

SWITCH

Enemies with Benefits #4



HOLLY DENISE



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IF SHE WANTED TO PRETEND HE WASN'T THERE, FINE. NO ONE SAID he had to play by her rules.

Spike chugged down the rest of his beer, keeping his gaze locked on the dance floor, where Buffy was doing her bloody best to give every bloke within vicinity a raging hard-on, moving the way she was. Not that he was paying attention or anything, because he wasn't. The Slayer had made it more than clear that he was to keep his distance. Not come close if he could help it.

But it was a free country, or so they said, and no one could tell him not to go to the bloody Bronze. Especially not certain hot-and-cold blondes who had occupied way too much of his mental real estate as of late.

Of course, though, the second he'd tried to give her what she'd asked for, Spike had started running into her virtually everywhere. If she wasn't traipsing through his bloody backyard every five seconds, she was on the streets near the butcher's where he grabbed his nosh, or at Willy's looking for a lead. Didn't help that the Initiative was still on the lookout for him, either. A couple of weeks back, after he'd been tagged with a tracker, Spike had been forced to knock on the Watch-

er's door for help, hoping against hope—for the first time ever—that Buffy would be nowhere in sight.

Lucky for him, she hadn't been. Then, at least. She'd shown up eventually, fresh off her latest brush with death, and done her damndest not to look at him. Not even when he'd voiced the reasonable observation that her new boy might have been in on this attempt on her life, as it seemed she had a type. The remark had earned him nothing but a glare, though one hard enough he'd wondered if she were actually trying to stake him with her eyes. And that had been that until the giant oaf had shown up in person. Like the Slayer feared Spike might have done something to give the game away, reveal just where it was she had learned those tricks that were undoubtedly driving Finn out of his head.

That had been the worst, Spike decided as he made his way back under the staircase. Smelling it on her, knowing that she'd finally done it—let someone else inside of her. Sure, it had been only a matter of time, especially after he'd run his mouth following their final lesson, but knowing hadn't made smelling the soldier's spunk any easier.

But from the looks of things, could be Spike's luck had turned around, at least where Riley Finn was concerned. The girl on the dance floor now was giving off the sort of signals that no reasonable taken bloke would stand for. Seemed she had finally given Finn the heave-ho—probably as bored with him as Spike had predicted she would be. Hell, Spike wouldn't be surprised to learn that Buffy had stuck with the enormous hall monitor as long as she had just to bloody spite him. More plausible, in fact, than the alternative—the possibility that she'd actually liked the git.

He wondered what would happen if he sauntered up to her now, wrapped his arms around her middle and thrust his cock against her arse. If she'd risk a scene or play along until she could drag him off to the shadows for a good telling off. And once he had her alone...

Spike huffed and glanced down at his crotch, which seemed to be trained only to respond to thoughts of her these days. Bloody traitor.

He did have to say, though, Buffy was doing a decent job at playing aloof. Like she wasn't aware he was near—or worse, didn't care—and it was pissing him right the hell off. For as much damage as she'd done to

him over the past few weeks, how she'd wheedled her way into his head and his heart when he hadn't been paying attention, the least she could do was acknowledge him. This was her fault, after all. He wouldn't know to miss her if he hadn't agreed to her bloody proposition in the first place.

Then again, maybe the Slayer was playing aloof a little too well. *Not* reacting to him wasn't the Buffy he'd come to know and not-loathe as much as he should. He considered her, following her progression from the dance floor and toward the bar, and made a split decision.

Time to see just how unaffected Buffy actually was.

He thought he did a decent job of it, pretending to knock into her like that hadn't been the plan.

"Oh, you," he said with as much derision as he could muster.

Buffy blinked at him, looking a bit sauced, if he did say so himself. "And you," she replied.

Well, that was right infuriating, wasn't it? First time she'd deigned to look him in the eye in a couple of weeks and she was acting like she didn't recognize him. He could shake her. Or punch her. Or grab her and drag her to his mouth, snog her so thoroughly that she forgot why she was brassed with him and welcome him back inside that piece of art she called a body. It was the only decent thing to do.

No. Bugger that. The decent thing to do would be to stake him and have it over with. The fact that Spike had spent the past stretch of days fixated on the way the Slayer felt and tasted was bad enough. Granted, the dance between them had always been primal, sexual, and he couldn't say he regretted the chance to get to experience a slayer like that. Bring his theory to life. Making nice with Buffy had been about survival. Shagging her had been about satisfying a curiosity and forging a way for him to get back to the man he'd been before he'd made the mistake of returning to this god-awful town. Nothing he'd necessarily brag about—especially not to Dru—but also nothing he'd be ashamed of.

At least not then.

Since that night at his crypt, when she'd blown in and blown *him*, he'd realized there was something more to it. That the reason he

couldn't stand the idea of Buffy toddling on back to her towering so-called demon fighter had nothing to do with the fact that she still hadn't fulfilled her end of the bargain, and everything to do with the fact that no one should touch her but him.

Now here she was, sans Captain Cardboard, and blinking up at him like *he* was the one who had lost his head.

"What happened to your tin soldier?"

Buffy grinned—a grin that was very much *not* Buffy. "Don't know. Don't care. Not sure why *you* do, either." She cocked her head. "You're a vampire."

What the hell did that mean? "Bloody right, I am," Spike sputtered, reaching into his duster pockets for his cigs, not sure what else to do. It wasn't right, how effortlessly she could throw him off balance. "And I aim to get back to it, so the sooner you can get those wankers to get this chip outta my head, the sooner ole Spike can kick the dust of this sodding town off his boots for good. Which is what I know you want, so I really don't get what the bleeding hold-up is."

The Slayer was still looking at him funny, a twisted little smirk on her lips. It wasn't a look that seemed at home on her face. More like a mask she'd put on but hadn't taken to all that well. He didn't know what to make of it—didn't like it at all. He'd made knowing *this* Slayer his business since the moment he'd first set eyes on her, and whatever she was playing at now was something new.

"Spike," Buffy said, drawing out his name. "Spike. William the Bloody with a chip in his head. I kinda love this town."

Spike went rigid. "You sayin' you're backin' out now? Oh, that's rich. Got yourself a little taste and now you think you can keep me danglin', at your beck and call for the rest of your days. Fuck, Summers, always knew you were a bitch, but I didn't peg you for a welcher, too."

Now she was eyeballing him up and down, that little smirk stretching wider still. "Hot damn, B. I didn't know you had it in you," she muttered.

"What's that?"

"And I did, didn't I?" Her gaze was on his face once more, bright and beautiful but again striking him as being somehow off. Not in a way he could have articulated—he barely understood what it was he

thought he saw, or didn't see. But before he could dwell on it too much, Buffy was moving forward, placing her hands on his chest in a way that was far too bold for his Slayer, not to mention out in the open where someone might steal a peek and come away with the wrong—or right—idea. “I had it *in* me.”

Spike frowned. Though he could definitely scent that the Slayer had been imbibing, he somehow doubted she'd downed enough to get well and truly sloshed just yet. She certainly didn't seem drunk. The ditzy blonde routine was not like her, either. Buffy had never flirted with him—not openly, at least. Not in a way she'd recognize as flirting.

“You all right, pet?” he asked, having the absurd urge to check her for a fever, though that wouldn't tell him anything. She always felt hot to him.

“Mmm. You're a big bad vampire. Why do you care if something's wrong with me?”

Bloody good question, that. “I don't,” he said quickly—too quickly, even to his ears.

Buffy just smirked again—a smirk that was damn well *not* hers—and used her hold on him to steer him back under the stairs, back, back until his shoulders connected with the nearest wall. And though the Bronze was well and truly hopping tonight, Spike's world centered on the girl in front of him, so much so that everything else became nothing more than background noise.

He would freely admit, he'd had the odd fantasy a time or twelve hundred since she'd flounced out of his crypt that went along these lines. Running into her in the open, getting her to talk to him, look at him like he was something special, tease and taunt until she took pity on him and surrendered. But in every one of those fantasies, Buffy had been, well, *Buffy*. Obstinate and bitchy, yeah, but also soft and warm, armed with that inherent goodness that drove him out of his bloody head, repelled almost as much as it compelled. She cared, his Slayer. And that she cared was what made her special.

The girl looking up at him now through Buffy's eyes, smiling with Buffy's lips, didn't give a toss about anything. He'd been around too many similarly minded creatures to kid himself.

“Good,” Buffy purred, dragging her hands down his chest, giving

him the full show now. "Because there's nothing wrong—except you, Spike. You're wrong. So very, very wrong. And what we did together, that was wrong, too."

Spike's throat tightened, making it difficult to breathe, which would have been a concern if he needed to breathe, which he didn't. The crotch of his jeans was suddenly tight as well, his cock well and fully trained by her now and very willing to see what she had in store.

Again, though, it didn't ring true. Buffy had said those words to him before—the last time he'd been buried inside her cunt, in fact—but she hadn't made them a seduction. She hadn't sounded pleased at the fact, rather choked out as he'd pounded into her how fucking wrong it was that they were doing anything at all. Granted, that had also gotten her hot—the fact that it was wrong—but for Buffy, being hot for him was a problem.

"But you know what?" Buffy continued, close enough now that he could feel her breath on his throat. "I think I've discovered that being *wrong* is sometimes kinda fun. Especially when you're *wrong* with the *wrong* person. And you, Spike, are definitely the *wrong* person." Her hand was between them then, stroking over the bulge in his jeans. "Aren't you?"

Fuck this, there was only so much a bloke could take, right? He'd only meant to knock her off her feet a bit, and now she was seconds away from having him off out here where anyone could see. If the Slayer had decided to shuck discretion, then he certainly wouldn't complain. Spike tugged her close and slammed his lips over hers, managing to swallow a nancyish whimper on his end when the taste that had haunted him for weeks was suddenly in his mouth again. And all of it, everything that had nagged at him since she'd fled his crypt, didn't matter anymore. That she was a slayer and that it was, as she loved to put it, so incredibly wrong to feel anything other than blood-lust for her, miss the parts of her that were *Buffy* and not just *woman* when she was gone, to think about her and pull on his prick and hate the fact that she was with another bloke—the parts of him that were slowly being unraveled because of her. He stopped caring. All he wanted was Buffy.

Except...

Except the hellcat in his arms, the one tearing at him with tongue and teeth and doing any number of things that would have most men nutting their trousers, wasn't Buffy.

It was a ridiculous thought but also right. He knew it was right. No matter how often or how fervently Buffy had objected to kissing him, she'd always responded with light and fire, and maybe some of that twisted hatred that wasn't as twisted or hateful as she wanted to think it was. This girl, though she definitely knew what to do with her mouth, kissed the same way she'd looked at him a moment ago.

Like a bird who didn't care one way or another, was just here to ride it out.

Spike seized her by the upper arms and pushed her back, willing the situation to start making sense. How could it be the Slayer but not? Had her scent right, her body too. The eyes, the hair, everything looked right, part of the Buffy he knew.

Only not where it counted.

"What the hell is this?" he rasped, digging his fingers into her skin and trying so very hard to ignore just how good she felt under his hands. "What's happened to you?"

The bitch just grinned up at him. "What? You can't tell me it's not an improvement."

Compelling argument, that. Buffy plastering herself all over him in public, letting him kiss her—hell, maybe even more than that—was something else. And if she didn't care, why should he? Might as well take what she was offering and have a right old time of it, get what he could from her before her senses returned. His cock was certainly on board with that plan.

"Is it a spell, then?" he asked, because he couldn't bloody well help himself. Apparently, when things were easy with the Slayer, Spike didn't have enough sense to keep his trap shut. "Red hittin' the mojo, is that it?"

The grin on her face widened, and she trailed a hand down his chest. "Why do you care?"

"Just tryin' to suss out the likelihood that you'll come at me with a stake in the mornin'."

"And here I would've pegged you for the kind of guy who likes to

live dangerously.”

“Dangerous, sure. Not daft.”

At that, the amusement lighting her face faded into a more familiar scowl, and even *that* didn’t seem quite right. What the *hell* was going on here?

“Look, if you don’t want the free ride, ain’t no skin off my nose,” Buffy said, and she’d never sounded less like herself than she did in that minute. Not even during the few hours she’d spent wiggling on his lap, cooing sweet little nothings into his ear, and planning the seating arrangement for their so-called nuptials. At least then she had acted like Buffy. “In case you didn’t notice, I’m not exactly hurting for company tonight. Your loss, vampire.”

Spike opened his mouth to object. He hadn’t entirely dismissed the idea of just shrugging and going with it—taking her outside, planting her hands on the wall, and fucking her until she remembered that she’d been avoiding him and snapped back to herself. It was what he *should* do, at least. What a bloke who didn’t give a bloody damn about the Slayer would do. Seize the opportunity to get in his jollies while he could and bugger the rest.

The bitch of it was he *did* give a damn. Much as he didn’t want to.

With a growl, Spike shoved her back, and with enough force that the chip decided to fill his brain with that agonizing buzz just at his own bloody presumption. The growl turned into a muted howl and he seized his head—not sure why, as it did nothing to ease the pain, but it was instinct—and lifted his gaze in time to catch Buffy’s derisive sneer.

“You know what?” she drawled, huffing a little. “I expected a lot, *lot* more from you, *Spike*. Goddamn shame, is what it is.”

He blinked at her, his head still throbbing enough that he wasn’t sure if that was due to her being off her trolley or because of his fun little handicap. But by the time the pain had subsided long enough for him to string two coherent thoughts together, Buffy had vanished back into the throng. Like he didn’t matter. Like their little conversation hadn’t taken place.

If he were a different sort of man, he might be moved to let someone know that something was off with her. Get the cavalry running to the rescue, as they were wont to do.

But, he decided as he headed for the door, catching Buffy sandwiched now between two blokes who weren't wasting any time in touching her all over, he wasn't a different sort of man. Bitch could handle herself.

As for him? He needed to kill something.



THE CEMETERY WAS MORE active than usual, thanks to that other slayer being on the prowl in town. Seemed she'd made as many friends among the demon community as she had enemies. Either way, Spike reckoned he owed her one, as he'd dusted four vampires between the Bronze and home. Old lackeys of the mayor, he'd gathered, who had been out and wondering if she would seek them out as punishment. Spike had been considerate enough to tell them that standing about in the open was a right good way of getting killed in a one-slayer town, never mind when there was a spare running around. Sure, the advice had come as he'd buried his own stake into the pillock's chest, but it was the thought that counted.

Four vamps in one night was fairly decent, especially considering that Buffy, the greedy bitch, never left him anything to kill. Still, as he prowled the rest of the way to the crypt, Spike couldn't help but be brassed at the miserable lack of a challenge he'd encountered. Offing lackeys might be calming but it was hardly satisfying. Especially not in the mood he was in tonight.

When the satisfaction he wanted was the sort only one person could provide.

God, he'd been a dolt. Should have just shoved her against the pool table, stripped her down and buried himself in her cunt. So what if she'd been off? Dru had gone through any number of turns in their years together and he'd shagged her through all of them, however she liked, whatever she wanted. Why should Buffy be any different?

She shouldn't. And she definitely wasn't any better than his black goddess, the woman he worshipped and would happily feed Buffy to, piece by piece, if he got the chance.

It probably said something that that didn't even sound convincing

in his own head. That the thought alone of harm coming to the Slayer made him ache in ways he hadn't since Prague, and on levels he wasn't sure he'd felt before. Just another reason to hate the bitch.

By the time Spike shoved his way inside of his crypt, he was nearly vibrating with anger. At her, yeah, because she deserved it—getting into his head the way she had and making herself at home—but mostly at himself for letting her inside in the first place. It had been so uncomplicated. Shag the Slayer, get her help in getting his fangs back, then snap her neck and make his way back to Dru. Simple. Straight-forward.

And now...

Spike didn't make it too far inside the crypt, just a few feet before the scent hit him. The scent and something more—something that called out to the predator in him. Something familiar, but not so familiar he knew who it was right off. Except part of him did. It wasn't her but close. Enough so that he couldn't help but go on alert.

Slayer.

"Come on out, kitty. No sense in hidin'." He stalked forward. "I can feel you."

There was nothing for a moment, but he knew where she was. Around that pillar, the one in the middle of the place, hiding like...like what, exactly?

"Don't think we've had the pleasure, pet." Spike took another step forward. "Name's Spike. Remember it, 'cause I'll be the one killing you later."

The girl—*Slayer*—snorted at that and came into view, and well, she was a tasty piece, wasn't she? Dark where Buffy was light, firm and curvy and—

Then he met her eyes and everything in him went still.

It made no sense. None whatsoever. He'd never seen this bird before and he damn well would have remembered her. But her eyes... Wrong color though they were, he knew that look. Knew it intimately. And though it was impossible, he couldn't seem to help himself. The name tumbled off his lips.

"Buffy?"

BUFFY COULD CRY.

“You know it’s me?” she asked, the words twisted in a voice that sounded nothing like her own. “You know?”

Spike blinked, his Adam’s apple bobbing. He stared at her a second longer, but the belief there never wavered. Somehow, inexplicably, he knew.

He knew.

She fought back tears, not sure how long she could hold them off. “Oh, thank god.”

And before she could help herself, she was moving forward, throwing her arms—*Faith’s arms*—around the vampire she had last vowed to never set eyes on again. But hell, she couldn’t help it. Moreover, she didn’t want to. Not then. She’d spent the entire walk to Spike’s crypt trying to think of how she could convince him that yes, she was in fact the very same Buffy Summers who had once teamed up with him to save the world and then, two years later, asked him to teach her about sex. Being trapped in someone else’s body wasn’t exactly unheard of—that was how she’d really met Amy, after all—but it was still a hard thing to swallow, even by Hellmouth standards.

“What the bugger is going on?” Spike asked, hugging her back, to her utter shock. She must have caught him off guard.

Buffy sniffed and pulled back, wiping at her eyes. “Faith. She’s the other slayer. She—”

“Yeah, Harris gave me the rundown.” He was now looking *her* up and down and she didn’t know how she felt about that. Actually, she knew exactly how she felt about that and it wasn’t good. Faith was a lot of things—psychotic being at the top—but she was also a certifiable hottie and, now that Buffy thought about it, exactly Spike’s type. He had a thing for crazy brunettes.

That thought shouldn’t matter—shouldn’t even *exist* in her brain as worth acknowledging—but it did and there was nothing she could do about it.

She took another step back, wrapping her arms around herself. “Well, Faith decided that her previous attempts to steal my life were a little of the subtle.”

“Yeah...” Spike rubbed his chin, still checking her out. After a moment, though, he seemed to catch himself and gave his head a shake before meeting her gaze again. “All right, pet, why don’t you start from the top?”

Yes. Talking. About the predicament. That was why Buffy had come here—why she’d *chosen* to come here over going to Giles. Also because Giles had weapons he could fire before asking any questions and Spike, courtesy of the government chip, did not have the same luxury. Granted, showing up at Giles’s with Spike in tow was likely going to make convincing him all the more difficult, but at the least, she could use the vampire as a body shield for any projectiles her watcher might fire at her.

So, in a very rambling and trademark Buffy way, she got the story out. Cliff’s Notes on the history of Faith, some awkward shuffling when she realized she was likely describing Spike’s ideal woman, a breezed-over account of what had happened with Angel, then the coma to the present. Faith waking up, Faith confronting her on the UC Sunnydale campus, Faith going after her mother, and at last the doohickey that had performed the switcharoo. Toss in a few murder-happy watchers and her escape from said watchers and they had themselves a party.

“Right,” Spike said, rubbing his jaw. “So your evil twin’s runnin’ amok in your skin and you decide to come to *me* with this. Any reason, love, or did I just win the lottery?”

That there was a real good question. And aside from the whole “not sure whether or not Giles would aim projectiles at her” angle, she had nothing. The first few seconds after her escape had been more than frantic—she’d had negative time to make a decision and once that decision had been made, she’d forced herself to stick to it. For whatever reason, her instinct had been to go to Spike.

Of course, as recent history could more than demonstrate, her instincts where Spike was concerned had been so far off the mark, they needed a new map.

“I... I dunno,” Buffy said, hugging herself tighter. “I thought you might...”

“What, help?” He barked it out like the thought was laughable. As though he *hadn’t* just hugged her back just a few minutes ago like they were some sort of hugging-friends. “And what exactly is in it for me, eh? The boys in tweed come and cart you away and I got me a town with a slayer that doesn’t have a stake shoved so far up her arse she can’t sit properly. That is if she decides to stick around at all. Win bloody win for yours truly.”

It was that exact sort of statement that just begged to be answered with a punch. But Spike knew her by now, knew her better than most people did—and if that wasn’t a depressing thought, she wasn’t sure what was—and he easily caught her fist as it arced toward his face. He gave it a squeeze, took a moment to study her knuckles, then rumbled a chuckle that had her trembling from head-to-toe in something between outrage and devastation.

God, she really had been fooling herself. There had been no reason—none—to think that Spike would do the decent thing and help her out. After all, he had a point. She’d done everything she could to avoid him since the last time she’d been here. But what exactly had her options been? She’d stormed in here, all but insisted on sucking his dick, then gotten the very thing she should have expected. The same sort of thing she’d been waiting for since that first night with him in the motel—to feel used, degraded, dirty, and wrong. That Spike had

let her go through with the exercise, knowing he was the wrong candidate, had been all kinds of humiliating. Plus she'd cheated on Riley. At the time, she'd tried to rationalize it as something other than what it was—he wouldn't talk to her, tell her what was wrong or how to fix it, so she'd gone to someone who had no qualms running his mouth. But there was no rationalizing it. Buffy had pulled a Hank Summers both in action and in what she'd told herself after to absolve her conscience.

And those were things she couldn't expect Spike to appreciate or understand. Hell, expecting *anything* of him was stupid. This entire thing was stupid. Once this last crisis was over, she should come clean to Riley, tell him everything—sans the fact that her practice guy had been a vampire—and let him decide where they went from there.

Great. Five minutes with Spike and she was kinda glad she was in Faith's body. Suddenly that seemed to be the least of her problems.

Except for the watchers and their very real guns and intent-to-kill-her.

"I can't get that chip out of your head if I'm in England," she blurted. "Or dead. And I definitely can't do it looking like this."

Spike smirked and ran his gaze down the length of her once more, flickering his eyebrows. "Look pretty tasty to me. Care to explain?"

"Because *Faith* doesn't have an in with the Initiative." Buffy bit the inside of her cheek hard enough to draw blood, which she immediately regretted because Spike's nostrils flared and he took on this hungry look she didn't have time to talk her way around. "But thanks, I get the picture. You're hot for Faith. You two would get along in ways that make me sick to think about, but hey, story of my life. Sorry. You need boring ole Buffy if you want that chip removed."

Something shifted behind Spike's eyes—soft and so subtle she nearly missed it, but she didn't. The hardness there faded a bit. And at once she was reminded of that night in the motel, the things he'd said to her as the hours stretched on and he kept stroking and kissing and being with her as she'd never imagined Spike would ever be with anyone. It had been soft at times, almost tender, though he'd chased it away any time she examined him too closely. Like he was afraid of being figured out. That much had seemed so preposterous that she'd

written it off in the days that followed, and especially after that follow-up encounter at Giles's.

Spike having soft, tender feelings for her just wasn't possible. That was the reason she'd come to him in the first place—he hated her, she hated him, which guaranteed he'd be brutally honest with her. As he had been the last time she'd been at his crypt.

"Got you on your knees, didn't it?"

Dammit, this was *exactly* the reason she'd avoided Spike these last couple of weeks. Every time she thought about that night she wanted to cry and rage at the idiot she'd been.

"All right," Spike said, snapping her out of her thoughts, though not nearly as much as she would have liked, considering that they were literally at the scene of the crime. "I'll help."

It took a second for the words to register. "Huh?"

"I said I'd bloody help, *Slayer*. What? Got a hearin' problem on top of everything else?"

"You're...going to help me?"

Spike rolled his eyes like it wasn't the most ridiculous thing either of them had ever heard and dragged his cigarettes out of his duster pocket. "Wager the first step is findin' this runaway body of yours, yeah? Just so happens I know where to start."

"Wait—what?"

"Yeah. Ran into you—or her—not a half-hour ago at the Bronze."

Buffy stared at him, her breaths coming faster. "You saw her. You saw—"

"Point of fact, thought I was in for a right nice evenin', too. Seems Faith doesn't have your hang-ups when it comes to... Well, anything, come to think of it."

And just as easily, the warmth—the spark of hope that had flared inside her—withered and died. Buffy stumbled back a step, then another, the urge to cry striking her harder than it had before. She sniffed and blinked to ward off the tears but dammit, they came anyway.

So that was why Spike was so cavalier about this.

"Well," Buffy said, forcing herself to speak around the frog in her throat, "that's...typical. That's what it is, Spike. Typical. I hope you

enjoyed yourself because that's the last time you're touching that body ever again."

She was halfway to the crypt door before he seized her arm and swung her around to face him. Buffy was ready, had expected this. The platinum pest never knew when to leave well enough alone, and expecting him to start now was just dumb. But he caught her fist again with apparent ease—she couldn't even hit handicapped vampires right—and used his hold on her to tug her toward him.

"Don't listen worth a lick, do you, Slayer?"

"Let me go!"

"Said I ran into her. Never said I did anything, did I?"

"Yeah, and I'm sure you found out that Faith doesn't have my hang-ups during bible study."

He grinned at that, the same grin that appealed to both the warrior and the woman in her. The warrior for the urge, the *need*, to smack it off his too-handsome face, and the woman who had better ideas of what to do with his mouth.

"Gonna really be sore because the bitch stuck her tongue—*your* tongue—down my throat? Nowhere it hasn't been before."

"It wasn't even me!"

"And I suppose that matters?"

No, it didn't. That was the point. That was why it hurt. But dammit, she couldn't let him see that—she couldn't even pause long enough to evaluate why that was the case in the first place, because who Spike did or did not kiss, touch, fondle, or fuck was so none of her concern. Buffy gave up on connecting her fist to his face, jerked free instead, and resumed her trek toward the door.

"Oh, come off it," Spike snapped, on her heels. Of course he was. "What, was I supposed to know? Look deep into your eyes and see it's not *my* slayer behind the wheel? Is it not enough that once I sussed out something was wrong, I came back here rather than take her up on what she was practically giving away?"

"No, it's not enough," Buffy replied, dodging his hand as he reached for her again. "You were supposed to know. As close as we've been, as much as we've done—you didn't know it wasn't me."

"Might not've known what exactly was off, but I knew somethin'

was, didn't I? Otherwise, why the bleeding hell would I have come home in the first place?"

That much managed to pierce through the fog that had settled around her head. Buffy stopped short, practically on top of the door now, her breath caught. What did it mean that he'd come home? *Why* had he come home? Why wasn't he somewhere with Faith in Buffy's hijacked body, doing things to her other *other* mortal enemy that Buffy knew for a fact would be more than a match for whatever Faith threw at him?

It shouldn't matter—definitely not enough to stop and ask him about it now. She had more important, not to mention pressing, things to worry about without going down that particular rabbit-hole.

Yet down she went anyway.

"You knew something was off and you came home," Buffy repeated. "Faith was pawing at you and instead of screwing her, you turned her down."

Spike didn't say anything, just glowered.

"Why?" she asked. "If it was all the same to you, then why—"

"Cause I did."

"You could've done what you wanted. Whatever you wanted."

"That's what I did, pet. What I wanted. Got close enough to put together you *hadn't* knocked loose that stake up your arse and wagered Red had worked some mojo that made your head go wonky."

"But still, you could have—"

"But I *didn't*, Slayer, all right? We gonna chat about that all night or go out and find the bitch who made off with your body?"

She had no idea how he did that—how he could make her so freaking mad one second, mad enough to cry, and then walk it back the next. Make it sound like his decision to not score what would have been an easy lay made him a saint or something, even if it made no sense.

Most of the time she felt she understood Spike just fine—what he wanted, what motivated him, and how to get his cooperation. He wasn't all that complicated, after all.

Except...

Except she kept thinking about that night in the motel, which

shouldn't have meant anything—*hadn't* meant anything. The things he'd said to her, about her—that was when he wasn't trying to piss her off—had been almost, well, nice. Actually, no *almost* about it. They'd been nice. Granted, said in a way that made it clear he resented what he was saying, but no one had forced his hand there. He could have told her anything and she would have had no reason not to believe him, because that was why she'd come to him in the first place. The knowledge that he wouldn't spare her feelings if she was terrible—the knowledge she'd get the truth from him.

What had he told her?

That she was the sort of woman a man couldn't be with just the one time without wanting more. That she felt good. That it was unlike anything he'd experienced before. That he would miss it.

And then when she'd shown up at Giles's place. Not the time they'd had sex, but right after the night at the motel. There hadn't been a reason to visit except to tell him that she would honor her end of the bargain, but being that she'd already gotten what she wanted, even that much seemed superfluous in retrospect. The sort of thing a girl told herself when she wanted an excuse to check in on a guy she liked.

Which couldn't be true. Absolutely couldn't. She'd known it then and she knew it now. Her future was all about the normal. As in no vampires, and certainly no vampires who shared a moral compass with Charles Manson. If it couldn't work with Angel, the love of her life, it absolutely couldn't work with any other men who clocked in at room temperature.

Maybe that was it—the Angel thing. Maybe that was why she'd been so ready to throw everything she'd started to build with Riley out the window. The kiss they'd shared hadn't moved mountains so she'd gone back to Spike, determined to test her lips out on someone else. And there was definitely one thing Spike shared in common with Angel—the concrete knowledge that she was doing something she shouldn't, which made things more exciting than they would be under normal circumstances. The kisses they'd stolen had been forbidden, therefore electrifying. Same thing with the sex. And at the slightest sign of trouble with her steady human fella, Buffy had gone back to Spike. Not because of him or anything, but because it was wild and

careless and dangerous, three things Buffy could never afford to be, no matter how good it felt.

That felt better—safer.

It also didn't feel entirely honest, but she couldn't think about that or Spike or that night. Not with impunity, and certainly not after what had happened the last time she'd been in this crypt. No matter what warm fuzzies Spike had left her with at the start, the things he'd said to her after their last encounter would remain with her forever.

He'd used her, known that he wouldn't be able to help, and let her debase herself anyway.

But you knew too, didn't you? You knew.

She didn't want to think about that.

"Fine," she said in her best holier-than-thou tone, which sounded super wiggy coming out in Faith's voice. "Let's go get my body back."



BUFFY WRINKLED HER NOSE—*FAITH'S nose*—as she negotiated her way through the throng at the Bronze. Under normal circumstances, she wasn't exactly a stranger to attention, wouldn't hesitate to shake her groove thang on the dance floor, and often with the intent of attracting male admiration. She was young, blonde, in amazing shape, and pretty easy on the eyes, if she did say so herself. All in all, being leered at and groped was not necessarily a new thing. It was a part and parcel of going out.

Didn't explain why she felt so icky now. The looks guys were leveling at her felt different, off somehow. Like they could see more of her than was on display, even though she wasn't showing off as much skin as Faith might under normal circumstances. It shouldn't bother her—wasn't like the body she was in was one over which she felt any sense of modesty—but it did bother her. It bothered her a lot.

"Skittish, pet?" Spike tossed over his shoulder, because apparently nothing could escape his notice. The jerk.

"I'm not used to people looking at me like this," Buffy muttered, her voice low enough that she struggled to hear it, though pitch-perfect for a vampire companion.

"I'd think not," he replied, and she caught the edge of a smirk on his lips before he turned to face forward again.

"And what the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Spike stepped to the left so he could fall into stride beside her. "Well, look at you," he said, gesturing. "Body language is all wrong, but everythin' else screams that you're the kinda girl who could show a fella a right old time."

"Okay, my actual body isn't exactly repulsive," she hissed, grabbing him by the arm and squeezing tight in warning. "And if you say something gross—"

"Not a blessed peep," Spike replied, all innocence, except for that wicked smile of his. "Have some bloody fond memories of that body."

"That was what I meant by gross!"

"Oh, so I can shag you but I can't like it, is that right?"

Buffy nearly tripped—would have had Spike not seized her around the waist and hauled her back to her feet, which had the unfortunate side-effect of bringing her flush against him, his chest hard, his breaths harder, and his eyes suddenly all she could see.

She exhaled slowly, trying to gather her bearings. Of the many avenues she'd known this night might take, getting up-close-and-personal with Spike had been the only one marked firmly off-limits, though it was hard to remember why when he looked at her like that. Hard, but not impossible. All she had to do was summon the memory of him gloating about how he'd gotten her to give him a blowjob even though he'd known she'd gain nothing from the encounter.

Buffy stiffened and pulled back. "Save it for Faith," she said, relieved when her voice came out firm and not shaky.

Spike just blinked. "Save what for Faith?"

"The eyes."

"Save my eyes for Faith?"

"You were making eyes at *me*."

"Was not," he replied, defensive.

"Yeah, you were."

"I bloody caught you before you hit the floor and knocked even more sense outta that head you've borrowed. Think the words you're lookin' for are *thank you*."

"I wouldn't have fallen. I—"

"Fuck me," Spike muttered, rolling his eyes. "If I wasn't already sure it was you in there, I'd bloody well know it now. No other woman on the sodding planet could be nearly as infuriating."

"Me? I'm infuriating?"

"Glad we can agree on somethin'."

"You're the one who's been drooling over Faith all night."

For a moment, he looked angry enough to strike her. She should know—she'd seen that look, often before being struck. He got as far as balling his fist before something changed behind his eyes, like he'd just remembered something. She'd seen that look, too. He'd remembered that he couldn't land a punch without hurting himself in the process.

Spike sucked in a breath, gave their surroundings a look to make sure no one had caught that, then seized her by the elbow and all but dragged her to the space under the stairs.

"You dizzy bint, in case you haven't noticed, I'm here doin' *you* a favor. Didn't ask for anything, did I? If you'd rather find the bitch yourself, then by all means, Slayer, piss off."

He was right. She hated it that he was right. But then, she hated most things about him. "Just stop looking at me like that."

"Like what?"

"You're checking me out and it's gross."

Spike blinked and regarded her in such a way she felt like she and Harmony might be kindred spirits, something Buffy so did not appreciate.

"Tell me," he said a moment later, "why's it you care?"

"What?"

"You seem right twisted at the thought that I might fancy this Faith bird." He arched his eyebrows. "You jealous, pet?"

Though she'd known it was coming, the use of that particular word still managed to hit her like a blow to the gut. There was no rationale for the way she felt at the moment—or any moment, really, where Spike was concerned. It wasn't like she had any sort of claim on him or anything, but the thought of him and Faith together, knowing how well-matched they were, how much he'd probably like her, how much he'd...

Buffy shoved those thoughts to the back of her head. They didn't make sense. Whoever Spike decided to screw was his business, not hers.

"Of course not," she managed to grit out. "I just don't want you ogling her when I'm stuck in her body."

He didn't look convinced. Of course he didn't, the ass. "Right. That's all it is."

"What? You think I'm lying?"

"Think I've told you this before. Offered to ride it out with you, if memory serves."

"There was nothing to ride out! I have a boyfriend."

He rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Right. That old chestnut."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Means you keep comin' up with all these excuses to come and sniff around yours truly. How much time do you spend thinkin' of me when you're with him, hmm?"

The question threw her off guard but damned if she'd show it. "I don't."

"Right. So you don't think of me at all when the wanker is touching you." As if to demonstrate what he meant by *touch*, Spike dragged his fingers from her shoulder to her elbow. Not skin-on-skin, thanks to Faith's surprisingly conservative-for-her wardrobe, but that didn't keep Buffy from shivering all the same. "Snogging you," Spike continued, fully invading her bubble now, the whisper of his cool, unneeded breath caressing her lower lip. "Inside of you."

Buffy inhaled, pressing her thighs together and hating herself for it. There was a lot she could say on the subject that was her and Riley's sex life and yeah, it kinda sucked, big whup. The lessons she'd mortgaged her body to take hadn't done what she'd wanted them to do—instead of spending less time in her head, worrying about how she looked, tasted, and felt, she practically lived up there. Wondering what it meant that Riley didn't make the same sounds Spike did when he kissed her, or that he wasn't nearly as verbose. Riley liked touching her just fine, it seemed, but he lacked the command Spike had taken during their night together. More like he thought she would break if he

pushed or nudged her a bit too hard, despite the fact that the day after they'd first had sex, it had been Riley who had limped around.

Fact of the matter was, Spike was pretty much all she could think about when she and Riley were together. Like he had rented out space in her head for the sole purpose of rambling on inane observations—or rather, criticisms—of her life choices. Particularly about her boyfriend, who was just fine, thanks. Perfect, actually. Perfect because he was the anti-Spike in every conceivable fashion.

"I don't think of you when I'm with him," Buffy said, her tone firm. "Ever."

Spike searched her gaze for a moment, then a slow smirk spread across his lips.

"What?" she spat.

"Forgot, didn't you?"

"Forgot what?"

He leaned forward so that his mouth was right at her ear, and when he spoke, the low timbre of his voice had all the parts she'd managed to keep from trembling spiraling out of her control.

"I'm a better liar than you." Spike pulled back and winked. "New face doesn't make a lick of difference where that's concerned."

"God, you are so full of yourself."

"Yeah. And you wish you were too." He did that thing with his tongue, dragging it across his teeth and wagging his brows. "Offer stands, pet."

Okay. That was it. She'd clearly been out of her mind to come to Spike for help in the first place. And hell, at this rate, she'd just as soon take the crossbow or whatever Giles would throw at her the second she walked through his door. It would be a step up from this.

"You're disgusting," she informed him. "And useless. If Faith was here, she's clearly gone, and you're wasting my time."

"If you say so," Spike replied, stepping back, bringing up his hands. "Have a jolly hunt, then."

Buffy tried not to growl, she really did, but something growl-adjacent might have rumbled through her throat anyway. She made to bypass the jerk and had made it a good five feet when he said, loudly,

“Reckon it’ll be simple, yeah? What with your keen sense of smell and experience huntin’ down slayers.”

She pressed her eyes closed, gritting her teeth. *Just keep walking. Just keep walking.*

But she didn’t. Of course she didn’t. She was a crazy person.

Instead, she whirled around, crossing her arms. “Are you saying you know where she went?”

Spike took his time turning to face her, that smirk still in place, and *god*, she hated him so much. “Saying I have the scent,” he replied, pulling out a cigarette in the same, deliberate manner. “So I know where to go from here.”

“You are so full of crap.”

“Am I? That a gamble you’re willing to make, Slayer?”

“How do I know you’re not just trying to buy her time? You said you ran into her earlier—maybe you two hatched some stupid scheme to get me sent to England in her place.”

He chuckled. “Maybe we did.”

“I hate you.”

“And I’m all you’ve got.” The grin broadened. “Again. If you wanna find her before she hops a bus and takes that delectable body of yours across the bloody pond, that is.”

Buffy glowered at him. She tried to read past the smugness, but it was no good. For whatever reason, she wasn’t as talented at reading Spike as he was her. He could be telling the truth—he could be lying off his ass. Even thinking about trusting him now was beyond-the-pale stupid.

But god, what were her options? Giles could likely be convinced that she was Buffy, providing he refrained from firing projectiles at her long enough for her to spew a few things only Giles would know, but he wasn’t a bloodhound in person form the way Spike was. If Spike was being straight with her, he could get her to Faith the fastest.

And if he wasn’t...?

Well, at least she’d have the pleasure of staking him before the other watchers dragged her off to the Mother Country.

“Fine,” Buffy ground out at last. “Lead the way.”

SPIKE COULD KICK HIMSELF. A LOT.

There was something about the Slayer that made it impossible for him to keep his bloody gob shut. Granted, most of the time, he didn't mind it so much just because getting a rise out of her was its own sort of rush. The way her eyes darkened, the way her blood pumped extra hard, the faces she'd make before shouting back something at him that would either wound or have him howling with laughter. She didn't back down, his Buffy, even when she didn't have anything useful in that arsenal of hers. And bugger if he didn't love that.

That was most of the time. The rest of the time, he just got in his own sodding way. Like that night at his crypt, when she'd been trembling and vulnerable and desperate for some sort of affirmation that she wasn't a bird who had just run around on her man for no good reason, even if that was exactly what she was. Even if that was exactly what she'd done.

Wasn't her fault Angelus had twisted that head of hers so thoroughly she couldn't walk in a straight line. She wasn't the first and odds were brilliant she wouldn't be the last. And yeah, that brassed him off—had ever since she'd come to him to help fix her little non-existent problem—but tell that to a woman still besotted with the giant fore-

head. He'd tried, hadn't he? Whatever else, Spike remembered every sodding second he'd spent in that motel room with her—the sounds she'd made, how she smelled and tasted, and everything he'd said to disabuse her of the notion that she lacked for anything. And bollocks, he hadn't *needed* to do that, had he? Had been against his own nature to soothe the Slayer rather than make her bleed.

Thing was, ever since that night in his crypt when she'd sunk to her knees and taken his cock into her mouth, Spike had been living with the unsettling realization that making the Slayer bleed had been knocked off the top of his to-do list. In fact, it wasn't anywhere on the list at all anymore. That much alone had taken some time to understand, never mind accept, and life had been bloody well unbearable ever since.

He'd thought, hoped, it was just more of that itch she'd poisoned him with. When he'd suggested shagging until they were sick of each other, he'd bloody well meant it, and the urge had only deepened since then. Prove to his useless brain that the way Buffy smelled and felt and tasted had nothing to do with Buffy herself—her body just happened to be something he enjoyed fucking. If he'd had any stones left at all, he would have taken up Faith's offer when she'd all but seized him by the dick and offered to take him for a ride.

But he hadn't, and though he'd told himself he hadn't known why, the troubling fact of the matter was he *had*. He just hadn't been able to admit it until he'd stepped into the crypt that was occupied with a bird he'd never seen before but would somehow know anywhere.

It wasn't just Buffy's body he wanted—her body wasn't even the most important part. He wanted all of her. Every infuriating inch. Because he was a sick, sick man and apparently susceptible to STDs after all, because if anyone could convince him that feelings for his mortal enemy—the bitch who had proudly ruined his life—weren't a disease, then he'd gargle holy water.

None of this was right. His first instinct shouldn't have been to hug her and kiss her and tear this other slayer limb from bloody limb for daring to fuck with his girl. And the fact that every time Buffy, wearing someone else's skin, flushed and stammered and hinted that she didn't care for the way he was eyeballing her, definitely shouldn't have him

biting his tongue to avoid crowing in victory that she fancied him too. Perhaps not as much as he would have liked—well, definitely not as much as he would have liked, given she had yet to kick the tin soldier to the curb—but enough that he knew she felt something more than the revulsion she kept wearing for show.

And he was so bloody terrified she'd see it when she looked at him, see the fury beneath the grin and the knowledge that he'd cross oceans if it meant righting the wrong that had been leveled against her, that he lashed out. A lot. Better that she hate him than know the truth, right? The Slayer might be averse to staking him now that he was leashed but she could still torture him plenty. If she ever cottoned on that he felt anything for her other than the god-given hatred he'd been born with, Spike was certain his existence would go from somewhat tolerable to completely bloody devastated.

Better this way. Keep his eyes on the prize. Get the Slayer back in her own skin so she could go back to avoiding him—even though that pissed him off, too, being ignored—and closer to fulfilling her end of the bargain. Once the chip was out, the game would change. He could kill her properly—*please, let me be able to kill her*—or, if not, get as far away from Sunnyhell as possible and never look back. Have himself a right nice bloodbath to get the taste of domesticity out of his mouth and, more importantly, out of his head, then go back to doing what he did best.

Though part of him knew he'd never get out of here. At least not all the way. Some of him would remain with her.

"Oh god," Buffy said in a voice that wasn't hers, shaking him hard from the dark place his thoughts had led him. She stopped short and gaped at the building he'd led her to—some student housing, or what all, near UC Sunnydale campus proper. "Oh god, Riley."

Spike arched an eyebrow. "Ah. So this is where the hunka soldier catches his kip."

But Buffy wasn't listening—she was running, her heart all a-thunder. And hell, maybe this was just what he needed to see to get his head on straight. The Slayer trying to convince her boy toy that the bird wearing her face wasn't actually her would be entertaining, if nothing else. Presuming the homicidal missy Harris and Rupert had

warned him about wasn't doing something homicidal, like gutting the wanker.

God, he shouldn't have thought that. He was just setting himself up for disappointment.

Spike sauntered right up to the door Buffy had disappeared through, then hedged and decided it was better to wait out here. Not much he could do to help, after all, without getting a sodding migraine. And if this was Soldier Boy's place, then he'd be even more of a dolt to slip in and risk being identified by the rest of the Cro-Magnon arseholes.

Thankfully, he didn't have to wait long. Within a few minutes, the door opened and Buffy stepped back into the night, a somewhat stricken look on her face.

"What's this?" Spike asked, tossing the fag he'd been smoking to the ground and stomping it out beneath his boot. "Thought you'd drag the bitch out by the ear or summat. Or did you just off her outright?"

Buffy didn't respond. Didn't so much as grin. Rather, she turned and favored him with wide, wounded eyes that didn't belong to her, but somehow screamed *Buffy Summers* all the same. "She's... They're having sex."

Spike blinked. "Who is?" he asked dumbly.

Who the bloody hell do you think, pillock?

She was somehow so dazed that his idiotic question didn't even faze her. Instead, she continued in a flat monotone, "Faith. And Riley."

An image he didn't want popped into his head—and not a foreign one, either. Rather the same bloody Technicolor rendering that had been plaguing him ever since he'd first gotten a whiff of Soldier Boy's jizz on Buffy. The two of them entwined together, the big sod's hands and mouth on her body, exploring her, tasting her, savoring her, but not knowing her—not bloody *appreciating* her—the way Spike could.

The way Spike *did*.

Only now Buffy was standing right beside him while some other bird shagged her fella. It shouldn't bother him—might be the opening he'd been waiting for to get her to kick the plonker to the curb once and for all—but Spike inexplicably found he was irritated just the same and he couldn't say why.

Perhaps because it was still Buffy, or part of her, up there now. Not the part that mattered but a part that belonged to her nonetheless. Part of her that was being used without her permission, and apparently with someone who didn't know her well enough to know that the girl he had up there wasn't the Slayer. At least not the right one.

"So you're just gonna let them have at it, then?" Spike blurted a moment later, when it became obvious Buffy wasn't going to say anything else.

She frowned. "Huh?"

"Not sure what it matters what they're doin'. Still need to get you back in your own skin, right? Wager it'd be handy to have her with us to make the swap."

"I am not going to...burst in there while they're doing that!"

Now he rolled his eyes. "Not exactly the time to get dainty, ducks."

"Do you have any idea how crazy that would look?" she shot back, and he was glad to see some fire in her now. It was much better than the blank, haunted look she'd worn before. "Stop, that's not me you're screwing?"

"What the bleeding hell was your plan in the first place?" Spike demanded.

"I didn't have a plan!"

"That's obvious."

"Well, sorry, I'll be sure to have an emergency 'Help, My Body's Been Stolen' kit at the ready the next time this happens. The plan as of ten minutes ago was to find Faith." She gestured wildly at the building. "Well, we found her. But if I bust in there with this face, telling him that I'm his girlfriend and the girl who *looks like me* isn't me, then I'm guessing I'd be fast-tracked into the Initiative and *not* with a visitor's pass."

"Your boy really so thick he wouldn't know it was you? That's pathetic, Slayer."

The fire in her eyes was roaring fast toward an inferno, he could tell. And fuck, it was surreal, seeing passion he would know anywhere flitting across a stranger's face. "Why in the world should he? It's not like *body-swapping* is one of those things that happens every other Tuesday."

"No, but it's a lot bloody like you're on the bloody Hellmouth." Spike stepped forward, itching to either clock the girl or drag her into his arms for a good snog. Both sounded equally appealing. "Told you I knew something was off from the start, didn't I?"

"Yes, and I'm supposed to just trust that?"

"Well, if it wasn't true, you could damn well guarantee the bitch would be shagging someone other than your life-size GI Joe." It was his turn to gesture at the building. "Turns out I know you better than lover boy, and that smarts, doesn't it? That ol' Spike sussed out what your Angel-approved human fucktoy couldn't."

She didn't reply to that, but hell, he could tell she wanted to. It was all over her face—that and something else, something he didn't much care to examine but couldn't help because he knew he was the one who had put it there. No matter what she tried to tell him or herself, the fact that Finn hadn't known her well enough to piece together that he was with someone else had hurt her, and badly. Maybe it wouldn't have if she hadn't come to Spike, and if Spike hadn't had the unique pleasure of catching the other bird's act in the flesh, she'd be able to rationalize it all she wanted. Odds were she would anyway, even if it never stopped hurting.

"Let's go," Buffy said a moment later, and turned and walked away without another word.

"Go where?" Spike asked, jogging a bit to fall into step beside her.

"Giles." Her jaw trembled a bit, her lower lip quivering, but she didn't bat an eye or shed a tear, just kept marching on with intent. "We need a new plan."

"ImPLYIN', of course, that you had a plan to begin with. Which you didn't."

"I was thinking I'd find Faith and drag her to Giles," Buffy snapped, picking up her pace. "Obviously, that won't work now. Even if I did burst in on them, by the time I managed to convince Riley that *I'm* Buffy, she'll have bolted."

"Don't think you could take her, huh?"

Buffy broke then, whirling on him with a raised fist and that no-nonsense look in her eyes. He had time to block the blow he knew was coming—had gotten rather good doing just that—but didn't, for what-

ever reason. The Slayer needed to let some of what she was feeling loose and he was as good a target as any. Might even be able to convince herself that she wasn't angry with her soldier at all, that Spike was the cause of all her earthly woes. Certainly wouldn't be the first time.

But the punch never came. Instead, Buffy fisted the lapels of his duster and dragged him to her, damn well attacking his mouth with hers. And fuck, he was a bloody goner. She'd always been fierce and passionate but now, right now, she was barely human. The kiss was all angry snaps and bites, like she *did* want to hit him after all but had chosen to do it with her teeth instead. And though the taste flooding his mouth was nothing like his slayer's, though the hands clutching him belonged to someone else, and the hips he had a hold of weren't those that haunted his dreams like the rest of her, there was no bloody denying that this was Buffy. Anything else, whatever Finn had in his bed, would be a piss-poor imitation and he almost felt sorry for the sod. Sorry, then furious, because anyone who had tasted Buffy, felt her against him or under him or been lucky enough to watch her ride him, ought to know the difference at first touch.

At last, Buffy pulled away, dragging in deep breaths and meeting his gaze with a rather lost one of her own. For a moment he was certain that was it—that she'd firm up and deck him anyway or storm off and pretend she hadn't tried to climb inside him just now, mouth-first. But she did neither of those things. Rather, she clung to him, looking as helpless as he'd ever seen her, and damn if that didn't piss him off, too.

"Were you telling the truth?" she asked, her voice hoarse.

"Yes," he said automatically. Then paused. "Wait, when?"

"You said you knew something was wrong when she came onto you earlier."

"Yeah."

"And you really didn't...*do* anything with her?" She wet her lips. "You didn't...team up in the name of evil?"

"What gave you that idea?"

"You said you might have."

"When?"

"At the Bronze."

Ah. Right. Well, he'd been saying a lot then, hadn't he? Whatever popped into his head, whether it was a good idea or not. The thought of being seen by her, truly, was equal parts invigorating and terrifying. Show her too little and she reckoned he was the same man who had tried to kill her a hundred times over, the one who still hoped he had that much in him once it was an option again. Show her too much and she'd see how utterly full of shite he was. He didn't even remember what he'd said at the Bronze that she might be referring to and decided that much, at least, he could afford to share.

"Fed you a load of rot to piss you off."

"Why?"

"Cause I like you hot and angry for me." He paused, lowered his gaze to her lips—lips that were not her lips but were for right now because she was Buffy, through and through. "You're your truest self when you lose your head, pet. You stop thinking and you *feel*. Me? I happen to like that—like it when you're not puttin' on airs or pretendin' for someone else's sake. Fancy you bein' honest with yourself."

Buffy blinked, released a ragged breath. "So, according to you, I'm not honest with myself?"

Spike took a step back, also releasing a slow exhale, debating the virtues of going on or keeping his gob shut against feeding her some line that would get her riled again. The latter had a tried and true result—she'd close off from him until she was struck by another genius whim and came knocking for help. Though the scenarios in which she'd come to him were becoming slimmer—he reckoned the trouble she was in right now wasn't the sort she was likely to repeat. Let no one say Buffy Summers didn't learn from her mistakes. That was one thing she did to a fault.

Except, of course, where Angel was concerned. And that was the rub, wasn't it? The thing that had brought her to him in the first place had been some twisted need to follow Angel's marching orders and find her a nice, normal bloke who could give her a nice, normal shag and be her bit of boring in an otherwise not-nice, abnormal life. Being that Buffy did nothing half-arsed, she'd been determined to make sure

she was the best shag this side of Death Valley to keep whoever conned her into sleeping with them satisfied.

Balls, he didn't have anything to lose, did he? Running his mouth certainly hadn't done him any favors.

"No," he said at last. "You're not. Wager that has to do with you bein' scared."

At that, she swelled up, all righteous indignation. "I am *not* scared. Especially not of you."

"Yeah, Slayer, you are. Why's it you think you keep comin' to me?" Spike met her glare and fed it right back to her. "The first time mighta been just 'cause I was convenient, I'll grant you. I was a bloke you had by the shorthairs, and you had somethin' you could offer me that I wasn't gettin' anywhere else. I was someone who would keep his bloody mouth shut if anyone ever caught wise. You're not about to go use a fragile human boy—hard to keep feelings from getting involved, yeah?"

"Do you *like* being punched in the face? Is that it?"

"That was the first time," he continued, ignoring her. "Second time was because that plan didn't work as well as you thought."

"You think I have feelings for you."

"I think you got close to your tin soldier, gave him a smooch, and realized he wasn't the sorta bloke who got your knickers wet. And instead of askin' yourself why that was, you decided there had to be somethin' wrong with the way you did it, so you came to me again." He paused, barked out a laugh. "Only thing that changed between you snogging him and coming to me was you went from the man you wanted to want to the one you really did."

Buffy crossed her arms and cocked out her hip. "You couldn't be more wrong," she said, either not hearing or opting to not acknowledge the slight tremor in her voice.

"Oh no? Then why?"

"We had a deal."

"You know you're a hell of a snog, pet."

At that, some of the harshness in her gaze faded. Hell, she fairly preened. "I am?"

Spike rolled his eyes. "Like I said, you already know that."

"I didn't know *you* thought that."

"Yes, you bloody did. Just like I know you fancy my mouth more than anyone's."

That was all it took—the pleased shine in her eyes blinked away and she looked disgusted again. "That is so not true."

"Exactly what I'm talkin' about, Summers." He took a step forward and seized her by the upper arms. "You got a craving for me that night the same as I did for you. Wasn't expectin' it and didn't want it but I'm at least honest enough to admit that's what it is. You came crawlin' back to the Big Bad 'cause you wanted to be wrong, wanted to snog me and feel nothin', but that's not what happened. If it was, we never woulda ended up having that right brilliant fuck against your watcher's kitchen table."

She swallowed, and he dropped his gaze to follow the motion. Standing with her now like this was like something out of a dream—the coloring was wrong, the scents off, and the sights unfamiliar, but still pure *Buffy* through and through.

"Who said it was brilliant?" she asked in a low, throaty voice.

"Slayer, I'm the best you've ever had and you bloody well know it. Might as well be honest with me."

"And help you climb farther up Mount Ego? Think I'll pass."

Spike grinned—he couldn't help himself. "That's a yes."

"It is not. It's a non-statement." But when she met his eyes again, he saw a flicker of the truth there—saw the moment she heard herself and connected it to what he'd said before. How she kept pushing when he pulled even though the rest of her was tired of the fight.

If he continued pulling, she'd snap back fast enough that they would both feel the sting. Demanding that Buffy admit something she wasn't ready to admit would only widen the distance between them.

But he didn't want to go back, either. Whatever else, they'd made some actual progress here tonight. Even if the Slayer wasn't in a place to do what he'd suggested and give him some of that honesty, he knew he could get her thinking it all the same so maybe, the next time she came to him, she wouldn't have to pretend that she hated where she was quite so hard.

"You asked earlier why I didn't take the other girl up on the offer,"

Spike continued in a low voice. "Told you I didn't feel like it and that was true enough."

Buffy breathed out, the thumps of her heart coming harder now. "True enough, meaning there's more truth?"

"Meanin' the reason I didn't feel like it was I knew it wasn't you." He paused. "Or knew enough to suss out it wasn't you the way I want you."

"What's the way you want me?"

Bugger, if that wasn't the question of the hour. Hard enough to explain this to himself—trying to explain it to her was bloody beyond him. "When she looked at me, there was nothin'," he said. "Wasn't personal to her—coulda been anyone."

"And you think that's not—"

"It's not you. Every time we've... *Every* sodding time, it's been you. That's what's made it brilliant."

Spike stopped talking, looking at the ground again, not sure where to go from here. Not sure whether or not admitting what he'd just admitted had been the right idea, and bloody terrified that it hadn't. Buffy's silences were never fully silent—hell, some were so loud they were deafening. But it was out now, for better or worse, she knew how he felt, or enough to guess the rest.

"I thought you hated me," she said at last.

"I do," he replied in a rush, snapping his head back up. "You think I wanna feel this way? Think I want to spend all my wakin' hours thinking about you—about us, about the things you made me—"

"Made you?"

"It's not natural, is it? Bloody *unnatural*, wanting any of this. Doin' it was bad enough—shoulda laughed you right out of the place the second you brought it up." And hell, he resented how he hadn't done just that. Only he didn't really resent it, which made him resent it all the more. "Shoulda tossed you out and rung up old Angelus to tell him just how much he'd twisted that head of yours to have you come sniffin' around me for a shag."

Buffy stepped back, anger flashing across her eyes. "Don't talk about—"

"I'll talk about whoever I please," he shot back. "Already done more right by you than he ever did, haven't I?"

"Oh my god, how full of yourself are you?"

She'd already said that and he'd already given her an answer, but Spike didn't care that he was repeating himself. Maybe this time it'd sink in. "Not nearly as full as you'd like to be of me."

He decided to sidestep the punch she lobbed at him, rather than catch it again. Better to change it up every now and then, keep her on her toes.

"That's what smarts, isn't it?" he said when she lunged once more, artfully evading a second time, then a third, his amusement growing as her annoyance did. "You get more from me than he ever gave you."

"You're disgusting."

"And I'm right." Spike got tired of playing dodge and seized her shoulders when she was close enough. "That's why you're so angry. If it wasn't true, it wouldn't hurt. Ol' Spike got under your skin and you keep crawlin' back to him because he can give you what he can't." She squirmed and tried to break loose, but he tightened his grip on her and when the chip didn't fire off its warning, that was even more confirmation that what he was saying was true. Buffy didn't really want to be free of him—not now and not in the greater scheme of things. The only person who didn't seem to realize it was her. "You're more you when you're with me than you are with anyone else. Tell me it's not true."

Buffy opened her mouth, presumably to do just that, but seemed to lose her nerve. Instead, she stilled, still breathing hard, her eyes dark and her skin flushed, and she just stared at him.

"What are you saying?" she asked eventually. "You want...what? To be my boyfriend, is that it?"

He snarled and jerked her closer, something twisting in his chest. "Don't want to be your sodding *anything*."

At that, the bitch had the nerve to look pleased. "Now who's lying to himself?"

Spike growled again and released her, staggering back a few steps, needing that space to get his own head clear. Trouble was it had been muddled for a long time now where the Slayer was concerned—far

longer than he wanted to admit. Hell, it was the reason he'd come back, wasn't it? So he could prove he had it in him to do her in good and proper, both to himself and to Dru, who had gotten it in her head that Buffy was what had come between them. Not, say, the six-foot slime-colored antlered wanker he'd caught her snogging.

It wasn't *Spike's* fault that the Slayer had gone and mucked up the natural order by asking him to shag her. And it wasn't *Spike's* fault that he'd said yes—any self-respecting vamp would have leaped at the chance to experience that. Nothing more dangerous than fucking the enemy, right? Hell of a bloody rush. It wasn't *Spike's* fault that the bitch had gotten under his skin and it sure as hell wasn't *Spike's* fault that he couldn't stop thinking about her. None of this mess was his fault.

Except everything he'd done and said tonight—the choices he'd made that made bugger all sense when given any scrutiny whatsoever.

God, could she be right? Did he want to be the Slayer's *boyfriend*? Was that what this was about?

He shook his head, pressed his palm against his brow to stave off the swarm of new thoughts he hadn't asked for and didn't want. That the reason he hadn't shagged the girl playing Buffy dress-up earlier was deeper than he hadn't known it was her—but because he couldn't stand the thought of being with someone else when she was what he wanted. Because he'd known, deep down, that she was in trouble, and helping her had been more important than getting his dick wet. That the reason he was pushing her so hard now was so she'd see what he saw and understand exactly what it was they could have if they both stopped pretending they didn't want it.

After she'd left his crypt the last time, he'd known he was in trouble—that she was everywhere, in his heart and mind and places she had no bloody right to be. That he wanted her to want him and only him, and the thought of her with anyone else made him want to thrash and tear. He'd known it but it hadn't hit, exactly what that meant. None of it had.

Fuck, it was so bloody obvious. Everything had been there—everything except the words, and how did that work? How had he been in love with the Slayer as long as he had without seeing it for himself?

Balls.

"I gotta go," Spike said suddenly, needing at once to be as far from her as possible. Needing to drown these thoughts and any like them in whiskey and hope they stayed nice and dead when the hangover was over.

"Spike—"

"Get to your watcher's, get this mess sorted. Don't need me for that."

He knew he was being a git, even knew that he'd likely regret bailing on her, but at the moment, all he cared about was survival. And survival meant getting as far from her as he could. Drinking enough so the upside-down world righted itself again. Make it so when he opened his eyes tomorrow, the thought of loving the Slayer would be something he could laugh off.

And if she got herself killed tonight, all the better. That'd take care of his problem. Sure, he'd have to find another way to get the chip out of his head but he was a resourceful bloke. He could see it done.

The chip wouldn't be the end of him, after all. Loving the Slayer would.

But only if he let her, so he wouldn't.

Bugger that.

THE ENTIRE ORDEAL WITH FAITH WOULD HAVE GONE A WHOLE LOT smoother if Buffy had just trusted Giles from the outset. There would have been no detour to the Bronze, no swinging by Lowell House, no listening to her boyfriend's rhythmic grunts as he screwed someone else, and definitely no confusing conversation with Spike.

Unfortunately, that was not what had happened, which made Buffy's reclamation of her body something less than the joyous occasion it should have been. She'd thought, at first, that her general sense of otherness might have been attributable to Faith herself, who had been in the middle of an identity crisis when the world was righted once more. According to Riley, she'd flipped out and bailed at some point during their time together, though he wouldn't share what he'd said to make her flip out and bail. He'd also danced around admitting what he and Faith had done in his dorm room, saying something to the effect of she *hadn't felt right*, and he should have known something was off.

Maybe that was Midwest for I-banged-your-archenemy. Buffy preferred her men a bit more up-front.

Or a lot more up-front, as it appeared.

As it was, Riley's reticence where all things Faith were concerned provided Buffy a handy excuse that she'd seized almost at once.

"I need a break," she'd told him.

Riley had shot to his feet, stricken. "There was no way I could've known. You have to know that."

Do I? she'd thought, remembering the way Spike's face had fallen slack the second he'd laid eyes on her. How her name had tumbled off his lips. He'd known just by looking at her.

But Buffy hadn't told Riley that. There really was no good way to break the news that the resident evil undead knew her better than her boyfriend. Not without going into how it was that Spike knew her so well—and that, despite whatever she'd told herself, was a conversation not worth having. Especially now that she wasn't sure if her relationship would survive—if there would ever be a reason to declare the break was over. What good would it do to tell Riley about the blowjob she'd given to someone else? It'd hurt him, and despite how much she didn't love how he'd hedged around his time with Faith, she didn't want to hurt him.

She didn't want to hurt anyone. Not even Spike, who kinda deserved it after taking off on her. Though also not, because he had helped her—and he'd been honest. More honest with her than anyone ever had been, and that royally sucked because it made her screwed-up head even more screwed-up.

The easy thing to do would be to just forget that she'd ever made a pit-stop at the crypt in the first place. In fact, Buffy had been near-certain she would do just that almost from the moment he'd taken off. That her first impulse after securing her own skin had been to run after him to finish their conversation had scared her stupid, so much so she'd filled the rest of her day with things like checking on her mom, giving Riley the Ross-and-Rachel treatment, catching up with Willow and her new friend, Tara, wondering where Faith might be headed, and sneaking in a few hours of sleep before her conscious mind arrived at the conclusion her subconscious mind had already reached.

Which was how Buffy found herself in Restfield Cemetery, staring at the door to a crypt she'd once vowed to never visit ever again and wondering which version of Spike she would find inside. There was the

guy who had mocked her after she'd sucked his dick and the one she remembered from the motel. The one she'd spied glimpses of the night before, peeking through the scowls and sneers as though both desperate and terrified to be seen.

That Spike hadn't screwed Faith when she'd offered herself up on a platter. *That* Spike had known her the instant he met her eyes. *That* Spike had helped her without asking for reward or payment. *That* Spike had told her things about herself that she couldn't pretend she hadn't heard.

Buffy both hoped she'd find that Spike inside and didn't. But she wasn't going to learn anything standing out here.

Swallowing, she pressed open the crypt door and stepped inside.

Spike was sitting on a sarcophagus, a worn paperback in his hand and a half-full glass of blood at his side. Even in the semi-darkness of the crypt, she saw his jaw tighten, his nostrils flare, and the lines of his mouth depress like he was biting something back. She let the door close noisily behind her, casting her surroundings even deeper in shadow.

For a long moment, she didn't say anything and neither did he, though she got the sense he wasn't reading anymore.

Finally, after what felt like forever, Spike sucked in his cheeks and said, without looking up, "Got your skin back."

Buffy glanced down at her hands as though needing to verify they were indeed hers. "Uhh, yeah. When I got to Giles's, Willow was there with a new witch friend."

"Joy of joys, now there are two." His gaze remained studiously on the book.

"They'd also been at the Bronze," she said. "Must have been right after you left or something. Or before we got there. Either way, we probably just missed each other." She swallowed and the sound was loud and awkward. "Willow's friend Tara—that's her name—reads auras and saw that something was off with mine. Or Faith's. Anyway, they were already working on a fix by the time I showed up."

Spike didn't reply. He turned a page and continued to read.

"Of course, by then we needed to find Faith again," Buffy went on, her words picking up speed. "Riley said something that freaked her out

and she motored. Only she didn't make it far. She was at this...church or whatever that some vamps had taken over. And apparently to stop them, which... I dunno, maybe she found her inner slayer again."

"There a point to all this prattling, or are you tryin' to bore me to death?"

Buffy snapped her mouth shut, her cheeks heating. She wanted to come back with something cutting, something that would throw him off his game—or at least make him as self-aware as he had her—but the barbs and insults that seemed always within reach were less so at the moment, and she didn't know why. Only she did and that was somewhat worse.

So instead of saying anything remotely quippy or Buffyish, she found herself blurting, "How can you even see to read in here?" instead.

Spike arched an eyebrow, slowly dragging his gaze up. "Predator, pet," he said, snapping the book closed. "Or have you forgotten?"

"Look, I need to... I need to ask you something."

"Let's hear it, then. Got plenty of evil to be doin' tonight."

She parted her lips, her heart thundering so hard her bones vibrated. God, she was nervous and nervous was not a thing she was around Spike. Or it hadn't been, not too long ago. Back before she'd decided to change their relationship in ways that could never be unchanged. She skimmed her hands along her hips, flexed her fingers to keep them from going numb, the carefully worded speech she'd been mentally compiling all day blanking out of her mind.

"I...broke it off with Riley."

Spike just stared at her, unmoved. "That a question?"

"What?"

"You said you wanted to ask me something."

"Oh. I do. But not that—that's...a thing I did. Not a question."

"Is it now?"

"Well, I told him I wanted a break. I think that's the same thing." She didn't know—she'd never broken up with someone before. At least not someone with whom she was in a real relationship that included sex and everything. Probably not the best time to confess her vocabulary when it came to adult relationships was heavily sitcom-based. It

wasn't exactly a topic she felt comfortable addressing with her mother. "He didn't... I don't think he would have told me about him and Faith if I hadn't dragged it out of him."

More of that blank staring. For a guy who had the most expressive face on the planet, Spike was doing a decent mannequin impression. She didn't like it.

"And what I wanted to ask you was..." Dammit, she couldn't do this. Buffy inhaled and directed her gaze to a far corner of the crypt. "I don't know what I wanted to ask you. Just...forget it. Forget all of it."

She had half-turned around when the sound of denim sliding against stone rippled through the air, followed by the plonk of Spike's booted feet hitting the floor. "Not likely, Slayer," he said, and when she looked back, he was coming toward her, his eyes fixed on hers. "Come on. You dropped by for a reason, yeah?"

"I don't even know."

"Yeah, you do." He stopped when he was close enough to touch, his gaze sliding to her mouth. "Go on. Ask."

Buffy licked her lips, aware of Spike's tracking the movement. Even more aware of the way his face, already cast in shadow, seemed to grow darker.

"Why didn't you take Faith up on her offer?"

At that, he looked up again. "Reckon we've had this conversation before."

"That was yesterday. This is today."

"Think the answer's changed?"

"Has it?"

Spike exhaled, his shoulders dropping. "Wasn't you," he said. He didn't sound the way he had the day before, saying those words. Then he'd been fierce and almost pissed off. Now he was more resigned, almost defeated, like she had claimed some sort of victory over him. "Didn't mean anything to her."

"A-and it means something to me?"

"You're asking me?"

"I—I don't know. Maybe?"

He snickered and rolled his eyes. "Don't much fancy talkin' in

circles, pet, if it's all the same to you. Not as much fun as when Dru did it, so if that's all, why don't you toddle on off and—"

"The last time I was here—the real last time—you were a jerk."

"Was I, now?"

"You know you were. I was here for help. It was our deal, wasn't it? I help you get the chip out and you help me not suck at..."

He quirked an eyebrow. "Sucking?"

"At sex!" Now her face was hot. Great. "You let me do that even knowing that it wasn't going to help with Riley."

Something that sounded like a growl rumbled from somewhere in the crypt. It took a minute for her to realize it was coming from him. "My *job* wasn't to help you with sodding *Riley*," Spike retorted. "I'll say again what I said then—you wanna learn how a man likes to have his dick sucked, you ask that man. You don't practice on someone else."

"He wouldn't talk to me—"

"Then his bloody loss, right?"

"So that was all that was? You wanted to say you got the Slayer to give you a BJ?"

He barked a laugh. "Somethin' like that, yeah."

God, she really was an idiot. Buffy drew in a deep breath, willing herself not to do anything else stupid, like start crying in front of the jerk. Apparently, her eyes had been fooling her last night, which made sense as they'd been Faith's. For a second there, she'd thought she'd seen something else.

She made to turn again, only Spike clamped a hand on her wrist before she could.

"All right, fine, you wanna know the full of it?" he rasped, his voice an octave lower than it had been a moment ago. "I wanted you. Fuck, I've wanted you every bloody second since we left that sodding motel. Told you as much, didn't I? You're not the sorta girl a man can have just once. And I'd been dreamin' about getting that mouth of yours around my cock from the start. Didn't do it because of the bloody *deal*—I did it 'cause you're all I think about and it was the only bit of you I wagered I'd ever get again."

Buffy froze, unsure of what to do, how to move, or what to say. The situation in her chest had gone nuclear, the rest of her torn between

real, righteous anger and some form of jubilation. It hadn't been all in her head. Not entirely, at least.

"You still shouldn't have," she replied in a much more even tone than she would have expected from herself. "I wasn't here for you."

"No," Spike agreed, tugging her so that she all but stumbled against his chest. Then his arms were around her, his face so close she could count the flecks in his eyes—darkness be damned—and his mouth right there. "You were here for you."

"For me?"

He nodded, looking at her mouth again. "Admit it, Slayer. There's a reason you keep comin' to see me. I'm in your system now, as much as you are in mine. And you can't get enough."

She wanted to argue—habit, and all—but there was no point. He was right. Hell, she wouldn't be standing here if he wasn't right. That didn't magically make everything okay—*nothing* about this was okay. The fact remained that he was a vampire, an evil one at that, who was one short-circuit away from becoming a problem she'd need to handle with a stake. Angel certainly hadn't disappeared into the mist so that she'd move on to someone else who was completely wrong for her. There was nothing normal about Spike. Nothing remotely good, either.

But she was still here, his arms around her, holding her to his marble-like chest. It was wrong—it had been wrong from the start—yet she couldn't bring herself to move.

"So what happens now?" she asked thickly.

Spike, who had still been studying her mouth, dragged his gaze back up to meet hers. "You gonna run?"

"I dunno. Maybe."

"Guess I'll just have to take my chances, then."

Then he was kissing her and all thoughts went bye-bye. There was nothing simple about the way Spike kissed—it was all or nothing, deep and consuming, like he wanted to swallow her whole, like he couldn't get enough. It had thrown her off balance the first time he'd done it and she wasn't sure she'd ever completely regained her footing. The passionate, enthusiastic kisses they'd shared during Willow's ill-fated Will Be Done spell had been easy enough to

dismiss as the byproduct of magic gone horribly wrong. The world didn't make sense if Spike actually kissed like that—as though she were the soul he didn't have and wanted to reclaim. Kissing was all about feeling, after all, and evil things didn't feel. At least nothing that was real.

But now, many kisses later and standing in his crypt, Buffy felt something in her give. Because Spike wasn't just kissing her; it felt he was trying to tell her something, all through a combination of lips and tongue and teeth and throaty little moans exchanged over pulls and tugs and sucks. The floor beneath her feet started to move at some point, one of Spike's arms now banded around her waist, his other hand tangled in her hair to hold her to him. Without warning, he spun her around and hiked her up against him once more, then her ass hit something solid—the sarcophagus—and he was between her spread legs, and his hands were everywhere. The sides of her neck, down her arms, gripping her hips, teasing her breasts, tangling in her hair—like he needed to feel every part of her.

"I was furious with you," he rumbled against her lips a second later, tugging on her top. "That's why I said what I did. Whatever it was."

Buffy's mind was far too fogged to make any sense of that statement. "Huh?"

"The night you sucked me off."

Whoa, wait. That did not compute. She seized his wrists to put a stop to the Buffy-exploration and pulled back just enough to give herself room to breathe. "What do you mean, you were furious?"

Spike sucked in his cheeks in a way she found both frustratingly sexy and just plain frustrating. Whatever he was about to say was almost guaranteed to piss her off, because what right exactly had he had to be furious with her after having tricked her into giving him a blowjob?

"I mean the thought of you putting your mouth on that git made me want to rip his bloody head off. Then yours. Then his again."

"And? Spike, you're a vampire. Not exactly unusual urges."

A harsh growl tore through his throat. "Had bugger all to do with being a *vampire*, pet," he snarled. "It was you. All you. You bein' with him and not bein' with me." He took her mouth again before she could

process that statement, which was probably for the best because *holy hell*, where would she even start?

"You're in me," he said a moment later before ripping her top over her head. In her stupor, she'd let her grip on his wrists fall slack. "All I want anymore. All I can think about. Follow me everywhere. Can't even bloody sleep without you poppin' up, and knowin' you were using me for him—"

"But that was the deal."

Spike laughed as though she'd said something funny; she would have asked what it was, but his mouth was over hers and her mind went blissfully blank all over again.

Only it didn't stay blank. Not with his words ringing in her head. What they meant—what he was trying to tell her. And while it was tempting—oh god, so tempting—to let him continue chasing her thoughts away with that magical tongue of his, this was more important. Buffy placed her hands on his shoulders and pushed him back enough that he broke from her lips. He gave a little whimper as though she were depriving him of something particularly delicious—a sound which, yes, went straight to her clit—but she managed to keep herself focused.

"What are we doing?" she forced out. "What is this?"

Spike blinked. "What is what?"

"Any of this, Spike!" Her heart skipped then started thundering all over again, a balloon of panic swelling in her chest. "What are we doing?"

"Snogging. Which would hopefully lead to shagging."

Oh, for the love of... "Speak English!"

His eyebrows went up. "Need to have this talk again, do we?"

"You said you wanted to kill Riley and it had nothing to do with being a vampire."

"Said a bit more than that."

Yeah, she knew he had, but that didn't make things any clearer for her. "I don't even know what I'm doing here," Buffy muttered, dropping her head into her hands. "It was supposed to be simple. You hate me, I hate you—we are all with the mutual hate." She paused, considering. "You *do* hate me, right?"

Spike offered an enthusiastic nod. "Fuck yes, I hate you, Slayer. Just happens to be my rotten luck that I love you more than I hate you."

Wait, what?

But she didn't get to ask because he'd invaded her space and claimed her mouth once more, and this time when the fog settled over her brain and carted her away, she didn't fight. Couldn't. The world where she had to process what Spike had just said was one she was just fine to ignore for a little while, thanks, and though it was likely the cherry on the crap sundae that was this disaster of an idea, she found the part of her that cared was way smaller than the part of her that didn't. So this time, when Spike pressed up against her, she was the one dragging his shirt over his head to free that lovely expanse of muscle for her exploration. She hadn't touched him enough when they'd been together before and that seemed like something that needed to be rectified now.

And Spike had read her thoughts, for he sighed a long, "Yes," against her lips when her hands began to stray. "Touch me. Touch me *everywhere*."

Buffy nodded without thinking about it—*thinking bad, no thinking*—and set out to do just that. She let her fingers roam over his shoulders and down his arms, traced the peaks and valleys of his muscles, wondered at how smooth and soft his skin seemed when she knew how strong he was beneath it. Then her hands found his chest, wandered over his flat nipples—his resulting moan went straight to her clit—then began the trek down. Lower, lower, around his bellybutton and lower still until she encountered the waistband of his jeans. And either her eyes had adjusted or they were playing tricks on her, but Buffy had no trouble making out the bulge from where he was hard for her.

This was the first time, she realized. The first time they'd been together without pretense. No lesson on the agenda, no excuse at the ready. She was about to take out Spike's cock because this was where she wanted to be.

And holy hell, that terrified her. Not enough to keep her from popping the button on his jeans or dragging the zipper down, and definitely not enough to stay the gasp that rushed through her lips when he whimpered and thrust himself against her hand.

I want this. God, I want this. It's wrong and he's wrong and I'm wrong and I want this so much.

Those were thoughts—thoughts were something she couldn't afford right now. So Buffy set about trying to banish them. She wrapped her fist around his cock and gave it a long, languid squeeze, leaning in to tease one of his nipples with her tongue.

"Oh Buffy." His hand was in her hair again, his fingers caressing her scalp in a way that almost seemed loving.

"Just happens to be my rotten luck that I love you more than I hate you."

Buffy squeezed her eyes shut and shoved the offending thought back with such force it translated into physical action.

She bit his nipple—hard.

"Bloody hell!" Spike bucked and thrust his hips forward, used his grip on her hair to pull her back and before she could blink, his mouth was on hers again, delving and seizing and claiming and *more*. She wanted *more*. More of this, more of him, more right the hell now. Buffy mewled into his kiss, tightening the grip she had on his cock and trying not to do something stupid like cry when he growled and fed her back everything she poured into him.

She'd tried with Riley, she really had. It had been sweet and safe and nice. And terrible. All of it had been terrible, and she didn't know why, except that touching him and being touched by him hadn't felt like this. There hadn't been that burning sense of desperation nipping at her insides, driving her forward and taking control when her mind blanked out. Hell, her mind hadn't blanked out at all—it was where she lived when she was with him. Inside, second- and third-guessing herself, wondering why when *he* did something, it didn't feel as good as it had before. Wondering why he didn't make the same sounds, didn't look at her the same way, why he was so gentle and tame when he knew damn well how strong she was. How she could take whatever he threw at her and then some.

It had been like math. Weighing the factors, changing the variables, attempting different ways to get to the same answer, and it should have been beautiful and sweet and perfect and it had been anything but.

Why was it like this with Spike?

"Fuck, I missed this," Spike was muttering now, dragging his lips

along her neck and across her shoulder. He nipped at the strap of her bra, reaching around to undo the clasp at the back. "Missed the way you smell and taste. You bloody haunt me, you know that, Slayer?"

He was one to talk. Buffy thought she might tell him as much, but then her bra was gone and his mouth was around one of her breasts and words were again unnecessary. It was her turn to clutch at him, tunnel her fingers through his surprisingly soft hair—*how in the world did he manage that?*—and hold his head to her as he sucked and nipped and played. And just when she thought it might be too much, he pulled back, blew a cool stream of air across her nipple before swallowing her other breast and doing it all over again. All the while his hands remained in motion, scaling down her stomach in a touch so feather-light it almost tickled, then pulling her slacks and panties down her legs in the same fluid stroke.

"Cold," she said when her bare ass hit the stone of the sarcophagus beneath her.

"Beg to differ," Spike replied, abandoning her breast as his mouth moved over her belly. "You're fire, baby. Pure bloody fire. Burn me up, you do."

She saw where he was headed and her breath caught. "Spike—"

"Was brassed about this, too," he murmured, then licked a path around her belly button and shifted so he was on his knees. "When you were here before. Been wanting another taste of you for bloody months. Knew how hot you were, how much you wanted me. Could smell it all over you."

Yeah, that wasn't embarrassing or anything. "Spike—"

"Wanted you in my mouth again."

He took one of her legs and hooked it over his shoulder, then his fingers were there—*there*—spreading her pussy apart, and *god*, she was wet. So much she was self-conscious about it, in ways she'd *only* ever been around Spike. Maybe because she'd only ever gotten like this—

Not going there.

Except there her mind went. Couldn't help it if it was true.

"Fuck, you're even prettier than I remembered," he breathed out, roaming his gaze over her exposed flesh like she was the freaking holy grail or something.

“Oh.”

“Oh?” Spike arched an eyebrow and looked up, and she didn’t know how he did it. How he managed to look so cool and in control of both her and himself when he was kneeling before her the way he was, his breaths crashing against her, sending jolting tingles through her body. “Don’t believe me?”

No, she *did* believe him. That was what made this so...

“Spike, please.”

“With pleasure.” And before she could prepare herself, he’d dipped his head and his tongue was there. Cool and slick and wet and *there*, licking a line from her clit to the mouth of her sex, dipping inside, then coming back up again. Buffy bucked without meaning to, and he rumbled back in kind, the sound low and desperate enough to have her glad she wasn’t standing at the moment, because holy cow, he sounded starved. Starved for *her*.

“Mmm, baby.” He drew a line around her clit. “This is it. This is what I missed.”

“Oh,” she said again, not knowing what else to say—if there was anything she could say. That Spike had missed her, any part of her—had missed doing *this* to her—was beyond her comprehension. But then so were all the steps she’d taken that had led her here. If asked to recreate them, she doubted she could, the path unclear. Except here she was and here he was, stroking up and down the seam of her pussy and making little happy growly noises that had her on fire.

“Tell me you missed me too,” Spike whispered as he planted a series of wet kisses along her inner thigh. “Missed the way I touch you. How I make you feel. Tell me, Buffy.”

She could barely think for as hard as she was shaking. “I... I...”

He nudged her clit with his nose. “Tell me. Tell me you want my mouth.”

“Oh god, yes, I want it.”

“Where do you want it, Slayer?” He ghosted his fingers up her legs, inspiring a trail of shivers in their wake. “Here?” But before she could reply, he released another one of those little moans and his mouth was in motion again, wandering, tasting and nibbling. And just when she thought she might lose her mind for real, he drew her clit between his

lips and treated her to a series of light sucks before favoring her exposed flesh with long, languorous laps of his tongue.

It was somewhere between bliss and torture. Every move had her jerking, scraping her skin against the stone he had spread her atop, hard gasps tearing from her lips and ringing in the stillness of the otherwise silent crypt. And that made her tingle, too. The way she sounded, like someone else. The way *he* sounded, ravenous and desperate. Like everything he'd told her was true.

Is it true?

"God, how wet you get for me," Spike whispered against her flesh. She opened her eyes—having not realized she'd closed them—just in time to watch him sink his tongue inside of her. Flickers of that white-hot pleasure she'd been chasing down for what felt like months suddenly came to life across her skin, and she realized the cold from just a moment ago had vanished. He was right—she *was* fire, and she was burning from the inside out, and she was also liquid, slick and slippery and all over. The light in the crypt might be faint but it was strong enough for her to see the shine of her juices reflected off Spike's face. He growled and delved and explored and flicked inside her, one hand holding her down as the sensations inside of her took on a life of their own, seizing control of her muscles and jerking her this way and that, pushing her close to a precipice she'd started to think she'd made up.

But it wasn't enough. She needed more. Needed...

It must have become a habit at some point—truly, Buffy wasn't sure if she'd known what her body was capable of before Spike had shown her. Her fingers just knew where to go, so when he growled and batted her hand away, she was firstly surprised to realize she'd reached to stroke her clit and then frustrated that he'd kept her from doing it.

"Wha—"

Spike smacked her pussy open-palmed. "Bad Slayer. I do that."

Buffy jerked and released a sound that was half-squeal, half-shout. "What the hell—"

But he swirled his tongue around her clit again. Swirled, then closed his lips around it and sucked hard as he pushed two fingers inside of her, and it hit her from nowhere, the orgasm. No build-up, no

steady climb, just the thrill of sensation before she exploded and it was good, so good, because part of her had thought—until Spike had hiked her leg over his shoulder during the Will Be Done spell, at least—that maybe orgasms were something that other people had. She'd thought that and then he'd proven her wrong time and again but the thought persisted in the moments spent trying to chase this feeling. She bucked and thrashed and wanted to hold onto him, but he was so far away, too far away. She wanted him against her, and then he seemed to read her mind for he was on his feet the next instant, slipping his fingers free of her pussy, and she didn't like that because she was still spasming and desperately needed something to spasm around.

"Spike, please," she practically sobbed. "I need—"

"I know what you need," he replied, one arm going under and around her, the other between them. She had a moment, an instant, to enjoy the sensation of his cock slipping over her wet flesh, nudging her clit once as though to tease her, before he was positioned at her opening. Their eyes met and she held her breath and nodded and then he was pushing inside, sinking into her much too slowly but still somehow too fast, and the shudders hadn't stopped. Buffy wrapped her arms around his neck, needing an anchor, and he was there, pulling her to his mouth and swallowing her in another one of those insane kisses. Because that was what this was—what all of it was.

"Missed this pussy," he said against her lips before feeding her a little whimper, giving his hips a swirl. Then he was moving inside of her, pulling back and pushing forward and holding her to him as he pumped his cock into her at a pace that was somehow both too fast and intense and too slow and sweet. "Missed your heat. Those little sounds you make. Fuck, Buffy..."

Suddenly, her eyes were stinging and her skin was too hot and he was too close but not as close as she needed him. Buffy shook her head and kissed him, because kissing him was simpler than figuring out exactly what was going on in her head. Every time she thought it had gone quiet, it ended up screaming louder.

Why was it like this with him? It was insane for Spike to be the one person who got her, but he was. Insane that he had recognized her with a look, that he'd known it wasn't her when Faith had come onto

him, that he had hugged her, that he had helped, that he was here inside of her and oh god, he loved her. He'd said that and she'd heard it and everything was different.

Spike loved her.

Nothing in her world made sense. Spike loved her.

And before she could stop herself, she heard the question bubble off her lips. "Why?"

Spike growled and attacked her mouth again, tugging her lower lip between his teeth. Then things were moving again—*she* was moving. He had his arms around her and the sarcophagus was gone, his hands under her ass to anchor her to him. The world seemed to spin and then her back was pressed against stone and Spike was there, holding her between him and the pillar, whimpering into her mouth and thrusting into her harder now. Hard enough that she felt ricocheted back and forth and good enough that she didn't care.

"Cause it's you," he said a moment later, his lips so close, his voice barely audible above the hard, wet sound of their bodies coming together, of her breaths being jolted out of her, matched by the cadence of his own. "Cause it's you, Buffy. You've bloody ruined me."

"I didn't mean to."

Spike smiled and nibbled at her lower lip again. "S'all right," he replied. "Don't mind so much right now. Now squeeze that pussy for me, pet. Oh, *fuck* yes." He scraped his teeth along her lips. "Feel so good around my cock. So hot and tight and perfect. Bloody made for this, you were. Made for me. My slayer."

No, he couldn't say things like that. Buffy buried her face into his shoulder, wrapping her legs around his waist, crossing her ankles, and using that leverage to pull him into her as he pushed. And Spike was still talking, his mouth at her ear, rattling off a bunch of things she couldn't hear right now. That she felt amazing. That her pussy was heaven and he'd missed it. Missed how wet she got, how she burned, that nothing had ever felt this good and didn't that mean something? He thrust and fucked and scraped and kissed and she was there—and there was nowhere else she wanted to be but she was also confused out of her mind. Terrified and thrilled and devastated and elated and a thousand other things she couldn't reconcile because this hadn't been

the plan. Spike was so not the right person and the things she felt were things she *couldn't* feel. Not here and not for him. Not another vampire. Not again.

"Feel that?" He was at her ear again, tugging at her earlobe with his teeth. "Feel how hard you make me? Never been like this with anyone, love. That's why. Fuck me, that's why. Needed it to be you."

The words swam around her head with the rest of the fog, making sense but not. Hard to think with him pounding into her, knocking the wind out of her lungs, his cock striking that place inside of her that no one had reached before.

"That's it. Buffy. *Buffy*. Oh god, that's it. Squeeze me so tight." Somehow, he managed to slip a hand between them, and then the tips of his fingers against her clit. Brushing, teasing, rocking back and forth in the rhythm of his thrusts, and it was too much. All of it. The sensation of him pistoning in and out of her, his breaths against her skin, the way he moaned when she clenched her pussy around him, how it seemed he couldn't possibly pull back but the sweet bliss when he did and the sweeter bliss when he speared into her again. "Give it to me, Slayer. Wanna feel you strangling my cock. Gonna fill you up but you gotta give it to me first."

And that was it. Sensation had mounted and had nowhere else to go. He was against her and over her and inside of her, in her head and she worried he might be in her heart too, and it was wrong, would always be wrong, but here she was. Without thinking, Buffy bit into his shoulder, her body shuddering and her pussy throbbing, and Spike went wild, growling and tugging at her skin with his fingers and mouth and teeth, thrusting hard enough she would have thought he was trying to dislodge her if he hadn't been holding her so tightly. As she trembled all over, skyrocketing again into pure physical ecstasy, clamping hard around his cock as he bucked and growled and shot into her, those words spiraled on an endless loop, loud and inescapable.

"I love you more than I hate you."

Spike loved her. Spike *loved* her. He might not have meant to say it—hell, he might never say it again—but he had said it and nothing would ever be the same. It was a brave new world, one she had no idea how to navigate. If navigating it were even possible.

The air around them fell still, but a loud still. Maybe the loudest ever. For a long moment, neither of them moved, just remained locked together against the pillar, Buffy's legs hugging his hips, Spike's fingers digging into her ass, and both of them shaking. She wanted to say this wasn't what she'd come here for but she knew it was a lie, and whatever else, she was through lying. To him and to herself.

What came next was anyone's guess.

"Gonna run off on me now?" His voice was low, almost hoarse. He tightened his grip on her when he said it.

"No."

Spike pulled back just enough to catch her eyes, his own full of misgiving. "No?"

"Legs not working."

The corner of his mouth kicked up. "That the only reason?"

Buffy worked her throat, her spinning mind refusing to land anywhere useful. It would never work, she knew. Even if he meant what he'd said, even if he loved her, it would never work. He was still a vampire—an evil one, at that. However she looked at this, she was going to walk away hurt. Maybe not in the way he'd hurt her before but hurt nonetheless. Nothing good could come from staying.

But to say anything else would be to lie, and she'd decided she was through lying.

"No."

The tension in his face lessened, and when he smiled, it was the smile she remembered from the spell. The careless, happy smile, the one that had lit her up and made her feel like the luckiest girl in the world.

"That's something, then," he said, and kissed her.