And you were worried that Giles would undo this claim with Spike."

Buffy nodded, dropping her gaze to the floor. "That about sums it up. And the longer I was away, the easier it was to stay away. Coming back at all was... Well, it scared me. So much had changed and I wasn't sure...about a lot of things."

"I know. I mean I get it—not *it,* of course, but that it was confusing and scary, especially after what happened with Angel."

She looked up just as Willow looked down, and experienced a stab of pure loss that nearly sent her to her knees. Whatever else, she *had* missed Willow—missed her terribly. Fred was a great friend, one of the best a girl could ask for, but she wasn't Willow, no matter how much she reminded Buffy of her at times. If anything, all their similarities had made hanging out with Fred difficult. Like she'd replaced her real best friend, when nothing could be further from the truth—like *anyone* in her life was easily replaceable.

"I know I haven't been...well, anything good since you came back," Willow said, sniffing. "It just seemed like everything had been great for you while we were over here thinking you were dead. I mean, you had new friends, new boyfriend, an apartment, and I know you said that first day that it wasn't like that but it was hard to hear, you know? All the while I've been going through this whole Oz/Xander thing with my best friend dead and some slayer slut bomb in her place."

Buffy snorted, arched an eyebrow. "Not a fan of Faith, are we?"

"She's fine," Willow said hurriedly. "I mean in a busty, whorey kinda way. And she's a good slayer from what I can tell."

"What you can tell?"

"Well, she's not so much with the group sitch. She didn't want me and Xander or anyone around when she got here. The only reason she didn't boot Giles is he's part of the Watchers Council and, also, I think because she knew he was mourning you too." A pause. "Faith lost her first Watcher before she came here and that really shook her. Giles

took over for a while, but his heart wasn't in it so they sent over a new one who proved to be kinda, well, crazy. And then we got Wesley, who I thought was cute until he started talking and he's so blah." Willow made a face that was apparently supposed to summarize the blahness that was Wesley. "The words *pompous blowhard* have been used by some people who shall remain...well, me. I'm some people."

At that, Buffy couldn't help herself. She laughed. "He does seem a little...extra."

Willow nodded. "And before Fred showed up, he was drooling all over Cordelia. Which, I mean, she's eighteen so it's legal but legal doesn't mean *not* gross, right?" She pulled a face, shook her head. "And Cordy was all whoring it up for him, too. Just to drive Xander crazy, I think, because he's been extra gaga about Faith."

"He has?"

"You can't seriously be surprised, right? Have you *seen* Faith?"

Buffy inclined her head. "She's pretty hard to miss. But I don't see her going for Xander."

"You act like she discriminates. She doesn't," Willow said, and there was no mistaking the venom in her voice. "She has two criteria—does it have a penis and is it warm? As long as you can check both columns, Faith is on board."

"You really don't like her, do you?"

At that, Willow tore her gaze away again, her cheeks going red. "She does a good job," she muttered, sounding like the words caused her physical pain. "She's...not you. She doesn't really have time for me or Xander, has tried to kick us out more than once. When Angel came back... He came to me before he went to anyone else and I didn't know what to do. Faith tried to stake him and Xander was all for that, but I kept thinking about what it would mean to *you* and... Well, it was just a confusing time. But once Faith accepted him into the group, she started relying only on him because he had muscle. After a while, she kinda accepted we weren't going anywhere but...she wasn't you. And having her around just reminded me of everything that was missing."

That hearing this made her happy probably didn't say anything good about her, but Buffy couldn't deny feeling a teeny bit elated.

She hadn't been replaced. The gang hadn't just continued on with

the lead role recast, and they weren't *friends*. While that time of her life was behind her, it still meant the world to her—the friends she'd had, the life she'd known. For the first time since being Called, she'd had people to help shoulder the burden, who had known her and, if not understood entirely, supported her as she went through the trials and tribulations of being the Chosen One.

"Buffy," Willow said, her voice cracking. "Buffy, please don't go back to LA."

Though some part of her had known to expect this since Willow had started talking, Buffy still wasn't prepared for the pain that struck her chest at the words. "Will..."

"I-I know I've been...not good since you've been back. But I missed you so much and it's just not the same here without you." Willow dragged a hand under her eyes, sniffing. "I've missed my best friend and I know things are different—I do. And it would be different if you came back, but please *come back*." A pause. "I'm going to UC Sunnydale in the fall—I was accepted to Harvard, Yale, and Oxford but I—"

"You what? And you're going to stay *here*? Willow, that's insane."

"I-I didn't want to be away from home. Or Oz. And I thought, part of me thought..."

But she didn't finish. She didn't need to—it was all over her face. Regardless of what anyone had said, it seemed no one had officially given up on Buffy being alive.

"Anyway," Willow continued a moment later. "I just... I wanted to tell you that. I mean ask."

This would be the part where she was supposed to talk. Buffy exhaled slowly, trying to make sense of the thoughts attacking her head from every angle. While she'd thought—perhaps even hoped—that someone would ask her to come back on a permanent basis, the part where she answered had always remained foggy. Right now, she straddled a divide, one side being nostalgia and loss, the other being growth and acceptance. And surrounding that was the sense of general displacement that had tagged her ever since she and Spike had rolled back into town. Knowing where she was, recognizing the landmarks, but feeling so far from

any of them that trying to see herself here was an exercise in futility.

"Will, I love you. And Giles and Xander and...all of you."

Willow deflated, her already-large eyes seeming impossibly large. "There's a but, isn't there?"

"I just... I don't know what I want to do. Being back here has been kind of...terrible." Buffy held up a hand. "And I know, so don't. But I'm not the same person I was before—so much has happened and I really feel like I just..."

"Grew up?" Willow supplied.

"I guess. I've had to deal with things I thought I'd never deal with. Or, not at eighteen, at least. Rent, for one thing." She shrugged a shoulder. "Spike's really good at cards. Or he's good at cheating at cards. Or picking demon pockets—I don't ask too many questions. Fred's said more than once she can get me a job at the library where she works and, I dunno, there's this demon friend of ours, Lorne, who owns a sanctuary bar and he might need help."

"You have demon friends?"

"Just Lorne, though... Will, it's different. There's so much more, I dunno, *nuance* than I thought when it came to demons. Like Lorne, who is a big fluffy puppy with horns and green skin. Old Buffy would've slayed first, asked questions later. This Buffy is more prone to ask because she's also seen some really terrible things." Things like what Gunn's old gang had done to Spike—images she doubted she'd ever get out of her head. "And Faith has the Sunnydale Slayer thing down pat."

Willow wrinkled her nose at the name. "Faith—"

"I know you're not a fan, but I kinda am. And whatever else you have to say about her, she comes up with good plans and kept this place from falling to hell since I left. This whole Graduation plan? Getting the senior class to help? So something I could see myself doing." Buffy paused. "I'm not saying I'm not the Slayer anymore, because I can't turn that off—something Spike helped me see—but the sacred duty thing? It's...something I don't have to shoulder myself. And the world is a whole lot bigger than just Sunnydale."

"I understand." Willow offered a solemn nod, tried and failed for a smile. "You're not coming back."

"I'm not *not* coming back. LA isn't that far away." Something Buffy understood now in ways she hadn't before—back when she and her mom had first moved here, LA had seemed like it might as well be on the other side of the moon for as far removed as she'd felt from her former friends, school, her dad... But it really was just a short drive down the highway. There was no reason why she couldn't see her friends on the regular, assuming more than Willow wanted to remain friends.

And Giles. And her mom.

Her mom who had not done more than send Angel after her in response to her bailing.

Buffy had the sudden, desperate urge to see her mother, stronger than it had been the other night. If nothing else, she needed to make sure Joyce had plans to be somewhere that was else the next day, because if she and Faith had the wrong of the whole Ascension thing—or if they failed in stopping it—then the town might well be wiped off the map.

"Will, I gotta go. I need to see my mom."

The disappointment in Willow's eyes faded almost instantly. She nodded, dragged her hand along her cheek one last time. "Do you need me to come with?"

A pang of affection hit her square in the chest, but Buffy shook her head. "It needs to be me. And maybe Spike." She paused. "Definitely Spike. I need her to understand. But thank you for offering."

Willow nodded. "Anytime."

Buffy nodded and backtracked toward the door, though paused when she got there. "And Will? Maybe ease up a little on Faith. She's... not me, I get it. But from what I can tell, she kept this place from going all hellmouth-explodey on you."

"Buffy—"

"I know it's hard for you to be objective where Xander's concerned and I don't know her all that well, but she came to me because she knew I'd be valuable to the fight, and she didn't have to do that." Buffy tried for a smile. "Just, in case we don't all die tomorrow, I'd keep that in mind."

There was nothing for a moment, then Willow offered a small nod. "Okay."

"'Kay," Buffy agreed, and pushed the door open.

She wasn't too surprised to find Spike waiting for her in the hall and guessed he'd heard most of that exchange. Something she confirmed when their eyes met.

"Lurk much?"

Spike shrugged, unapologetic. "Just keepin' an ear out."

"Eavesdropping."

"Well, yeah. I am evil, after all." Spike took a few steps toward her, jutting his chin in the direction of the empty classroom. "All good?"

Buffy knew what he was really asking and wasn't sure how to answer it, so she didn't try. It seemed likely she wouldn't know until after tomorrow was behind them, and the path forward wasn't blocked by the threat of yet another doom-and-gloom situation.

Instead, she swallowed and said, "I wanna try to talk to my mom again," even though she knew he knew. "Will you come?"

Spike's lips twitched. "'Course."

"And if it... If she..."

"I'll make myself scarce if that's what you need."

Buffy smiled. It was the answer she expected, but that didn't make hearing it any less swoon-worthy. "Have I told you today that I love you?"

Spike smirked, wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "How's about you show me later and we call it even?"

"I think that can be arranged."

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The second time was apparently the bloody charm. Or maybe it was that Joyce had taken some time to reflect since Buffy had scarpered off and was more open to listening. He didn't know and didn't really care. All that mattered was that when the door opened when the Slayer's mum saw her daughter, she welled with tears almost immediately and stepped aside.

Buffy didn't budge, though, or say anything. She just squeezed Spike's hand and waited.

After a long beat, Joyce shifted her attention to him, not bothering to wipe at her cheeks or gather herself.

"Come in. Both of you."

The past few months—well, really, ever since he'd set eyes on the Slayer—had put him in a variety of situations that defied everything he knew about his nature and himself. Coming over to play the part of the respectable boyfriend, even if he was neither, was one of those things the pre-Sunnydale Spike would have found hilarious. So hilarious, he'd have laughed his way through offing the poor sod who dared make such a suggestion, then laughed some more while shagging Dru even more out of her mind. Even though not much time had passed, all told, so much of him had changed that thinking about the bloke he'd been

before Buffy made him fill a mite sorry for himself. Relationship issues aside, that version of Spike had been blissfully unaware of what he was missing, fool enough to believe he had everything he wanted.

But some part of him, he reckoned, had known that the more he was around the Slayer, the more the lie that was his own existence would shine through. When it came to slayers, after all, Spike didn't believe in staffing out kills. That he'd ever considered handing the glory of killing Buffy to the Order of Taraka or the Judge, let alone gone so far as to order a hit or piece the big smurf together ought to have startled him, but he'd always been there with an excuse. Let others deal with the Slayer, his priority was Dru. It was easier that way—not as much fun, but the end result would be the same, and that was all that mattered, right?

And until that happy day arrived, Spike would play the role he'd been created to play—lover and caretaker of his sire. He'd ignore the fact that thinking about the Slayer made his dead heart warm and part of the reason he'd hated Angelus, aside from the fact that he'd started shagging Dru nearly from the moment he'd walked in, was that he'd gotten to taste what Spike craved.

All of that buried so far down he hadn't known it was there until after he'd stolen a snog of his own. Now here he was. He had the girl and she loved him—really loved him as no one ever had. And he was sitting at the dining room table at her mum's place, tearing bits of chicken off the spicy wings Buffy had insisted Joyce order along with their dinner. His role here was not to take center-stage, rather allow his girl and her mum to reconnect while providing silent support should Buffy need it.

So he sat and listened, kept himself attuned to what the claim could tell him regarding Buffy's mindset, which wasn't much but enough for him to know he was doing what he needed. The conversation was oddly restrained, though civil, and ever since the first hug, Buffy and Joyce had stuck to superficial topics.

That was until they got to the business regarding the Ascension.

"Mom, you need to leave town."

Spike sucked in his cheeks to kill his grin. The girl was a lot of things, most of them magnificent, but she knew rot about subtlety.

Then again, he wasn't one to do anything without a lot of grandstanding. Another thing that made them the perfect bloody pair.

Joyce placed the slice of pizza that had been making its way to her mouth back on her plate, blinking. "What?"

"After dinner. You need to go upstairs and pack and hit the road." Buffy swallowed, flicked her gaze to him, then back again. "This thing that's happening tomorrow is big. Like, possibly end-of-the-world big, or at the very least, end-of-Sunnydale big. If it happens, you need to be somewhere that's away."

Joyce just stared at her for a moment before turning her attention to Spike, as though waiting for the punch-line.

"Slayer's right," Spike said, not really sure what else there was to add. "Everything goes south and it's bye-bye Hellmouth."

"And..." She turned back to Buffy. "What?"

"I can't explain everything."

"Everything? Buffy, try anything. You just came back to town and—"

"And I know. But this is why we came back." She winced at that, looked away. "I mean, I wanted... My life—"

"You came back because of what's happening tomorrow. Not..." The color drained from Joyce's face, and Spike heard her heartbeat kick up a notch or two. "You wouldn't have come back, would you?"

There was nothing for a moment. Buffy just stared at her plate of half-eaten nosh, her eyes taking on that distant look he'd come to both loathe and respect. The one that warned she was playing with which story to tell—the comfortable lie or the painful truth.

"Mom," she said at length, keeping her eyes pointed downward, "I... I don't know, to be honest. I think eventually, yeah, I would've had to come back. I couldn't just never see you or any of the others again, but I had things I needed to work out and...I hadn't worked them out yet. Part of that was because I was afraid to." She swallowed and drew her head up at last. "And you know why. I wrote about it in that letter."

Joyce stiffened but held her daughter's gaze. She didn't say anything.

"And I tried to explain in the note I left the other night. I get that you don't get it and that you probably never will. I never wanted you to

know this side of me." Buffy pressed her lips together. "But what I want doesn't matter. Keeping you safe does. So after dinner, you're going to go upstairs and pack. You can stay at our place in LA until it's over." She shot Spike a somewhat guilty glance. "That's okay, right?"

Like there was anything else to say. "'Course, pet." He dove a hand into his duster pocket and pulled out his key-ring. Not much on it—the keys to the car and the one to the flat. He tried to work the ring, but after a few seconds decided *bugger it* and snapped the needed key free. "Here," he said, sliding the scrap of metal across the table. "If it smells wonky, it's probably the blood in the fridge. Toss it if you like. I'll want some fresh juice when we go home, anyway."

"And you'll probably want to change the sheets on the bed before you hit the sack," Buffy said, going a bit pink. "The spare set is in the hall closet. Oh! And don't touch anything in the other closet—the one in our room. That's where we keep the weapons and, well, I wouldn't want you to get hurt. There's a takeout menu on the fridge for this little Vietnamese place we like right around the corner. And they deliver after dark for free if you're within five blocks. Which you'll want to do. We don't live in a crappy neighborhood but it's always a possibility that something ookie followed us home one night. Sometimes we're not with the subtle."

"Word of caution," Spike added, nodding at the woman, "if you decide to order from that joint, you might skip anythin' with fish."

"Oh, right." Buffy made a face. "Major with the upset tummy. I've tried it three times and the last time—"

"Bloody loo still doesn't smell right."

"Maybe to he with the sensitive nose. To human moms, it should be fine."

Joyce was quiet for a long beat, and Spike couldn't blame her. Bit of a lot to throw at anyone, especially when things between mother and daughter were still strained. In truth, Spike himself was still trying to get used to this idea of fighting alongside the white hats, being a part of the big plan and all. Wasn't quite the same as back home where he and Buffy would tag-team beasties in the local cemeteries, or those few times he'd released his inner demon on muggers and rapists—all without snapping necks or draining bodies, mind. While not insignifi-

cant, that had been for himself, more or less. Getting in his need for a spot of violence before bedtime, making sure he kept to the vamp diet of blood, sex, and pain.

Everything since returning to Sunnyhell had been something else, though. Something he knew was important, something he cared about because Buffy cared, but he'd never been a part of a big group like this and he didn't much fancy it. Though that might have been because everyone kept looking at him as though he was a hair away from lunging for someone's jugular. Or that *doing the right thing* for the sake of doing it wasn't in his makeup and he made no apologies for it.

"Mom?" Buffy asked, at last, reaching for her mother's hand. "Is... What's wrong?"

Joyce gave her head a shake and plastered on a patently fake smile. "Nothing. Sorry, it just... You two really sound like an...actual couple. With an actual life."

Buffy looked to Spike. "Oh. Well...that's kinda what we are. Actual couple, just with superpowers and an extended lifespan. And he's on a liquid diet."

Spike arched an eyebrow and pointedly popped a strip of chicken into his mouth.

"Well, not a liquid-only diet."

The smile on Joyce's face softened by increments, and she nodded. "I guess...it's not what I expected. I know what you told me the other night, and what you said in the letter—both of them. But, well, when your daughter's living on her own in a different town and with her boyfriend, you'll understand how strange it is to hear about it. Hear *her* talking like an actual adult. Except..." She furrowed her brow. "You two probably can't have a daughter, can you?"

Buffy worried her lower lip between her teeth, throwing Spike another look that begged for help but bugger, he didn't know what to say to that. Wasn't like having a bunch of sprogs was anything he'd ever wanted, at least in this life—and in his old one, the possibility had seemed so bloody remote he'd never given it fair consideration. That Buffy might have ever ventured down this line of thinking had never occurred to him.

"Babies don't really fit into the whole fighting-evil lifestyle," Buffy

said when he didn't rush to her rescue. "And vampires can't make them the old fashioned way, so big no. But that's a thing I decided I didn't want anyway."

"You did?" Spike blurted before he could help himself. "When was this?"

"Before us," she said, and from the way she suddenly couldn't meet his eyes, he took that to mean *Angel*. Something she confirmed when she pressed on. "I gave it a lot of thought after a conversation I had with... And I decided I didn't want them. With anyone, vamp or otherwise." Buffy shrugged. "It just makes sense with the slayage and I have enough responsibilities without throwing childrearing in there. Unless... Spike is that something *you* want?"

"It's not. But if you did, I'd bloody well find a way—"

"I don't." At that, she looked up again and held his gaze, offering a small smile. "Believe me when I tell you I had all the mental conversations between this year and last, everything from greatest hits to hot new singles, including those involving baby slayers, toy stakes, and monster nurseries. And, hey, maybe I'll change my mind down the line —you and me have a whole lot of forever ahead of us—but right now and for the foreseeable future? I have enough responsibility on my plate, and that's just one of a laundry list of reasons why the answer is a firm hell no. If that answer ever changes, you'll be the first to know. And I definitely wouldn't be making with the choices unless we were both on board." With that, she turned her attention back to her own mum, her expression fierce. "All that to say, you're motoring. I can't worry about surviving tomorrow if I'm worried about you, too."

Joyce looked down, a long, tremulous sigh riding off her lips. "And you would. Worry about me."

"What? Of course I—"

"It's not an unreasonable question, Buffy. I am allowed to have thoughts and...*doubts* after this past year." She took a breath, not looking up. "I know there are things I don't understand. Things I might never understand about you and your life, or about your relationship. I know what you've told me, what Mr. Giles has told me, and what you left in those letters. But I also know that I've been barely surviving for months, terrified you were out there dead and the last

thing I'd said to you was to get out of this house. You just said you're not having children, so you *can't* understand just how...how..."

The salty scent of tears hit the air just seconds before the woman's eyes started leaking, and then she was bent over, sobbing hard into her hands, then into her daughter's arms as Buffy rushed to her mum's side, crying too. Spike's chest went tight and he felt a telltale sting behind his own bloody eyes, one he shoved back right quick, feeling like a ponce but not able to help it.

The last stretch, before everything about the bloody book and the claim had come to a head, as he'd embraced the new life he and Buffy were building together, Spike had been preoccupied with thoughts of this. Not her mates or the Watcher, but the only family his girl had left that meant anything. He knew the Slayer's chums were as good as family for all they'd been through, and Giles even more so, but the bond between mother and child was one no one could replicate or replace, and try as he might to live in the present and not worry a lick about whatever happened down the line, the ghost of what had happened to his own mum had never stopped haunting him. The mistake he'd made, believing it was the right thing. Believing he was ending her pain. Buffy's mum might not have been dying in the literal sense, but Spike had observed enough to wager that the woman had been dying. Some pains were worse than physical.

The girls had their cry and Spike did what he was good at whenever his woman was distressed—that was, find any way to make the environment better, which was how he ended up clearing up the table like a sodding live-in waiter.

It said something about him that this didn't bother him, but nothing he didn't already know.

He'd been hers from the start.

THE FIRST TIME he'd been to Sunnydale High, he'd made one hell of an entrance. Left his mark, gotten smacked over the head with an ax for his trouble, and dragged his sorry arse back home to lick his wounds and pretend for a stretch, at least, that the defeat hadn't been a signifi-

cant milestone. Just part of the game—the Slayer the rabbit; he the big bad fox.

Had she known then? As he'd rested his head against her shoulder, relishing in the sensation of her fingers stroking his cheek, had Dru understood that he'd lost much more? That they were on the countdown to the end? He couldn't say—her seeing had never been exactly reliable, and trying to suss out the meaning of her riddles not always easy, even to a seasoned veteran such as himself.

Odds were he'd never know for sure. If he and Dru ever crossed paths again, he doubted she'd be in the mind to chat things out. Not after she'd lost everything, especially Angelus.

The second time Spike had entered the school had cemented what he'd been too bloody cowardly to admit, that his life would never be the same. Standing there in that hall, watching as the Slayer's mouth moved, as she cried tears that weren't hers and talked about love that belonged to someone else, right before she'd fired off a shot that had knocked him off the balcony. Right before he'd stirred and made it to her before the ghost possessing her body was able to put a bullet in her head. When he'd kissed her for the first time, lost himself in her taste and promise.

The time between that moment and this one seemed lifetimes apart, but no less significant. Because this was it for real, a glimpse of what the future held. Fighting the good fight not because he wanted revenge or to take back something that he thought belonged to him, but because it was right. Because it mattered to the person who mattered most to him, and always would.

He and Angel were back-to-back among a crowd of snarling vamps as the entire senior class battled around them. The boy, Harris, had stepped up in brilliant form, shouting out orders to a fumbling lot who were bloody lucky to be gathering their diplomas at all. The mayor had gone up serpent-style, rearing and charging through the onlookers and having a right old time of things, but then the Slayers had stepped up, and done what they did better than bloody anyone—screw up the bad guy's big plan.

Somehow, the two had convinced the snake that had been the mayor to tear off after them through the winding passages of the high

school. Between ducking blows and snapping necks, Spike managed to sneak a glance of his girl disappearing inside. And while the thought arose that he might never see her again, that this could be the end, he also knew it wasn't.

Because she was the Slayer, the best he'd ever known or would ever know, and this was a bloody cakewalk.

Because she was *his*.

It was likely over in less than a minute, the girls bursting through the back window of the library as one, but even with all the confidence he had in her, Spike didn't let himself throw back into the fight until he saw that flash of blonde once more. Then he was swinging again, snapping his fangs at the useless lot that thought they might be the ones having a good day today. Around him, arrows soared and vamps crumpled to dust, and then the sky was on fire and everything was over.

Because that was the way it happened. Boss goes up in flames and henchmen scatter. No honor among thieves or loyalty among villains. And the second the lackeys pulled the vanishing act, Spike was tearing across the campus to his girl, Angel hot on his heels.

Buffy turned in time to be swooped into his arms. "You're okay," she said, squeezing him to her.

"'Course, pet."

"Anyone hurt?"

No one else would ever know just how close an eye he'd kept on her friends. It was something she hadn't asked him to do—she hadn't needed to.

"Your people are fine," he murmured into her ear. "Lost a few, but we always were gonna."

Buffy nodded, pulling back enough so he could see her beautiful, smoke-stained face. "Thank you."

"Always." He kissed her temple, relishing the heat of her skin, the smell of her blood pumping hard and strong.

Then the other one was there, crowding in and pushing him aside, something that might have earned a snarl had the brunette not tossed him a wink that told him plainly she was doing it just to get a rise.

"Hey girlfriend," Faith drawled, tossing an arm around Buffy's

shoulders. "You got killer moves. Kinda bummed this is what it took to see you in action."

"Well, this is the Hellmouth. Odds are high that the next big evil will happen here." Buffy offered Faith a small smile. "You too. You knew just what to say to him to piss him off."

"I have that effect on people." Faith winked and turned her attention to Angel. "You okay there, big guy?"

A beat. "Just glad to see you're both safe," came the reply. He might have said something more, but then Gunn came barreling onto the scene, tearing Faith away from Buffy's side and twirling her around as she cackled. And maybe it was petty and small, but the part of Spike that would always hate the git couldn't help but relish knowing that for once in his awful brooding life, Angel was in the presence of two women who weren't tripping over themselves to fawn at his feet or prioritize his feelings. For once, he was the one on the sidelines.

Old habits were going to be a bitch to break. Assuming, of course, that Spike had a mind to break them.

"Gotta say, you sure do know how to show a guy a good time." Charlie was beaming ear-to-ear, even though he looked a bit worse for wear. "Gonna start expectin' this kinda excitement on the regular."

Well. That was interesting. Spike glanced at Buffy, whose brows winged upward. For a moment, he thought she might interrupt, speak a piece, but the minute passed.

Instead, she turned to Angel and offered him a solemn nod. "All good?"

"As can be expected," he replied, staring fixedly at the still-spinning couple. At length, he tore his gaze away and focused on her. "You're leaving?"

"Not immediately, but...yeah. We'll be leaving." Buffy pressed her lips together. "What will you do?"

"I'm staying put. Faith... She's good, doesn't need protection, but I like knowing someone has her back."

She nodded, tossed Spike a quick look, telegraphing her intent, then edged forward to bury herself in her old flame's arms. "Be happy, Angel," she murmured. Then straightened. "Well, not too happy. Obvi-

ously. Or Spike and I'll have to come back and do some serious dustage."

Angel met Spike's gaze over her head. "You too," he said. "Be happy."

Almost sounded like he meant it, but Spike wasn't about to give the sod that much credit.

But then, what did he know? If this last year had taught him anything, it was that people *did* change.

Even demons.

AFTER ALL WAS SAID and done, there wasn't much to saying goodbye.

The lot of them gathered at the Slayer's house, where Spike had left the Desoto. The little witch was in tears again, and though it wasn't charitable, he was glad to see it. Buffy would always be far more forgiving than him—no amount of tapping into how she felt would change that. But he knew it was good, for the best, as he watched his girl fold her friend into a tight hug. Just as he knew this wasn't really goodbye. No matter how much time or distance Buffy had put between herself and this place, these people, they would always have a hold on her. The hold might look different than it had twelve months previous, and the circumstances were hardly the same, but leaving here and staying away would never be in her blood.

He thought she might know that for the way her eyes shone whenever they met his.

"This is our number," Buffy told the redhead, slipping a torn piece of paper into her hand. "And our address. If you're ever in town and want a tour of... Well, our apartment's on the small side, but we can give you tours."

Willow nodded, tears running rampant down her cheeks. "I will. Want tours. All the tours."

"God, Willow," Cordelia said with a sneer, tossing her hair over her shoulder. "You act like you're never going to see her again. Hello, she lives in LA, not Yugoslavia." She rolled her eyes before fixing her stare on Buffy again. "As much as I want to leave the monster mash behind,

it wouldn't be entirely terrible if we ran into each other from time to time." With that, she held out a hand. "Number me."

Buffy seemed taken aback and, bless her, didn't bother to pretend otherwise. Still, she reached into her bag to tear free another scrap of paper and jotted down their digits.

"Thanks," Cordelia said as she pocketed the number. "If something freaky happens, it's good to know someone who can handle it."

"That's me. Freak girl." Buffy tried for a smile that ended up looking more like a wince before turning her attention to the boy. "Xander... If you ever want to, you know, talk... Well, Willow has my number."

Xander offered a stoic nod but didn't say anything. Which was good, because if he ran his trap, there was a decent chance Spike would rip out his tongue, hateful thing that it was. The boy's animosity toward Buffy seemed to have dimmed a bit, but not nearly enough for Spike's liking. But the paths were there and maybe they'd find their way back to some level of friendship, even if nothing could convince Spike that Xander deserved it.

The Slayer turned to Gunn next, plastered on a smile. "And you're sure?"

Gunn shrugged, threw an arm around Faith's shoulders. "I'm sure. Not sayin' you won't run into me durin' one of yours and Blondie's midnight strolls, 'cause it's possible...but I think I like it here. Nice change of pace."

Buffy wrinkled her nose. "You do know that *Hellmouth* is not some quirky little nickname, right? It's literally what this is."

"Don't scare easy. Besides..." He tossed Faith a fond grin. "Interested in seein' how long this ride'll last."

Sounded like a right good plan, that, particularly given the way Charlie had come out of himself since they'd rolled into town. After everything the man had been through, he deserved something bright, and Faith was that. Pure bloody fire.

"No worries, B. I'll do your boy right," Faith said, apparently reading the look on Buffy's face. "And no expectations, neither. He knows the score."

"The score?"

Gunn nodded, separating from Faith to move forward so he could take Buffy into a hug. "Know you'd worry about me gettin' all heartbroken," he whispered in her hair, his voice faint enough that Spike was confident he was the only other person who could hear anything. "Just who you are. Ain't in it for the long haul and neither is she, but we're gonna have fun until it fizzles."

Buffy relaxed, but only slightly. "Take care of yourself."

"Always do. 'Sides..." Gunn released her and backed up a step. "It was gonna be a little crowded on the drive back, anyway." He nodded to his left, where stood little Fred and the mini-Watcher. They were apparently swapping out brawn for brains, as the git had gone and toddled head-over for Fred in the time since they'd been in town and had decided to take a mini-holiday in the City of Angels.

He wouldn't say it, but Spike wagered the holiday would become permanent right quick, seeing as Faith wasn't really the manageable sort. In the time they'd been in Sunnyhell, he didn't think he'd seen the other bird so much as blink in Wesley's direction, much less take anything he said to heart. And while Spike didn't think too highly of the pompous git, he reckoned it might be good for Fred to have someone who wasn't Buffy around to worry about. Lucky for him, Wesley did plenty that merited worrying. How he hoped to survive in this world outside of his books would remain to be seen.

Giles was the last person Buffy turned to, and neither of them said anything. She just threw herself into his hug. They'd already gone through the formality of exchanging numbers and it seemed the Watcher was keen on staying in the area, even though his charge was considered dead by the Wankers Council and his livelihood had been blown to bloody smithereens. Something about not being able to tear himself away now that he knew she was alive. Could be he'd up and move to good ole LA, himself, just to be close to her. Spike wouldn't be surprised. Buffy had a quality about her that made everyone want to be near her. So long as the Watcher gave him a wide berth and didn't run his trap too much, he wagered he'd be able to keep from biting the old sod.

Even still, as they were climbing into the car, Spike felt a rush of misgiving he thought might not be entirely his. Talk was one thing and

action another—something he knew better than most. For all of Buffy's talk of leaving this place behind them, she was doubting herself. Would doubt herself, most likely, for the foreseeable future. She was a woman of action, his girl, and decision. She had to be. Unknowns were unacceptable, especially when she could turn those unknowns into solid facts. And she'd lived with unknowns for so long this year that clinging to firm decisions made sense to her, even as uncertainty nipped at her heels.

Buffy didn't say anything as he negotiated the Hellmouth's residential streets, nor did she pipe up when they passed the sign that announced they were leaving town. In the back, Fred and Wesley were reliving the highlights of the fight and working up a load of hormones that would stink up the car in a right hurry. Spike took a few turns harder than necessary just to entertain himself between stealing glances of his girl.

He waited a good long while, he thought, before his patience got the better of him. "You sure this is what you want, pet?"

Buffy started, pulling her gaze from the black-smeared window and turning to him. "What? Sorry."

"Back to LA. Offer still stands if you'd rather—"

"I don't."

"No?"

"No." She shook her head, expelling a deep breath. "Not...not right away, at least."

"Meaning someday."

"Meaning... I don't know. Maybe." Buffy sighed, scooting over to lay her head against his shoulder, her warmth pressed into his side. "Meaning there isn't really one way or another. Right now, LA is home. It might not always be. I kinda think we should maybe make a point to come back every couple of weeks or so, just to...see if there's anything here that can be fixed." She paused. "I'm not where I was with them—any of them. And I maintain I don't want to go back. But...maybe we can go forward. See what happens."

"Reckon you can do anything you put your mind to, pet."

"And...you'd be okay with that?"

Spike sucked in his cheeks and threw his arm around her. "More

than anything, I want you to be happy. Told you as much, whether it's here or there or on the other side of the sodding world."

"That's not really an answer." But he could tell she was smiling, even without looking at her.

"Yeah, pet, it is. Whatever you want." He allowed himself a second —figuring that was all he'd be able to sneak, anyway—to press a kiss to her temple before reaffixing his eyes on the road. "Seems your mum and the Watcher understand, yeah? And your mate, the redhead. Figure enough time, all of them will come around. Might even get along."

"Don't push it."

Spike grinned. "Wherever you want to be is where I want to be. Long as I have you, I'm a happy bloke."

"It's forever, you know. How long you'll have me."

"Plan on holding you to that."

Buffy snuggled closer, and he felt her lips graze the base of his neck. Right over the mark she'd left there.

"Mutual."

59

Living is easy with eyes closed
Misunderstanding all you see
It's getting hard to be someone
But it all works out
It doesn't matter much to me

Buffy didn't really feel at home until they crossed the threshold into Caritas that night. She didn't want to say she was in a funk, but *funk* was the easiest way to describe her mood. The past few days in Sunnydale had been, well, surreal—so surreal they almost felt like a dream once there was some distance between her and the Hellmouth. The drive back hadn't done much to right her head, either, considering the bad-ass demon hunter they'd left with had been traded out for a tweed-wearing super-geek. Plus, finding her mother in her apartment, even if she'd expected it, had been just weird.

But dreams had nothing on reality, even when reality was at its wackiest. After assuring her mother that everything had gone more or less to plan, that the world was safe and things were back to as-close-to-normal in Sunnydale as they could get, Buffy had made arrange-

ments to visit. A real visit, not work-related, where they could do the bonding thing and start to make up for all the time lost. And Joyce had startled the hell out of her, complimenting the apartment, telling her she thought she'd done a good job, considering Buffy had come here with nothing. Hell, her mother had even hugged Spike and thanked him for looking out for her *little girl*, and made it clear that he was invited over any time.

Things weren't perfect, granted. There had been a few wary looks, the hurt that Joyce hadn't been able to entirely mask, or her reservations about leaving. For a moment, Buffy had wondered if her mother *would* leave—if she'd be able to force herself out of the door and back to Sunnydale without Buffy in the car beside her. And as much as Buffy loved her mom, as much as having her back in her life meant to her, she couldn't deny she also needed room to breathe. To be the Buffy she had been before—which meant patrol and karaoke. In that order.

"A sanctuary?" Wesley was whisper-shouting at Fred. "Demons of all kinds can just...co-mingle here without fear of attack? You do realize there are certain types of demons that are at constant war with one another. The idea that any establishment could be a *sanctuary*—"

"It just is," Buffy said, rolling her eyes at the now-former Watcher. It was going to take a good long while before she got used to him. Giles had been bumbling in a fun, paternal way—this guy just rubbed her wrong. She couldn't imagine any self-respecting slayer taking orders from him.

Hence why he was here, she supposed. It hadn't worked out with Faith. Or perhaps he was hoping to take up Giles's mantle where Buffy was concerned.

Well, if that was the case, he was in for one hell of a rude awakening. But Buffy was determined not to worry about that for tonight. Something made much simpler a few seconds later.

"Babes!" Lorne pushed his way through a crowd congregating near the bar, his million-dollar smile fixed firmly in place. "Oh, Buffarino, I was beginning to wonder if I'd ever see your sunny face again." He didn't wait for permission, just pulled her into a bone-crushing hug

before turning his attention to her vampire. "And Spikealicious! You've done something to your aura, haven't you?"

Spike just smirked, tugged Buffy back against him and pressed a kiss to her temple. "Had a rough go of it but made it just fine to the other side. But then, you knew that, right?"

Lorne released a dramatic gasp and fluttered his hands. "Oh my stars, did it finally happen?" He looked back to Buffy, beaming. "Did you finally put this hunka platinum love out of his misery?"

"Huh?"

Spike tightened his grip on her. "Last time we were here, Jolly Green spoke a piece 'bout how life was about to go all sideways."

"He did? I don't remember."

"Well, you were three sheets to the wind, love."

Oh, right. Buffy bit the inside of her cheek to keep from letting loose a guilty giggle, particularly because she wasn't sure the Host had known about the underage drinking that had gone on during their last visit. Odds were he did, but it seemed safer to play otherwise. Demon bar or not, the very real human authorities might get it in their heads to shut this place down.

"What happened?" she asked Spike instead. "Refresh my memory."

He nodded at the stage, where some greenish-orange abomination was shouting out Aretha Franklin lyrics. "Took a turn at the mic, since you fancy it. Didn't mean to have my fortune read but this git can't turn it off."

Lorne offered a sage nod and clapped Buffy on the shoulder. "Got a peek at what was coming. Told him he'd steer clear of the doghouse if he just did what came naturally, which was giving his favorite slayer exactly what she needed."

The other pieces fell into place. That had been the night they'd celebrated her good GED results, the night she'd spilled about the claim being breakable, and kicked off perhaps the worst period of hours she could remember living through. Somehow, she'd completely missed that Lorne had probably gotten a preview of all that.

"So you knew?" she asked the Host. "You knew—"

"Not everything, sugarplum, just enough to give your man a head's up and a roadmap how to get through it."

Spike stiffened at that. "You told me to—"

"Do what comes naturally. And I'm assuming, given the aura change, you did just fine." Lorne looked back to Buffy. "So *did* you ever put this big lunk out of his misery by fessin' up that he's the only vamp in that big ole heart of yours? The suspense is killing me!"

Buffy rolled her eyes, not sure whether to be exasperated or entertained. "So you knew all this time and decided to just keep it to yourself, what was going to happen?"

Lorne, not being an idiot, apparently heard enough in her voice to sense that his answer to this might cost him something more valuable than regular customers. He brought up his hands, his eyes going wide. "Kids, there are things you just don't wanna mess with. Me? I get the luxury of seeing just enough to point you on the path you need to get on in order to get to the place you wanna be. I tell you too much and you get tossed off that path. Honestly, Little Miss Buff..." He neared. "You know how you take things you're *told* better than anyone. You needed to know for yourself. And being that you're both here and your auras are damn near identical, I'd guess I did exactly what I needed to do and said exactly what I needed to say."

That much, she supposed, was fair. Even if the path he'd shoved them toward had been fraught with limbs, potholes, and more than one speed-bump, that they'd made it here meant something.

A year ago, her life had been upside down in every conceivable way. She'd gone through what had been, at the time, the hardest thing she could envision going through. She'd been a confused, twisted mess of a girl, brokenhearted and hollow. Looking back alone was hard enough—how she'd managed to pull herself free was something she wasn't sure she'd ever understand and could never replicate.

"And who is this?" Lorne had shifted his attention to Wesley, who was still gaping at the patrons. "Fred, do my eyes deceive me or did you bring a date?"

Fred went a bit pink but clutched Wesley's hand. "He's new in town," she said. "Visiting from Sunnydale."

"Visiting?" Lorne eyed him up and down. "Nah, poodle. Methinks this one will stick around for a while. Come on—after staying away so long, you *all* owe me a song."

"Song? In front of people?" Buffy surveyed the club. "None of these demons will take me seriously on patrol if they hear me sing!"

"Gives you the advantage then, doesn't it?" Spike purred in her ear before nipping at it. "Come on, Slayer. What are you afraid of?"

"Maybe it'd be better if you hadn't made fun of her singing voice," Fred said with a smirk.

"Oi. She knows the truth."

"I hate you," Buffy murmured.

"No, baby. You love me. Every bit of me. Especially the evil." His lips neared her ear again, and his voice dropped. "You sing and I sing. I'll make it good for you."

It was unfair that he knew just what to say to get her motor running, or how effortlessly he could do it. And considering that the last few days had been desperate-might-be-the-last-time romps on a bed that wasn't theirs, Buffy was more than looking forward to letting the man she loved do naughty things to her in their very own room, on their very own mattress, fitted with their very own sheets that she had been halfway through changing before her mother had gotten out her last goodbye.

"Fine." Buffy released a long sigh and turned back to Lorne. "Let's get this over with. Any song suggestions?"

"Think I have a few that'll do you both just right."

"It's more Beatles, isn't it?"

"Don't mess with perfection, skittles." He winked, looped an arm around her shoulders, and steered her into him to walk her toward the stage. "Besides, you're closing one chapter and opening another. That's why you're here, right? To celebrate your own *personal* graduation. I don't think it'll kill you to experience some musical consistency."

"Does your logic make sense to *you,* at least?"

Lorne shrugged. "Most of the time."

The song the Host had selected for her was one Buffy knew by melody but not by heart. Enough that the first few chords, when he played a quick sample, struck her as familiar, though she worried about keeping up with the lyrics. He was gracious enough to let her listen to the song twice before ushering her onto the stage. Thankfully, the lighting made making out individual faces a chore, and she wasn't too

eager to bring anyone into relief. Better still if she could pretend there was no audience at all. But once the notes started carrying over the speakers, a sense of calm rushed over her.

You defeated a giant snake, got your mom and your Watcher to kinda give you their blessing on your vampire honey, and know exactly where you stand with said vampire honey for the first time. You got this.

Buffy lifted the mic to her lips, trying and failing to get a handle on how hard she trembled and began to sing. *"There are places I'll remember... all my life, though some have changed. Some forever not for better. Some have gone and some remain. All these places had their moments...with lovers and friends, I still can recall. Some are dead and some are living. In my life, I've loved them all."*

Through the brightness of the spotlight, she found where Lorne had seated Spike and the others. Though the second her gaze connected with her vampire's, she worried she might flub the rest of the song. The way Spike looked at her was something she figured would never stop making her knees do the wobbly thing. Scoffing or mocking she could take, even somewhat relished, but the softness she saw there now, the love brimming in his eyes, made her more aware of herself than if she'd been up here naked.

"But of all these friends and lovers, there is no one compares with you. And these memories lose their meaning when I think of love as something new. Though I know I'll never lose affection...for people and things that went before... I know I'll often stop and think about them. In my life, I love you more."

It was hard to argue with Lorne's choice of song, as she listened to the words that tumbled from her mouth. Actually, it felt pretty damn on the money. Like she wasn't sure she needed to be read after all if this was what he'd picked up just by greeting them as they'd walked in. The place she'd come from, the place she was now, and how she'd gotten here. So as the musical interlude wound to its finish, she felt her eyes begin to well, and that sense of displacement that had chased her from Sunnydale vanished.

Buffy was exactly where she was supposed to be and with the people she was supposed to be with. Whatever came next would come, whether in LA or in Sunnydale. But right now, tonight, she was home.

"Though I know I'll never lose affection...for people and things that went before. I know I'll often stop and think about them. In my life, I love you more." She swallowed, then forced her voice to go up an octave. *"In my life, I love you more."*

The crowd broke into modest applause as the final chords played out, and despite feeling a bit embarrassed, Buffy couldn't help but grin. She gave a little curtsey, then another when some generous maybe-souls threw in a few wolf whistles for good measure. When she glanced at the table where Spike and the others had parked and saw Fred and Wesley sitting alone, a thrill raced up her spine and settled at the back of her neck. That could mean only one thing.

Buffy whirled around and hurried toward the backstage, unable to hold in her giggle as Spike swept her into his arms.

"Takin' an ungodly amount of willpower not to strip you down and shag you senseless right now," he murmured into her ear right before thrusting his hips against hers so she could feel just how much he meant that. "Best bloody performance of your life, that was."

"Aw, better than taking out a giant snake?" She grinned and drew him down for a kiss. "I didn't sound too pitchy or, you know, terrible?"

"You sounded perfect." Spike nipped at her lips, then buried his face in the crook of her neck, and she could feel him trembling against her. Giddiness, she knew, but a healthy measure of something else. "Know you didn't choose it, pet, but—"

"Every word."

He released a long sigh, relaxing into her. "Fuck, I love you." He pressed his lips to her throat. "With every part of me, understand. You're in my dust."

"That's sweet but something we will never actually put to the test because you're going to stay all Spike-shaped. Sorry, but that's the deal. No weaseling out of it."

"None whatsoever." Spike pulled back, winked at her. "Now, go sit that scrumptious little arse of yours down and let me serenade you."

"Lorne's still all about the Beatles with us."

"Yeah, I heard. Fortunately, they have a decent tune or two left that I haven't already performed. Then I'll introduce him to the Sex Pistols."

Buffy wrinkled her nose. "I'll warn him."

"You're hilarious, Slayer. Now go sit down. You'll miss the show."

"Yes, sweetums," Lorne agreed, scurrying toward them. "Go sit your cute little booty down. We'll discuss all things your aura after your vamp-muffin graces us with his vocals."

Getting read by the Host was one of those things that made her the good and bad kinds of anxious, had since that first night when he'd told her that her worries were understandable and she was on the right path—so long as she didn't let herself get distracted. But the look on his face now wasn't like it had been then—he was grinning. Hell, his eyes were doing the twinkly thing. That had to mean good things, right?

"Buffy!" Fred squealed when Buffy approached their table. "You were awesome. I love that song."

"Quite agree," Wesley said, scooting over to make room for her. "Excellent selection."

"Thanks. And who knows? One of these days I might even get to decide what I sing for myself." Buffy paused, considering. "Though if that means more public performances, I'll just skip it."

"Spike isn't still making fun of your singing voice, is he?" Fred asked sternly. "Because I don't mind telling you, I'm pretty sure I saw him wipe away a tear or two. And I don't think he breathed once through your entire song."

"He's a vampire," Wesley pointed out with a frown.

"Yeah, but he's a weird, breathy-type of vampire," Buffy replied.

And he was about to take the stage. The chatter from the surrounding demons immediately died down, and she could have sworn she saw a few female demons by the bar elbowing each other and giggling. Likely they had seen her man heading up before she'd finished and had an idea of what was coming. Before long, her vampire would have his own flock of groupies.

And if any of them so much as got close enough to touch him, she'd introduce them to Mr. Pointy.

"Ladies and gents, the wait is over," Lorne told the crowd, beaming. "Please join me in welcoming our very own Platinum Poodle back to the stage."

Spike made a show of stalking out with a sneer—he had a ways to go before he fell in love with Lorne's pet names as Buffy had. The club was gracious with its applause, and that group of giggling demons shrieked a few things in a language that she didn't understand. But from his snicker, Spike did. He would have to tell her afterward just how badly she'd need to slay them.

Then the music started, bold with the horns and sounding somewhat official, and her world zeroed in on the stage.

"There's nothing you can do that can't be done," he purred into the mic. *"Nothing you can sing that can't be sung. Nothing you can say but you can learn how to play the game. It's easy."*

"Eeek!" Fred squealed and clapped her enthusiasm. "I didn't know what to expect but, oh my god, Buffy."

Wesley cleared his throat, looking a bit self-conscious. "It is a good song."

"Lorne does know how to pick 'em."

"Nothing you can make that can't be made," Spike continued, those ocean-blue eyes of eyes pinned on her. That was the way of it with him—had been from the start. *"No one you can save that can't be saved. Nothing you can do but you can learn how to be you in time. It's easy."*

Buffy swallowed, and that feeling from before—that sense of rightness, of homecoming, of being exactly where she was meant to be settled over her again. The uncertainty didn't seem so bad when he looked at her like that.

And the meaning of Lorne's song choice wasn't exactly lost on her.

"All you need is love. All you need is love. All you need is love, love. Love is all you need."

God, the things this man did with his voice. There should be a law. Whether he was just taunting the mic or putting some fire behind his vocals, the effect was the same. Buffy melted into a little puddle of Buffy goo.

"Nothing you can know that isn't known. Nothing you can see that isn't shown. Nowhere you can be that isn't where you're meant to be. It's easy."

"Bah-bah ba, dah-dah da," Fred sang, then burst out laughing when Wesley favored her with a half-bemused, half-totally charmed look.

"All you need is love. All you need is love. All you need is love, love. Love is all you need."

"All you need is love." Suddenly Lorne was on stage beside the vampire, drink in one hand, and beaming. He turned to the crowd and made a wild *join in* motion. *"All together, now!"*

Spike rolled his eyes, though Buffy could tell he was struggling not to smirk. *"All you need is love."*

"Everybody!"

"All you need is love. All you need is love, love. Love is all you need."

Lorne clapped him hard on the back and winked. *"Love is all you need. Yee-hai!"*

"We done now?" Spike asked bluntly, his voice carrying and earning a round of chuckles from his super fans. The demon fangirls batted their eyes outrageously and made come-hither gestures that would get them nice and slain if they didn't watch out.

The Host didn't bother to acknowledge Spike's question, rather took the opportunity to point directly at Buffy before belting out, *"She loves you, yeah yeah yeah. She loves you, yeah yeah yeah."*

Fred burst into another series of giggles, which only intensified when Buffy turned her gaze onto her friend. "What?" she asked, wiping at her eyes. "I mean, you do. Don't you?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Buffy replied dryly in song, and though she wanted to, she wasn't quite able to keep herself from grinning. There was something infectious about Fred's mirth.

The roar of the crowd drowned out the concluding notes, several patrons leaping to their feet to better demonstrate their appreciation with gusto. Spike again offered his trademark smirk, gave a little bow, then bounded off the stage and into a throng of admirers. For a moment, Buffy thought they might swarm him—the demon groupies certainly looked more than willing—but her vampire raised his hands and shifted into game face. This seemed to be enough to let others know that he was not a man to be crowded, even in a sanctuary.

The next second, Spike was at the table, squeezing into place beside Buffy and greeting her with an enthusiastic kiss.

"Enjoy the show?" he asked against her lips.

"Mhmm. Your voice does things to me."

He grinned. "Fair's fair."

"I'm not the only one. You're *this close* to needing a security detail. Some skanky demons were making eyes at you."

"That a fact?" Spike grinned wider, bringing up a hand to play with the wisps of hair at her nape. "These birds makin' my kitty's claws come out?"

"Not really. I mean, I will kill them all dead, but that's just part of the whole sacred duty thing."

He laughed and caught her mouth again, and Buffy let herself get lost in him. In the way his lips moved against hers, how he tasted—of leather, whiskey, and cigarettes. Of pure Spike. Of home.

After doing a few very naughty things with his tongue, he pulled back and settled his mouth at her ear. "Gotta know, Slayer... Just how wet are those knickers of yours?"

Buffy flushed and smacked his chest. "Bad."

"Oh, baby. Play your cards right and I'll do an encore. Still haven't sung 'Something' for you."

"You've sung many somethings."

He rolled his eyes. "Thinkin' Jolly Green's obsession with this particular band is as much to educate you on the classics," he murmured, then pitched his voice lower. *"You're askin' me will my love grow? I don't know, I don't know."*

A shiver ran down her spine. "Oh god, what's that?"

"'Something'," he replied insolently. "Sing it to you proper when we're home.

At that, she couldn't help but grin like an idiot. If there was anything better than a Caritas performance, it was a private show in their bedroom.

But before she could allow her imagination to run too wild with her, Buffy caught sight of Lorne negotiating his way between tables and immediately stiffened. While she was reasonably certain he wasn't about to drop a bunch of doom and gloom on her—every big fight earned at least a little reprieve, right?—she knew to never say never.

Spike must have felt it, for he tugged her closer to him. "Together, yeah?"

"Kids, if there had been a show going on, your numbers would've

stopped it." The Host beamed at them before favoring Fred and Wesley with a rather pointed look. "And don't think you're off the hook, either one of you."

"I beg your pardon?" Wesley asked, stricken.

"Oh, come on." Fred tugged on his arm once, then again so he got the memo and began scooting his way to freedom. "Don't you want your fortune read?"

"My fortune?"

"Sing a little song, bear your little soul open to yours truly, and I'll do what I can to set you on the right path," Lorne explained with a shrug. "Go around back. Ricky will get you both set up. I need to talk with the lovebirds."

Wesley gulped. "Ricky?"

Fred rolled her eyes, but in a soft, affectionate sort of way that betrayed just how much she liked the man. Which was good, Buffy supposed. Somebody had to. And who knows—maybe she'd warm up to the guy once she spent some time with him.

After all, she thought, stealing a glance of her vampire, stranger things had happened.

"Alone at last," Lorne said as he assumed the seat Fred had vacated. He must have seen something on Buffy's face, for he offered a soft smile before reaching across the table to pat her hand. "No worries, sugarplum. You did good. The both of you did good. I'm talking *pure* good. No offense to the soulless among us, of course."

Spike snickered, squeezed Buffy's shoulder. "I've made peace with it," he said. "This whole bein' a white-hat business."

"I don't think anyone could ever call your hat *white*, Spike. Maybe cloudy, a bit of light gray thrown in, but definitely not white." Lorne turned his red eyes back to Buffy. "I can't answer your biggest questions about what comes next. Sorry, Charlie, power doesn't work like that. But from what I *did* see, your story is an open book, waiting for you to fill in the lines. Right now, this second, you're exactly where you're supposed to be."

"So coming back to LA *was* the right choice?"

"For right now. For tomorrow, who knows? You got people here who love you oodles"—Lorne jerked his head vaguely in the direction

of the stage, where Fred had disappeared—"and you have people *there* that love you just as much. But no matter where you go or where you land, you'll always be with the person who loves you the most. And kitten, I gotta tell you, there ain't a lot of people in this world who can say the same. From where I'm sitting, you hit the motherload."

With that, he turned to Spike, his expression sobering a bit. "That's not to say it's smooth sailing forever and ever. I can see enough to see that there are hard times ahead—not *what* they are, but that they're there. Crazy little thing called life, and there's no getting around it. But in between those hard times are times like right now. The last time the two of you were in here, you were close but no cigar. You stick together the way you have been and I can't imagine much of anything will be able to take either one of you down. Remember—secrets are nobody's friend. You got where you are by finally being honest. Don't be afraid to piss each other off, 'cause it's gonna happen, but as long as you keep the lines of communication open—"

"This a couple's counseling session?" Buffy blurted, a bit hot in the face. "I thought you would just tell us what came next."

Lorne rolled his eyes. "I *am*. Right now, it's blue skies but that ain't the way it's gonna stay, and you know it. I'm telling you what I know based on what I can see and what I *have* seen. Like I said, the last time you two were in here was about the purist I'd ever seen your connection and you weren't there yet. You are now and *woof*, it's blinding. Just giving you advice I hope you remember whenever you start to backslide." Again, he must have read something on her face, for he sighed and patted her hand again. "All's wine and roses. You two are gonna be okay. Now, if you'll excuse me..." The Host rose to his feet once more and turned his attention to the stage, where Fred had just emerged from between the curtains. "My superpowers are needed elsewhere."

Well, that had been blunt. Was it possible for something to be equal parts comforting and terrifying?

When Buffy was sure that Lorne was a reasonable distance away, she dipped her head in Spike's direction and murmured, "I hope that made sense to you because I'm not sure I understood any of it."

Spike rumbled a low chuckle that had her squeezing her thighs

together. "Bloke talks mostly in circles as it is. Think, Slayer, he just didn't see anythin' too excitin'. Reckon that means we have a piece to ourselves for a spell."

The concept was difficult to wrap her mind around. Even during the summer when things had been mostly quiet, the knowledge of what lay ahead—the inevitable return to Sunnydale, managing through her feelings regarding the claim and the book, and finally finding the courage to tell Spike how she felt—had loomed on the horizon, a black cloud carrying a series of storms, one right after the other. It had been a long time, before she and Angel had gotten pelvic, since her path had been clear.

"I'm going to worry about not having anything to worry about," she muttered.

Spike laughed again and ran his finger along the mark on her throat. "'Course you are."

"You'll love me anyway?"

"Through every sodding second."

"Then I guess we'll be okay."

He kissed her temple. "Take it as it comes, all of it. Always in for a good fight, pet. You know that."

That was an understatement. All they'd done was fight—first each other, then together, then *for* each other. Since that night at the school, Spike had been the one continuous constant in her life. Perhaps that was why it felt so right to be where she was, and why it didn't matter too much where they ended up. Because wherever they ended up would just be a pit-stop, and some pit-stops lasted longer than others.

In that sense, she knew exactly what the Host had meant. He had it right.

❧

"Buffy?"

It took herculean effort, but Buffy managed to lift her head from where she'd dropped it against Spike's shoulder. Her legs were still making with the pinpricks, her lungs working hard to up her oxygen supply. Eventually, she supposed, she'd get to a place where she under-

stood and appreciated that, unlike some people who would remain heartbeat-less, she didn't just breathe to blend in.

But when Spike curled his tongue over his teeth in that way of his, his eyes sparkling with mischief, the whole *breathing* thing seemed negligible.

"Give me a minute," she said. "I think I should at least let the feeling return to my legs before round...whatever."

Spike grinned at her, the light in his eyes softening a bit. "Just fancied hearing it, is all."

"It?"

He nodded, swallowed. "Tell me?"

"I love you."

"Not that. Well, yeah, *that*. Never get tired of hearing that." As though to punctuate the thought, he dipped his head and kissed her with enough love and heat that she started to think that legs might just be overrated. "But what you said. When we got here."

Here being their bedroom? Buffy blinked and looked around, making sure she hadn't missed anything. Everything since Spike had pressed her up against their apartment door had been a blur of flying clothes and stolen kisses and naked fun times. He'd been inside her almost from the second the door had closed and steadily fucked her all the way back to their bedroom. It had been the best of all possible ways to end the evening. The best homecoming a girl could ask for.

Then it hit her.

"Oh," she said, and smiled at him. "I believe my exact words were, *home sweet home*. That's what you wanted me to say?"

Spike released a happy sort of sigh and, before she could brace herself, flipped her over so she was under him, the head of his hard cock slipping inside of her. "That exactly."

"You're a sap."

"You love it."

"You're supposed to sing for me."

"That's what you want now?" Spike replied as he pulled back, all the way out of her. When she whimpered in protest, he flashed her that grin again, then shifted so his shaft slid between her labia and over her clit. "A song? Got better things I could do with my mouth."

Buffy pressed her eyes closed, taking in a deep breath. Hard to focus when he did that thing with his hips—hard to focus when he was near, period, but somehow she managed. "Things like what?"

She felt his brow nudge hers and opened her eyes. That warm blue that she loved so much shone back at her.

"I'll show you," Spike whispered before kissing her and sliding down her body, trailing his lips over her skin, bringing her back from the edge of satiation and throwing her right back into the fire.

And he did show her, she thought in a daze before all thoughts went away. He'd shown her from the very start. All kinds of things she hadn't known, things she couldn't live without now. Things that made eternity seem like not enough time.

Then Spike fitted her leg over his shoulder and buried his face between her thighs, and she let him sweep her away again. Beyond thoughts and worries or concerns for tomorrow. Just them. When the world came back, they'd face whatever it brought with it. And keep facing it together.

Home sweet home.

AFTERWORD

I started writing under the name Ameeya in 2006. I've had to revisit old LJ posts to remember why and I don't have the time or inclination to do that. However, from what I recall, the thought process essentially boiled down to this in:

- Fandom hates claims
- Fandom makes fun of claims
- Holly writes nothing but claims
- Ergo, Holly bad

I need to be absolutely clear—this thought process was *not* a reflection of reality. Yes, a subsect of fandom was vehemently opposed to anything fanon, and (it seemed) claims in particular and yes, some of those detractors might have said things that disparaged fics/authors who did them. I'm not sure—I don't know how much of what I remember was clouded by my being overly sensitive and not yet comfortable in my author skin, despite whatever I would have tried to make others believe. It took years for me to thicken up my author skin—I was on the right path when I first became inactive in fandom, but really, being a professional editor was what did it. I learned to divorce

myself from my writing and the reactions to it (indeed, today some of my favorite reviews for my published work are those that are scathing —like *all* of the negative reviews for *A Higher Education* complaining about the language, feminism, and explicit sex. LOVE. THEM).

In 2006, though, I just wanted to write. I didn't want to write as Holly the Claim Lover, but I also didn't want to budge an inch on the fanon conventions I enjoyed. Beloved in Blood was my answer to these claim detractors—a story I'd write without developing a presence online beyond the forums (this was my original intention but I didn't stick to it because, well, best laid of plans). Beloved in Blood was birthed from one of the critiques of claims I'd read, in that the fics that included claims seemed to just tack them on at the end and not make them a central part of the story. I admit this is something I did (with great relish) because I was always an HEA writer, and HEA to Holly meant that Spike and Buffy got to be together as long as they wanted, human aging be damned. Claims were a quick way to make that the case.

So Ameeya would be an experiment—I'd write fics that made claims the central conflict of the story rather than something done at the end. Lo and behold, Beloved in Blood was born—a fic that is super OOC upon reflection, but I had such a fun time writing that characterization seemed incidental. It was like writing when I first discovered fandom but before I became really involved with the community (and I was super involved with the community back when it was all on LJ). And yeah, there was drama when I was unmasked as Ameeya and a lot of things I did wrong/stupidly then (not intentionally, but intent doesn't matter; I fucked up), but I was determined that the love of writing I'd rediscovered with Beloved in Blood wouldn't go away. I'd use Ameeya as an outlet to tell the stories that would be claim-centric. I'd already started outlining Strawberry Fields based on the fic prompt that occurred during my rewatch (that was another thing about Beloved in Blood – it had me rediscovering my love of Buffy itself). I needed the fic to be claim centric.

If I'd known in 2006 that it wouldn't be until 2020 that I finished the story, I'll tell you right now, I never would have started it. I hated disappointing readers. The last update prior to 2017 was in 2008; I was

still writing for fandom then, but I'd lost steam on this story and I wasn't sure I'd ever pick it up again. In the time spanning the last update to 2017, I continued to receive pleas from readers to finish the story. It hurt reading these for a couple of reasons—I'd abandoned a WIP, something I'd always told myself I'd never do; I missed fandom but was focusing on other things. And though I thought it unlikely, a part of me refused to shelve the idea that I might return one day to finish the story.

But, as you can imagine, returning to a fic after a nine-year absence (during which time I'd really grown up; met my husband and got married, graduated college and became an adult, went through what has been (to date) the worst period of my life with my father's illness and ultimate passing), I was a different writer. Some of the things in my initial outline, which I'd kept, were flat-out out of the question, mostly involving dubious consent or non-con, something that I've lost pretty much all tolerance for. Consent is a BIG thing in Romance, especially because of the genre's patchy history with it. Impaired judgment (sleeping with the drunk girl) had been unmasked in my world as rape. There was a drunken blowjob scene that was repurposed because of this—it still happens in the fic, but where consent had been established. In the original outline, Buffy and Spike were not a couple during the drunken blowjob.

In fact, Buffy and Spike were initially not supposed to become a couple again or intentionally intimate until they returned to Sunnydale. Rather, when they showed up, they were supposed to still be trying Buffy's friends-first edict as she figured things out. There would be the occasional slip-up (the shower scene post-rescue was one of them, and initially much more forced consent than the way it played out in the writing of it), but they wouldn't have consensual P-in the-V sex until the night Buffy snuck out of her house to tell Spike she loved him.

The characters made that very clear to me that they wouldn't be able to hold out that long. And trying to force them to, to come up with reasons why Buffy would keep Spike at arm's length while developing very real feelings for him, felt inorganic. So 2017 Holly decided they needed to be together, if not entirely figured out, by the time they

went back to Sunnydale. There were initially several more LA chapters, a longer sequence with Gunn/Alonna and the club they liberated. The Sunnydale sequence was going to be longer, too. Much more drawn out and with more sex scenes that were cut (sorry, but there is such a thing as too much). Ultimately, Buffy and Spike would return to LA with Fred and Wesley in tow. Gunn would stay in Sunnydale with Faith...for the time being. Neither one of them see the relationship as permanent (and I 'ship her with Dean Winchester, anyway).

I did waffle on whether or not Buffy and Spike would return to LA as I got closer to the return to Sunnydale. The original outline had been written by a girl who couldn't conceive of the pain of losing a parent. Keeping Buffy from Joyce became less palatable to me, knowing her fate, and knowing how much Buffy missed her mother. But Buffy is not me and must make decisions on her own based on where she is emotionally and developmentally. And I do think the compromise we ended up with makes the most sense for where Buffy is at the end of the fic. I also trust that their relationship will become strong over the years Joyce has left. And who knows? Maybe someone will have a vision and spare Buffy the pain of losing her mother. I hope so.

I pulled up a copy of my old, unchanged outline, last saved in 2008 and...for as much as I thought had changed, most of it didn't. Taking out the dub-con sex didn't affect the plot, nor did Buffy and Spike getting together before they were supposed to initially. All of the stuff with the claim, its possible removal, the history behind it—that was new. A nice substitute for the tension of "when will they get together again" that I think actually lived up to the original intent behind Ameeya's creation better than what I had initially planned. Consent also played a role here—I hadn't given Buffy a choice when I first started writing this; that she chose to not break the claim because she loved Spike, not just that she had resigned herself to loving him because of the claim, was very important to me when I came back to it.

So even though I wouldn't have started this fic in 2006 if I'd known it'd be knocking on the door of fourteen years later when I finished it, I'm actually really glad for the break. I think the end product is

stronger because of it—made the conflict more internal, strengthened Buffy and Spike's relationship, and gave the author a chance to grow up in the meantime.

To those of you who started the story in 2006, I hope you're satisfied with the ending you've been asking me for. The way we got there might have changed, but this was always where it was heading. To those who joined me in 2017 when I posted the first update in nearly a decade, thank you for trusting me not to abandon it again (we'll pretend 2018 didn't happen).

To all of you, thank you for letting me grow up with this story.

Until next time, and as my dad would say, be good to yourself and to somebody else.