

# ECHOES

*A Spike/Buffy Romance*



HOLLY DENISE



*“The devil takes a hand in what is done in haste.”*

Kurdish Proverb





*NEW ENGLAND, 1701*

She knew not to do anything without salt. There was no rhyme or reason to such knowledge—only the knowledge itself. Salt was invaluable. Salt bade witches away. Salt shielded hallowed grounds. Salt was the only mineral that offered pure, unadulterated protection.

Even with the Powers in her corner, salt might well be the only thing that could hope to keep her alive.

However, the circle of salt would not protect her if she had a stake in hand. Salt required a tacit contract of pacifism. She could leave the book open and on the table beside her sacred circle, but she could not bring it into the circle itself. No, save for the clothing on her back and the ritualistic dagger needed for the sacrifice, nothing synthetic could enter the circle.

She thought it odd that she could hold a dagger but not a stake, and decided not to dwell on it.

She felt so alone here, in her watcher's abandoned cottage, surrounded by the very symbols that had betrayed her. She'd stopped weeping if only out of exhaustion, her tears rubbing her skin raw. If she paused, if she allowed reality to catch up with her, she was certain the rest of her would break.

He was gone. He was *gone*.

Resolution hardened her veins. She shook her head.

*Nothing is ever set in stone.*

The thought only offered a blink of peace. No matter how many dimensions she battled, no matter what sacred part of herself she had to forfeit, no matter the cost of his return, she knew nothing in the world could eradicate the sensation of his dust on her fingers. The ghost of his hand against her cheek. The soft smile on his face, telling her he'd known his time was ticking to an end but gazing into her eyes with such loving trust that she knew he would trade nothing in the world to save himself.

*"Don't cry, sweet girl. Don't cry."*

She shook hard, her trembling hands struggling to light the first of her three candles. Her vision blurred with tears, a storm of sobs crashing against her chest.

If she stopped—if her thoughts caught up with her—she wouldn't be able to function.

She would dissolve.

"I c-call thee," she muttered softly, "oh spirit of shadows, giver of darkness. I beseech you to heed my prayer." She expelled a deep breath and raised her left hand to her eyes, swallowing hard before applying the blade in her other hand to her wrist. "I offer blood for your mercy." It didn't hurt too badly—one little flick of the knife and a dark crimson line stretched across her skin. She blinked hard and twisted her arm until the cut was facing the floor, then pressed her thumb against the incision to encourage drops of blood to spill onto the wooden planks below.

Physical pain was secondary. She was no stranger to bleeding.

"I swear upon the fates," she continued, turning her wounded wrist back to her eyes so that she was gazing at her open hand. She inhaled sharply and pressed the tip of the blade against her roughened, splinter-laden palm, and carved an upside-down crucifix into her flesh. "To honor my vow. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

She shivered impossibly against the moist, hot air, and turned to face northwest.

“Paimon, King of Hell, servant of the Legion, I beckon you. Appear before me.”

There was nothing for a long minute aside from the chirping of crickets outside the cottage doors. She didn't know what to expect—this was, of course, her first demon summoning. The only one she had ever, or would ever attempt. A hysterical scream in her head forewarned in advance she would regret any bargain made, but the part of her that cared had died alongside her lover. The part of her that cared had abandoned her, along with every other human comfort.

Kenneth Travers had betrayed her. The townspeople would have her head if they knew she had returned to her watcher's home. Poison had ripped Will out of her life. She was left gutted, hollow and charged with grief.

Losing her soul mattered little against these odds. It was the only thing of value she had left.

Kenneth had betrayed her. He was dead now. A victim of his own deceit.

But he'd taken Will with him.

*Will...*

A great, thunderous roar pierced the air, reverberating through the walls and sending shock waves under her feet. She cried out in surprise and stumbled back, nearly tripping over the protective circle of salt, but balance returned before she toppled over. Blind panic speared her veins; she seized control of herself before her emotions spilled into pure terror. A blink of nothing and the entry to the Travers' home burst open with a great gale of wind, a tall, solitary figure silhouetting the doorway.

The air around her crackled and the hair on her arms stood at attention.

Elizabeth Travers was accustomed to facing demons. Battling vampires. Washing inhuman blood from her clothing and learning new techniques by which to banish the unholy of creatures back to the bowels of Hell. Her watcher had taught her everything. Had adopted her, raised her as his own, and instructed her in the old ways of the world. In the manner by which her destiny determined she live.

She was the Slayer. This was her cause. Her existence. Her everything.

Only Kenneth was dead, and he'd taken Will with him. He'd murdered the only man in her life she'd ever truly loved, and he'd tried to end her life in the process. Her surrogate father had betrayed her, and thus everything he'd ever taught her was now in question.

Will was dead. Nothing else mattered.

"Do you know who I am?" the demon asked.

Elizabeth had imagined several incarnations of a Hell Demon's voice, but whatever expectations she'd had were washed away. Despite the booming roar of his entrance, the demon's words rode out in a cool, elegant timber. There was a sliver of malice, deadly but deceptively calm, edged in the underlying rhythm of his greeting. It was fashioned to send shivers down her spine—to keep her perfectly aware of whom she was dealing with. This was a demon who cared not that she was the Slayer, even if some had called her the best in history. This was a demon who cared not that her career consisted of sending his friends back to Hell. This was a demon molded of a caliber she had never before encountered.

This was a demon old as time itself. He could blink her out of existence without actually blinking if he so willed. No amount of salt would protect her.

And yet, even knowing this, she refused to tremble.

"You are Paimon," Elizabeth replied, sounding strangely composed to her own ears. "King of Hell. Servant of the Legion."

Paimon inclined his head. He was tall—nearly seven feet in height. She was surprised he didn't have to crouch inside the cottage, but then, demons could likely bend the laws of reality to their particular whim. He was dressed extravagantly, complete with a great jeweled crown atop his head. Elizabeth sensed the movement of others outside the lodge walls. He had not arrived alone, and she was not surprised. The books Travers had left behind had indicated that no figurehead of Hell traveled alone—at least not those of truly noteworthy significance.

"You accept the consequences of my summons?"

She nodded. "I do."



“You understand it is my right to ask whatever I desire?”

“I do.”

“You understand it is my right to demand whatever I desire as payment for services rendered?”

“I do.”

“You understand that failing to adhere to any request will result in the immediate acquisition of your mortal soul?”

A beat. Elizabeth swallowed hard and thought of Will. “I do.”

Paimon gestured as if to give her the floor, a curious smile playing across his lipless mouth. “By all means,” he offered softly, “make your case.”

“I seek the release of a demon.”

“Ah,” he replied, his red eyes flaring with immediate recognition. “A certain vampire, if I am not mistaken.”

“William,” she agreed with a nod.

Paimon arched an eyebrow—or what would have been a brow had he possessed one. His strikingly feminine facial features were void of emotion. The only indication as to the nature of his reaction came in the unnerving tone of his voice. “Does your vampire not possess a surname?”

She swallowed hard. Her wounded wrist ached. Her head felt light. She was aware of the muted splatters of blood striking the wooden floor, but made no move to hide or tend to the cut. “William had no use of his surname,” she replied. “At least none that he shared with me.”

“Mmm, yes,” Paimon cooed. “William was a rare breed. He left his past in his past. Didn’t even bother to slaughter his family, as so many vampires are prone to do.”

“He was unique.”

“Others might call him weak.”

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes, defiance strengthening her tired body. “They would be wrong.”

Paimon smiled. “A woman prepared to fight for her man,” he said, his eyes trailing down the length of her and focusing on her bleeding wrist. “And sacrifice anything to acquire what she wants.”

She flexed her hand. “It’s only blood.”

“Of course,” he replied politely. “And you’ve sacrificed your fair share of blood for dear William before, haven’t you?”

“I love him.”

“A slayer in love with a vampire.” The devil’s eyes twinkled. “I must admit, I am fascinated. What did you find so...how do you say...appealing about this particular species? I’ve known many vampires, as you might imagine, and they are quite a sloppy race. All fang, no courtesy. Many won’t pause long enough from ripping one’s throat out to ask civilized questions.”

“William was different.”

“Ah. *Amore*. It affects all, yes?”

Elizabeth couldn’t imagine the Hell Demon being at all affected by love, but wisely bit her tongue, fighting the urge to glance down. She wasn’t afraid. She truly wasn’t. And in honesty, her lack of alarm was what truly terrified her. She stood before a minion of the Legion without fear. Losing William had stripped her of concern for herself. She just wanted him back, and if dark magic and bartering with the devil was the way to do it, she would navigate the necessary channels and sell what of herself she needed to sell.

William might have been a vampire, but he was a good man. She couldn’t abandon him. She *wouldn’t*.

“You do know what you ask is highly unorthodox,” Paimon continued. “It has never been done before.”

“I know.”

“Resurrecting the spirit of a demon...would you like him just as you remember him?”

She would give anything to see her love’s blue eyes again, but would similarly accept William in any form. “Yes,” she replied. “Yes, please.”

“The scar above his eyebrow. The uncouth twang of his underclassman accent. Yes, you’d want it all. Right down to the sneer on his lips, unless I’m mistaken.” Paimon nodded, his blood-red eyes narrowing into two thin slits. “And I am not mistaken. You truly would sell your soul for a vampire. A demon.”

Elizabeth swallowed hard. She hoped to whatever Powers existed that it would not come to that, for she knew she would. A rash move undeniably, but one made out of grief and devotion. If she came to

regret it, she would find solace in the knowledge that anything was worth saving her William. Anything. Even at the cost of herself.

“I would,” she replied.

Paimon studied her for a long minute.

And she knew without question he believed her.

“Foolish,” he decided after a long, quiet beat, “but noble. It is a worthy man who earns such devotion, or in this case, a sublimely fortunate vampire.” He paused. “And perhaps you are fortunate as well. You see, I have no interest in your soul.”

Elizabeth blinked, but she did not question him.

“You are surprised?” Paimon chuckled and waved dismissively. “Yes, I’d imagine you are. Believe it or not, child, slayer souls hold little value in the underground. Certainly, there are demons that would bloody each other to tiny bits—rather redundant of them, I must say—to get a taste of you down there. As it is, the Powers set you loose in this world with a handy clause which makes you utterly useless. You, my dear girl, are untouchable. That soul of yours. Even if I dragged you kicking and screaming to the gates of Hell itself, Lucifer could not so much as blow you over.”

A potent rush of relief flooded her veins. If her soul could not be touched, she was in no danger of losing it. No danger of losing herself, and committing that ultimate act of self-betrayal.

And yet, if her soul could not be touched, William might be lost to her forever.

“There is something, though,” Paimon continued, “that you have. Something I want.”

“It’s yours.”

“Don’t you want to hear what it is?”

“It can’t be anything of consequence. Not if my soul is off-limits.” Elizabeth shuddered, her arm going numb. “I will give you whatever you want. Just return William to this earth.”

He fell silent again, considering her. “You truly desire this?”

“Yes.”

“No matter the cost to you?”

“Yes.”

“It could be years before I could reconfigure his existence into this

realm. A vampire can not simply disappear and reappear without throwing the whole of the universe out of order.” He shook his head gravely. “No, it must be planned. He must be born again. Right into the blessed womb of his mother, grow up and be shaped into the man he was before he was sired. And ultimately, yes, sired again. There will be remnants of this life, of course. One cannot simply exist, not exist, and exist again without some...mark carrying over. He might hate you.” Paimon chuckled. “He might hate what you’ve done. What you’ve made him relive. He might wish you dead.”

“William would never.”

“He loves you so?”

Elizabeth nodded, her heart full. “Yes.”

“And you trust the word of a demon?”

“I trust the word of my William. There is nothing else but that.”

“Mmmm.” A few beats of quiet settled between them. “And I suppose, in this perfect universe, you would be reborn as well.”

“Yes.”

“As I said, it might take some time—”

“Time does not concern me.”

“Oh?”

“I will find him. He will find me. Of this I am certain.”

Paimon fell silent again, considering. It seemed an eternity passed in those few endless minutes. As he watched her, debated her—as though tossing stones into a murky sea of knowledge beyond her understanding.

When she thought she might lose her mind for the silence, he offered a solemn nod.

“I accept your bargain. What you ask shall be done.”

Euphoria raced relief as her balance wavered. The blood-stained planks beneath her feet heaved as the air around her head grew even heavier, her vision beginning to dim. There was nothing but understanding—a golden promise for the cosmos to grasp and make into reality.

*William.*

She would not have to live without him. He would be coming home.

A long sigh rolled off her shoulders, carrying with it a relieved sob. Elizabeth lurched forward, her feet coming dangerously close to the barrier of salt, her voice crackling.

“Name your price.”



*SUNNYDALE, CALIFORNIA, 1997*

Somewhere distantly, a bell was ringing.

And someone was nudging her. Pushing her. And...okay, waking her up.

“Buffy? Buffy! You can stop pretending to be...ummm...” Willow took in her appearance and offered a lop-sided grin. “Studying? The bell. With the ringage? Time for munchies.”

Buffy blinked wearily and sat up. She had no idea when she’d fallen asleep—likely sometime around the Boston Tea Party. The endless droning of Mrs. Hatfield’s old, scratchy voice had proved yet again to be a nice relaxant. So she caught up on all the sleep she missed in slayage, rather than learn anything that would be constructive on, oh say, the final or SATs.

Not that her life was compiled of moments of studious panic. She didn’t have time.

She had a Calling.

“We going shopping after school?” Willow asked as the girls filed into the hallway. “I don’t have anything resembling a Halloween costume at home. And I doubt Snyder’ll consider jeans and a sweat-shirt as acceptable attire for marching the kiddies around.”

“Shoppage,” Buffy confirmed with a nod, her mind racing to catch up with the day’s events. Snyder. Halloween. Mandatory trick-or-treating. Shopping.

Right. Because Halloween was dead day for the dead. No demonic tricks or treats. Just good ole fashioned fun.

And hopefully some scheduled smoochies with Angel. After she found a period-appropriate dress.

Oh yes. Buffy was determined this was going to be a Halloween she wouldn’t forget.

THE DREAMS HAD GROWN STRONGER since arriving in Sunnydale. There was no point in denying it—denial did not make the truth any less significant. He was lucky now to escape a single night without a visit from his nocturnal angel. And perhaps he wouldn't be so concerned about the dreams had the faceless woman remained faceless. The dreams had been with him since infancy—always the same thing, always the same woman. Always the same *everything*.

Spike honestly didn't know what to make of it. Not once had the phantom woman in his psyche assumed the persona of a woman in his life. Not when he had been an awkward teenager in middle-class London, not when Drusilla had rescued him from mediocrity, and certainly in neither of the two instances where he'd hunted down and bathed his hands in slayer blood.

The fact that something consistent in his life had suddenly turned inconsistent didn't really bother him—it was unusual, yes, but not unheard of.

No. What bothered him was the dreams were the only remnants of his human days that had carried over into the twentieth century. The only thing he relied upon when Drusilla was too weak to respond to his touch, or when his sire's emotional distancing left him in the

uncomfortable reality of how alone he truly was. The dreams brought a woman, one woman of poetry and shining with light. A woman whom, in his youth, he'd assumed was his guardian angel. Adulthood had transformed the romantic notion into a proverbial pipe-dream; his subconscious telling him the sort of woman he truly wanted. Vampirism had molded the interpretation into the pinnacle of desires: what he needed in Drusilla but never received. What he wanted more than anything—a perfect, nonexistent being who would complete every hollow crevice of his worn body.

Suddenly, the angel of night had transformed into something else entirely.

Suddenly she looked like the Slayer.

It was bizarre the way it happened. Spike had always seen a young woman with emerald eyes. Her hair was dark brown—the color he now assumed was Buffy Summers's natural shade. Her smile was infectious, her laughter addictive. Her skin tasted like honey and smelled of raspberries; her lips were soft and warm, her tongue a golden caress against his own. Her skin felt like cashmere, and her body molded against his as though they had been fashioned together.

There was power in her hands and loyalty in her heart. And the love she gave him in a single glance bent time and reshaped realities.

None of that had changed. The only thing that was different was that her face carried over now. It hadn't before. He'd always awaken from the dreams with a vague recollection of what had occurred—of what he'd seen and experienced. He'd feel her skin beneath his hands and taste her kiss for days, but her face always eluded him. He recognized her instantly at night, of course, but never during the day.

Not until now.

At night. Every night. Ever since he'd met her outside that bloody alley, there was the Slayer. The Slayer was his woman.

It was bloody outrageous.

More than that—it was insane.

It had to stop.

Spike knew he wasn't helping matters. His obsession with the Slayer had exploded beyond his reckoning. He wanted more than anything to snap her neck and be done with the whole sordid affair.

The fact that the idea alone made him feel nauseous was more than enough reason to proceed with her regularly scheduled death. The sooner Buffy Summers was out of his unlife, the better. Perhaps her face would fade and the nightly angel would return to him, enigmatic and distant. A proverbial woman who did not exist.

He tried to tell himself he was watching the videos his lackey had made to study her moves for that very purpose.

He wasn't getting very far in convincing himself.

"Here it comes," Spike said to the room, his body tightening with excitement. Annoyance that she was, he couldn't deny the Slayer was pure poetry in motion. Her body twisted like lyrics come to life. The fiery, seductive determination on her face was a walking aphrodisiac. He licked his lips and inhaled, nodding to the nearest lackey. He could watch this all sodding day and not get bored. Say what you would about the Slayer—she was gorgeous.

And so bloody off-limits.

"Rewind that," Spike told the lackey, not looking away from the screen. "Let's see that again."

The tape backtracked a few frames. He strolled to a different screen, exhilaration pumping his dead veins. "She's tricky," he drawled. "Baby likes to play."

On the telly, the Slayer fell hard against a makeshift fence in the Sunnydale pumpkin patch, and even though he'd seen it a thousand times, Spike still grinned at her quick recovery. Buffy was on her feet in an instant, snapping off a piece of the fence and shoving it through her attacker's heart. She had no way of knowing that the vampire was there on a suicide mission, of course, or that every second of her battle was being recorded for the purpose of uncovering and exploiting a weakness. The vampire-attacker hadn't held back—if he had, the tape would be worthless. Rather, he'd been sent after the Slayer without knowing it would be his last outing.

There was something addictive about being the local vamp mob-boss. He could get used to this. Even if cronies and giant master plans weren't his forte. No, Spike much preferred the lonely road. As long as he had blood in his stomach and Drusilla at his side, not to mention a



spot of violence every night and something fun on the telly, he was a satisfied bloke.

He wasn't the sort to sit at home and plan the apocalypse. No, that was Angelus...before Angelus turned into a ninny lapdog. Spike was in Sunnydale for one reason and one reason only: restore Drusilla to her former glory. He'd off the Slayer, guzzle her blood, snack on her friends for dessert, and the world would be set right again.

"You see that?" Spike said loudly, doing his best to ignore the internal angry growl of his demon. Sodding thing was getting wonkier by the day. The Slayer's death was cause for celebration. Maybe there was something in the water. It was the Hellmouth, after all.

Not that he drank the water, but he was reasonably certain the blighters he offed did.

And if he'd learned anything from Woodstock...

Spike shook his head, belatedly realizing he'd paused in mid-thought. "The way she stakes him with that thing?" he continued, gesturing to the telly. "That's what's called resourceful. Rewind it again."

"Miss Edith needs her tea," Drusilla singsonged from the other room, waltzing over the threshold.

He turned rapidly, flushing with guilt. He was able to kill the sensation quickly, but knowledge had a funny way of remaining long after initial sparks had vanished. "C'mere, poodle," he said, extending a hand.

He tried bloody hard not to compare her cold, fragile touch to the warm, strong touch of his night angel. It was unfair—it wasn't right. Never before had the dreams disrupted his life. The life he led between sleeps. The life with Dru.

Now he was holding his love's hand and wishing she was someone else.

There was nothing at *all right* with this picture.

As though reading his mind, which he was almost certain she had, Drusilla cooed, "Do you love my insides? The parts you can't see?"

Spike swallowed hard. "Eyeballs to entrails, my sweet," he replied, nodding at the telly. "That's why I've got to study this slayer. Once I

know her I can kill her.” He bloody well hoped. “And once I kill her, you can have your run of Sunnyhell. Get strong again.”

Once he killed her, she’d no longer haunt him.

Only he didn’t say that part.

“Don’t worry,” Drusilla breathed, and for one horrible instant, he thought she truly had read his mind. “Everything’s switching. Outside to inside.” A small gale of cool, dead air hit his neck. “It makes her weak.”

*Weak. Weak.*

The Slayer weak. Now that was something he could get into.

“Really?” he demanded eagerly. “Did my pet have a vision?”

“Do you know what I miss?” Drusilla asked airily. “Leeches.”

“Come on,” he probed, taking hold of her waist. Again he tried to wane off a comparison between her cool frigid body and his night angel’s warm, welcoming embrace. Again he failed. “Talk to Daddy. This thing that makes the Slayer weak... When is it?”

His dark princess averted her eyes as though embarrassed. It was rot, he knew. Dru never got embarrassed. She danced naked in the moonlight—often when she knew mums and little tykes would be around to see her in full glory. No, Dru was anything but modest. “Tomorrow,” she replied.

Spike frowned. “Tomorrow’s Halloween. Nothing happens on Halloween.”

She shook her head, meeting his eyes again. “Someone’s come to change it all.”

Spike blinked, his mind racing to mesh her words with reality.

And then a silver light of knowledge.

Change could be a very, very good thing.

And the way things were going, he could use all the change he could get.



THE AIR TASTED DIFFERENT. WARM. HUMID. IT WAS NOT THE AIR of home. The air she knew so well. The air which had breathed life into her worn, tired body more times than she cared to consider.

Nights in her village had been kissed with cold. Often while waiting for the dead to rise, she would entertain herself by observing the curious swirl of her breath as she did her best to keep warm. Warmth was not a concern once battle broke out, of course. More often than not, Elizabeth relied on adrenaline to keep her body heated.

At least in the beginning. After William, she hadn't needed to search for heat. Heat found her.

*William...*

Elizabeth blinked wearily, a tired, pained moan whimpering through her lips. It seemed her body had betrayed her. She was on the ground, her back propped against what felt like a tree. Screams ripped through the balmy air—screams of what sounded like hundreds. She shuddered and forced her eyes to remain open. Not that it did much good—her vision was blurred. There was nothing discernible about her location. Nothing but a hodgepodge of shapes and colors; faceless blurs racing across an unknown terrain in a place she'd never before ventured.

Demons. These were the cries of demons.

Elizabeth gasped and shot to her feet, shaking her head hard to clear her murky vision. Endless seconds passed until the scene before her hardened into something tangible, and even then she remained lost.

This was unlike anything she'd encountered—anything that could be construed as a slip of reality. This was *no* reality. Lights. A rampage of demons and crowds of panicked humans in bizarre clothing scurrying into the most curiously illuminated cottages she'd ever seen.

*Witchcraft.*

The word sent a dark shudder down her spine and her resolve fortified.

The last thing she recalled was the face of a demon lord. The one she'd summoned. She'd been on her back, drowning in her own blood. He hadn't allowed her wound to heal. Her inherent super-strength should have guaranteed her survival, but Paimon had denied her. It was just as well; the sooner her life ended, the sooner she could be reborn.

The sooner she and William could be reunited.

*Reunited.*

Elizabeth glanced down to herself. She was wearing some god-awful dress that only Kenneth could have selected for her. He'd gone through a phase in her adolescence during which he'd tried to dress her up as a live doll—present her as the perfect young lady to those around them. To protect her, or so he'd said. To ensure that no one would ever dream of connecting the violence of the night with the sweet girl in the pretty dress.

So she was dressed to please the locals.

And the locals were running around screaming with demons from all walks of life hot on their heels.

She was not home. Paimon had inserted her into a society far from her own. Her body felt the same. When she looked down, she saw her hands. When she spoke, she heard her voice. She fisted handfuls of her own hair and recognized the familiar contours of her face as her fingers explored what she could not see.

Everything was there. She was Elizabeth Travers.

She was *here*.

“Buffy!”

Her heart leaped into her throat. She'd never heard anyone save her beloved breathe that name to life. Elizabeth's stomach clenched and she whirled around, her eyes landing on an exuberant redhead who was dressed like...well, she'd never seen anyone dressed in so little. Not in public, anyway. Perhaps this was some modern version of a streetwalker.

But that was neither here nor there. What truly mattered was the name she'd called her.

*“My gorgeous little slayer.” A lick of his tongue across her quivering skin. Her insides pooled into desire, and she reached for him with trembling hands. He grinned in kind and kissed her lips, his hands framing her face. “My sweet Buffy.”*

*Buffy.*

How did this girl know her name? The name only William knew? The name William had given her.

*“Buffy?” she replied, indignant. “What sort of name is Buffy?”*

*“Your name.”*

*“I prefer Elizabeth, thank you very much.”*

*“Elizabeth is the Slayer,” William countered, calloused fingers tugging expertly at her hard nipples as he explored the creamy flesh of her throat with his mouth. “The Slayer is not welcome here.”*

*“I am always the Slayer,” she replied, her words little more than a dreamy gasp. She thrust her hips hard against his and melted when he growled and thrust back. She’d grown addicted to the hard feel of him between her thighs.*

*“Not here, you’re not,” William replied simply, slipping a hand between them. “With me...you’re...mmm...”*

*“Unb...”*

*“You’re...” He pried her folds apart and slipped a finger across her swollen, tender clitoris. He favored her with a cocky wink. “Buffy.”*

*She fought the urge to laugh. “I am not.”*

*“You’re Buffy. You’re my Buffy.”*

*“I bloody well am not!”*

*William’s dancing eyes glazed over her face, wandering southward until he was staring at her breasts. “You most certainly are,” he told her chest. “You should see it from this angle.”*

*“Will—”*

*“You’re mine, and I’ll call you whatever I bloody well like.” He grinned and tickled her lips with his tongue, the fingers at her pussy massaging her throbbing clitoris into a new form of madness. “You’re Buffy.”*

*“You’re nutty.”*

*“Love tends to turn a bloke wonky, yeah? ‘Specially a bloke who falls for the enemy.” He nuzzled her throat tenderly and pressed a kiss against the sacred mark at her flesh. “You’re my Buffy, darling. Accept it.”*

*Elizabeth’s vision blurred, another gasp clawing for freedom. Around him, air seemed in short supply. “I might need some...convincing,” she conceded, feeling very wanton and rather unapologetic about it.*

*William met her eyes, the demon in his all but purring with pleasure. “Oh kitten,” he growled, his hand abandoning her center to free his cock. “You know how I feel about challenges.”*

*“Remind me.”*

The redhead was at her side now. She attempted to grab Elizabeth’s arm, but her hand whipped right through her skin as though made of nothing. But even that didn’t faze Elizabeth; it was the fact that the girl was still calling her Buffy.

William's name for her.

"Buffy, are you okay?" the streetwalker demanded.

The streetwalker was not alone. A man in strange clothing and a wicked-looking musket was at her side. Elizabeth sized up the weapon. She would have to find a way to get her hands on that.

Perhaps this was a test. Perhaps Paimon meant for her to rescue William from these people.

Or perhaps these people were truly allies. Perhaps she was supposed to rescue William from the monsters around them.

Perhaps this was Hell.

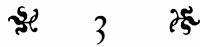
"This could be a situation," the man stated by way of greeting.

The streetwalker looked petrified but was quite adamant on the familiarity of their acquaintance. "Buffy, what do we do?" she asked fearfully.

The words were innocuous enough, but they fueled her with a strange sense of authority.

These were allies. And they'd just made her their leader.

"Well, I think it's obvious," Elizabeth said. "We find William."



IT WAS QUITE possible her first instinct was off the mark.

“Obvious?” the streetwalker demanded. “You call that obvious?”

“Who’s William?” demanded the man with the weapon, not meeting Elizabeth’s eyes. “Is this a drill?”

He kept aiming the muzzle of the musket-replica at the demons around them. Not that a musket would do much good, but it was better than nothing. Elizabeth found she was woefully lacking in the stake department.

“A what?” she repeated, perplexed.

“A drill. Sergeant Nichols said we’d be doing drills.” The man swung his musket around until it was pointed square between her eyes. “Identify yourself.”

“Xander, put that down!”

He whirled around again. “Stop calling me that!”

“It’s your name, isn’t it?”

He seemed to balk at that, blinking rapidly. “Well...yes. But I still don’t see how—”

“I’m your friend,” the redhead insisted. “So is Buffy.”

“Who’s Buffy?” the man called Xander demanded.

Elizabeth raised her hand. “That would be me.”

The streetwalker waved dismissively. “He doesn’t remember who he is,” she said. Then she grew silent, sizing up Elizabeth with slanted speculation. “Wait a second...do you remember who *you* are?”

“Of course I do. I’m Elizabeth Travers. Or *Buffy*, if you prefer it. Though I’d like to know where you heard that name.” She paused. “Do *you* have a name?”

The answer obviously wasn’t the one the redhead expected. “I-I’m Willow. A-and I think we should—” She gasped and ducked as a small blue goblin scrambled up their way. Not that ducking would do any good, seeing as goblins were about two feet in height and the best way to avoid them was to go up rather than down.

The musket dealt with the goblin accordingly, but the swarm of demons wasn’t thinning.

A fact seemingly not lost on her strange companions.

“I think,” the streetwalker continued shakily, “we should get inside.”

“And away from the demons,” Elizabeth said in agreement, turning her eyes to the bizarre monsters moving at a frighteningly speedy pace up the road. She’d seen her fair share of evil creatures, but never before had they sported lights and been on wheels. “Have demons grown... larger since I’ve been away?”

Xander and Willow exchanged what could only be a dubious glance.

“Is this woman insane?” the man asked.

“She’s from the past,” Willow explained.

Well, it seemed the redhead was far more in tune to what was happening than she was. Elizabeth couldn’t remember much past the last ten minutes, let alone the life she was alleged to have led since her deal with Paimon.

Paimon...who evidently had yet to collect his payment.

“And you’re a ghost,” Xander said, staring at the streetwalker.

“Yes!” the girl exclaimed. “Now let’s get inside!”

The man pursed his lips and swallowed hard. “I just want you to know that I’m taking a lot on faith here.” He nodded. “Where do we go?”

“To Buffy’s,” Willow insisted.



“I live here?” Elizabeth asked. She was certain she would recognize the warm air if this was true. The air, the ambiance, the strange-looking cottages and the demons on wheels. Quite obviously there was much missing from her memory. She just needed to decipher what.

“Yes.” The redhead tried to grasp her wrist, but her fingers waved through her skin as though made of nothing, and a chill raced down Elizabeth’s spine. “Erm,” Willow said, shaken. “I need to...not do that.”

The path they took was not familiar to her, nor was the house the redhead was adamant upon entering. However, seeing as she was very much out of her element until someone filled in the gaps, Elizabeth was not in the mood to argue. She filed in obediently behind the ghost-girl and stepped across the threshold and into the unfamiliar home.

The one that was allegedly hers.

“Hello?” Willow called tentatively. “Mrs. Summers?”

The use of her old surname struck Elizabeth like a proverbial slap across the face. She’d heard Kenneth refer to her birth parents once, maybe twice, but never as anything more than cursory acknowledgment. She’d never once been called Elizabeth Summers, even if that was how she’d entered the world.

Wherever she was, her mother was still here.

Still alive.

Elizabeth sniffed hard. She didn’t enjoy showcasing weakness, especially among strangers. And yet there was no hiding the surge of emotion storming her insides. Her mother. The woman she’d never known but had loved all her life. Her mother was here.

“Good, she’s gone,” Willow said quickly, earning a sharp glare that went entirely wasted.

“Where are we?” Xander asked, shutting the door behind them.

“This is Buffy’s place. Now we just need to—”

A sharp knock at the door made the walls explode with sound. Xander immediately turned to investigate.

“Don’t open it!” the ghost exclaimed.

“Could be a civilian,” Xander replied.

“Or a mini-demon,” came the just-as-reasonable retort.

Elizabeth rolled her eyes and turned her attention to her home. It was comfortably furnished, if not compact with devices and objects

she didn't recognize. There was a large box in front of what she could only assume was a modern settee. A fireplace stretched the wall, and a staircase led to the bed-chambers above, or so she concluded. There was a dining area and small portraits encased in glass on practically every fixture.

Her eyes settled on one. It was a rendering of herself and the two people with her.

Only she looked different. Very different. Her attire resembled the streetwalker's. Her hair was short and light. There was no hint of unfamiliarity on her face. She looked, indeed, to be in the company of friends.

"It's us," Willow said softly, startling Elizabeth out of her skin. Not that she'd ever admit it. She whirled around quickly and met the other girl's imploring gaze. "We *are* friends, Buffy."

She licked her lips and nodded. "And...the year?"

"1997," the girl replied. "Why? What year is it...for you?"

The answer nearly knocked her over. Air was suddenly very thin. Her heart pounded furiously and all feeling abandoned her body.

Now *this* felt more like home.

"Buffy? Oh god, she's gonna faint. Xander!"

"No," she answered quickly, waving at the approaching man. She didn't think she could stand to have anyone touch her. Not now. Not someone she didn't know. "I'm... I'll be... I will be...fine."

It was nearly three hundred years in the future.

*Three hundred years.*

Perhaps she wasn't going to be so fine after all.

"Buffy? Talk to us."

Without warning, Elizabeth found herself dropped into the nearest chaise, the redhead in the streetwalker clothing kneeling in front of her. Xander kept vigilant at the nearest window, peering at whatever lurked outside.

"What year is it for you?" Willow asked again.

"Seven...oh lord..." She was very dizzy. "1701."

Xander tossed her a curious look, Willow's eyes widened, and Elizabeth felt inexplicably and utterly alone.

The moment didn't last too long. A crash exploded through the air as the glass pane of the window shattered. Xander was thankfully alert, as Elizabeth felt about as prepared to slay a demon as she did to attend a church service.

"Not a civilian!" Willow screamed.

He aimed at the glass hole with the musket. "Affirmative!"

"Hey! What did we say?"

Sound boomed as he activated the trigger. Willow winced. Elizabeth found herself covering her ears. It seemed to last forever but was likely over in a matter of seconds. Long, endless seconds.

Whatever modifications had been made to muskets in the past three hundred years, she fully approved. And she wanted to get her hands on it now more than ever.

"Big noise scare monster, remember?" Xander explained.

Willow nodded. "Got it."

The sound of a screaming woman pierced through the calm aftermath of the musket's firing. And before Elizabeth could prepare for whatever was about to attack them next, Xander swore and fled out the front door, slamming it closed behind him.

Uncomfortable silence settled around them. Willow tossed Elizabeth an awkward glance.

"So," she said. "1701, huh?"

Elizabeth waved a hand. "We can discuss that later. Right now, the important thing is finding William."

Willow's eyes slanted. "Uhhh. I think the important thing is ending this spell so the craziness goes away. You with the...eighteenth century mumbo jumbo. Xander, who's all with the..." She winced. "Gun. A-and me..." She waved at herself. "Dead."

"You don't understand. I'm *here* to find William."

"No...*you* don't understand. You're *Buffy Summers*. You live in *Sunnydale, California*, and we don't know anyone called William."

"Are you a vampire?"

Willow blinked. "Am I what?"

"A vampire." Elizabeth frowned. "Oh... No, you must... You must not...know."

"No, I know!" the redhead countered, her voice shrill. "I so know.

The...thing. With the Slayer. And the Calling. And the...once every generation? You just... I'm not a vampire. I am *so* not a vampire. If I was any less a vampire, I'd be...well, something that's not a vampire."

"A human?"

"That's right." Willow nodded. "No, you're the Slayer. You're the Slayer, we're the slayerettes. We help you...and stuff."

Well, that was certainly a shocking revelation. Elizabeth drew in a sharp breath, her mind racing with flashes of knowledge. A clash of absolutes. The Slayer was alone in this world. She didn't have companions or...or slayerettes. She wasn't allowed close friendships. She wasn't allowed anything other than a watcher.

She wasn't allowed anything.

She hadn't been allowed William, and that was the reason Kenneth had taken him away from her.

"I have...help?"

Willow nodded. "Lots. Or...erm...however much we can...we can give you. I-I mean, Xander's just...Xander and I'm...I'm good with computers a-and... Well, you wouldn't know what computers are, but I'm good with them—"

"I'm sure you are."

"And—"

The door flew open again, making them both jump. Inward came Xander once more, this time accompanied by the strangest-looking woman Elizabeth had ever seen. She was dressed in a long, one-piece strip of thin fabric, with makeshift cat-ears attached to her head and what appeared to be painted whiskers stretched across her face.

"Cordelia!" Willow exclaimed.

Evidently, this living cat-person was someone else that she was supposed to know.

Times had certainly changed.

"Wait a..." The cat-person's facial features contorted into something almost comical. "What's going on?"

Willow jumped in. "Okay, your name is Cordelia. You're not a cat, you're in high school, and we're your friends." She paused and added as an afterthought, "Well, sort of."

"That's nice, Willow. And you went mental *when?*"

“You know us?”

Elizabeth fought off another eye-roll. That much seemed more than obvious.

“Yeah, lucky me,” Cordelia retorted dryly. “What’s with the name game?”

“A lot’s going on.”

Another piece of knowledge that seemed more than obvious.

“No kidding,” Cat-Woman replied. “I was just attacked by Jo-Jo, the Dog-Faced Boy. Look at my costume!” She gestured to the torn fabric dangling from her strange attire. “Do you really think that Party-town’s gonna give me my deposit back? Not on the likely.”

A smile tugged on Elizabeth’s face. She admitted a growing, albeit begrudging fondness blossoming within her chest. Friendship was something she’d never had before—and while she didn’t know these people from Adam, she would have to assume them to be genuinely good and well-intentioned, especially if they took the existence of demons and vampires at face-value.

She wanted to get to know them.

Not as much, however, as she wanted to find William. She needed to find William. He had to be here. If she was here and it was nearly three hundred years in the future, he had to be here, too. There had to be a reason she was here now. That she knew without a fault who she was. Not Buffy Summers, though the name did have a particular ring to it that she could see herself growing to like.

William was somewhere out there.

Perhaps he was just as confused as she was.

God, perhaps he was looking for her.

Elizabeth swallowed hard. She needed to get out of here.

“I need to get out,” she said. “I need to find William.”

“Who’s William?” Cordelia demanded.

“Don’t know,” Xander replied, assuming his place beside the window. “Don’t really care.”

“It’s...we don’t know,” Willow replied. “I don’t...I don’t think he’s real.”

The suggestion that William and by implication their love could be

anything less than real made her chest swell with a fury of outraged grief. “He’s real,” Elizabeth all but growled. “He’s very real.”

Willow suddenly looked like a small animal about to be trampled. “A-and a vampire, apparently.”

“Yes,” Elizabeth said testily.

“Oh!” Cordelia exclaimed. “Are we talking about Angel?”

“Angel?”

“Y’know—the mega-hottie who you tried to convince me was a vamp so I’d back the hell off and let you have free-reign over all that salty goodness?” She arched a perfectly shaped cat brow. “Is he William in this bizarre-o universe you’ve created around yourself?”

“Whoa!” Willow screamed, throwing her hands up. A sound Elizabeth barely registered as a growl split through her lips, her feet carrying her toward the Cat-Woman—whom had just slid considerably down her list of nice people—with a mind to hurt. The redhead tried to situate herself between them, which did little good as she was presently a ghost. “This is completely not the time to anger the Slayer who has no idea who you are, Cordy!”

Cordelia blinked stupidly. “She doesn’t?”

“She doesn’t,” Elizabeth confirmed, still growling. “And unless you want to explain yourself, I suggest you run.” A pause. “Now.”

“I-it’s like amnesia,” Willow explained quickly. “They don’t remember who they are.”

“I remember exactly who I am,” Elizabeth interjected, her eyes narrowing. “And yes, while I... While my memory is lacking in certain areas, there is absolutely no doubt as to who I am or who William is. Or who we are to each other. Therefore, if you don’t mind...” She inhaled sharply. “William is—”

“Suddenly very much here,” Cordelia said breathily, her eyes shifting to a shape behind her.

It was a very strange feeling—going from absolute bliss to the lowest form of disappointment in less than a second. The instant the words left the Cat-Woman’s lips, Elizabeth experienced an inflation of happiness she had never expected to reach again. All at once she could feel William’s hands on her body and his lips at her ear, whispering that her nightmare was finally over and all would be right again. The dream

was so vivid she could practically taste it, but it left her just as quickly. William's presence was inherently familiar to her. One she could identify if she was blindfolded and surrounded by vampires. Even the first time their eyes had met, her body had sparked in such a way she knew without fault that he would change her life forever. Undeniably. One way or another.

The person Cordelia had identified as William was not William. Not even close.

He was, however, a vampire.

Elizabeth's eyes darted to the nearest slice of wood. There was a piece of furniture that hosted a strange-looking vase with a shade topping its head and another device of modernity that she couldn't identify at all. The legs of the stand were wooden. The lack of alarm on the faces of those around her—alongside the absence of snarling—lent her pause.

"Angel!" Willow said, relief pouring into her voice. "Oh thank god. Can you...can you keep Buffy from killing Cordelia? I need to get to Giles."

"Why is Buffy trying to kill Cordelia?" the vampire replied, more than perplexed. "Does this have anything to do with the chaos outside?"

Elizabeth turned around slowly, her eyes confirming what her heart already knew. The vampire was not her William. He was nothing like her William. His voice was roughened with an American accent. His frame large and bulky compared to the wiry strength her William possessed. His hair was oddly resistant to gravity. His eyes were chocolate brown, not blue. And while he looked at her with a sense of affection and longing, there was nothing recognizable about him.

William was still out there.

"God, I hope." The redhead shook her head heavily and turned to face the wall. "Just...keep everything together."

The vampire's eyes flickered to the man standing attentive at the window. "Why does Xander have a gun?"

"Hey," the musket-wielding man barked indignantly. "That's Private Harris to you."

"Angel...I don't..." Willow trailed off, her eyes filling with tears. "I

don't know what's going on. All I know is I was a ghost for Halloween, and now I'm a ghost. Xander was some military guy...and now..."

"And Buffy..."

"She dressed up for you."

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose. "I did?"

"She thinks you're a vampire," Cordelia said by way of explanation, rolling her eyes.

"I am a vampire."

The girl's face went comically blank. "Say what?"

"I'm going to find Giles," Willow repeated. "He can...well, he can make sense of this. I hope." She pointed at Angel. "You. Keep Cordelia and Buffy from killing each other. Or...rather, keep Buffy from killing Cordelia. A-and you." She whirled around, aiming her point at Xander. "Don't shoot at any demons. Scare them, sure. But that's still a little kid in there."

"In there?" he repeated. "Whatever you say, lady."

"Just...don't shoot them, 'kay? We don't know who's a demon and who's not."

"They all look like demons to me."

"And I look—erm—I feel like a ghost, but I'm not! I'm gonna get this fixed." Willow turned back to Angel and implored him with a look. "Please make sure everything stays reasonably...sane here?"

"Uhhh..."

"I'm not staying here!" Elizabeth said. Her outburst was aimed at Willow, but the girl had vanished through the nearest wall, evidently overeager to get out of the house. Frustrated, she turned to the vampire and Cordelia, neither of whom thought she was in her right head, judging by the looks on their faces. "I'm not staying here."

Angel reached for her, which, as he rapidly learned, was a mistake. She seized his arm and tossed him over her head, his thunderous body making the walls tremble with the impact.

Cordelia blinked. "Whoa."

"Holy cow," Xander said shortly, his eyes wide. "She's like...a fourth your size, man."

"I'm going to find William," Elizabeth said. "And none of you can stop me."



Angel stared at her as though she'd started speaking in a foreign tongue. "William?"

"I'm leaving now."

"We're not stopping you," Cordelia agreed, her hands coming up. "Observe the not-stopping-you of us."

Xander nodded his accord but didn't say anything. Angel just looked at her.

Elizabeth drew in a sharp breath, encouraged.

William was out there. She didn't know where. She didn't know how she was going to find him. She just knew he was out there.

And if she knew him, he was probably worried out of his mind.

THERE WAS nothing in the stars or in his sire's cryptic warning which could have prepared him for this. This wondrous, delightful madness dancing across the Hellmouth's gates. Demons lurked around every corner, attacking pedestrians, messing with traffic lights, leaping in front of moving vehicles. It was chaos at its best, and he'd never witnessed anything so bloody amusing.

It was as though every classic horror tale had suddenly spurned life. Everywhere he glanced, he met a demon's eyes. Species of demon he'd never before encountered; demons he'd never heard of; demons he'd only seen described in pages of mythology; demons that only lived in the minds of writers and the squeamish religious sort. A parade of demons.

He absolutely loved it.

Spike wasn't a fool. He knew there was a mystical explanation, and that his time in the devil's playground most likely ran short. He also had brains enough about him to piece together the likelihood the Slayer was a victim of this madness, and hence weak as Drusilla had suggested. Whatever had affected all the little tykes had affected her as well. And all he had to do was find her.

Before Angel the walking party-pooper interrupted and set about raining on his parade.

Spike wasn't about to toss away a golden opportunity like this. He'd hunt her down and snap her neck. He'd spice his liquor with her blood and make a trophy of her body. He'd been merciful with slayers in the past—with Buffy, all bets were off.

In order to obliterate her from his dreams, he needed to obliterate her.

Perhaps then he'd win back his nights.

Or perhaps he'd be haunted by her face forever.

Spike shuddered and snarled, causing the army of miniature demons behind him to murmur in a range of tongues he couldn't identify. The sodding Slayer best not even consider wheedling her way further into his psyche than she was already. He truly didn't fancy beating himself over the skull with a blunt object until his memory of her was nothing more than a shadow. The way he figured it, he'd have to send his brain through a bloody shredder before the Slayer's face faded.

It was ridiculous how deeply one chit could affect him. One chit whom he'd only twice encountered in the flesh. He'd seen her dance and he'd felt her hot little body pressed intimately against his in a span of forty-eight hours. Every glance he'd stolen of her since the disastrous mess he'd made of St. Vigeous had been at a woeful distance.

Spike had already reconciled he wasn't one for master plans. He had a bloody hard time staying away so necessary events could unfold. What he truly wanted was to storm up to her, provoke her into a fight, and rip her beautiful head off her shoulders. He didn't want to be patient. He wanted this to end. Now.

He wanted to get her up close. He wanted to get his hands on that annoyingly perfect skin of hers.

He wanted...

*To fuck her into the bloody ground.*

Spike snarled again and turned a sharp corner down an unfamiliar alleyway. And without warning—without anything at all—her scent filled his nostrils. Her potent, intoxicating scent.

Something significant shifted inside him. His cock took immediate notice as well.

And then he saw her. A fucking vision if there ever was one. She moved down the dark passageway with nothing but confidence at her side. Her hair was long brown—a true visage of his night angel prior to barreling down the Welcome to Sunnyhell sign. Her eyes were large and bright; she was lost, but unafraid. She moved like royalty. And she was looking for something.

He knew the moment she sensed him. He saw the shudder of realization grip her shoulders, heard the gasp that claimed the night air, watched as she raised her head and met his eyes. The mini-monsters behind him cackled and cooed with delight, and while his brain told him to relish this moment as the last she'd ever enjoy, something carnal stirred within his loins and his demon howled. All at once, he felt paralyzed. Felt trapped in an odd moment of pure déjà vu. His mind scrambled to catch up with the fading memory of something long forgotten, but it was too fast for him to catch. Somehow in the shadow of an instant, everything had changed.

He needed to kill her quickly before he talked himself out of it. Before the angel of his dreams turned into something of his nightmares.

And being a vampire, he knew how particularly horrific nightmares could be.

“William,” she breathed, her eyes shining with tears.

Everything inside him collapsed.

Buffy hadn't simply *become* his night angel. She was his night angel.

And somehow, she had been all along.

“My god,” he said, holding up a hand to prevent the eager demons behind him from storming forward. “Bleeding hell...”

And then she burst into tears. Hard, body-consuming tears. Tears that could only be shed in the light of one's greatest loss or one's greatest triumph. She lurched over, holding her stomach as her whole being collapsed in sobs. And before he could stop himself, Spike rushed forward, a twist of fear and concern seizing his insides. The whispers in his brain commanding him to snap her neck faded to the hysterical screaming that suddenly demanded her safety. He

didn't understand it, and he was moving too fast to allow second-guessing.

He didn't even have time to shake off his fangs or realize that the Slayer had identified him even through the eyes of his demon. Before he could even consider blinking back to the part of him that wasn't stark-raving mad, the Slayer choked a heartbreaking sob and lunged into his arms. Then she captured his face between her warm, warrior's hands and touched her tear-stained lips to his.

Some inner dam broke and reason shot far out the proverbial window. The salt of her tears collided with his taste-buds, meshing everything he knew and everything yet-to-be-decided in a colorful frenzy of meaningless shapes. All he knew at that moment was that somehow redemption, purity, and light had manifested in the Slayer's kiss, and he found himself aching for something he'd never thought to touch. The part of him screaming in protest was swiftly defeated by the man yearning for the visage of perfection that haunted his dreams.

The warmth of her tongue invaded his mouth. Her tears doused his cheeks and her kiss set his body aflame. He was touching the sun, her taste consuming every nerve in his body. She ripped him apart and pieced him together; she caressed him like a lover, held him to her as she explored every crevice of his mouth. As she touched him as no other woman had ever touched him. Her hands didn't abandon his face—didn't dip between them to rub his denim-clad erection. Didn't do anything but hold him to her as she bathed him in sunlight.

"I'm so sorry," she sobbed against his mouth when their lips parted. "Will, I'm so sorry."

Spike blinked, bewildered.

"I had to do it. I *had* to. I had to find a way to bring you back. I couldn't... God, I couldn't..."

He stared at her broken face, the fragmented pieces of his mind clawing for some sense of understanding. None was forthcoming. Instead, all he had was an armful of weeping slayer—one who had called him by his Christian name. A slayer whispering soft, tender kisses across his face, uncaring of the demon ridges or the yellow slant of his vampire eyes. She even kissed his fang when his jaw refused to snap upward.

“I’m so sorry,” she whimpered again, her small, perfect breasts pressed fully against his chest. “Will... Oh Will...”

Spike’s eyes wandered over her face before focusing on her round, perfect mouth again. He was painfully aware of the monsters behind him, as was he of her feminine softness, encased in a warrior’s firm physique. She was burning him up through layers of fabric, and if he got any harder he was going to burst through his zipper.

He needed to get her somewhere secluded. Away from prying eyes.

Not that he cared a lick if the Slayer showed the world her goodies. The fact that she was currently looking at him as though he’d descended from the heavens was an entirely different matter. She was under some wonky spell, and if he wasn’t careful she would entangle him in her web.

He tossed a hurried glance over his shoulder. “Go,” he barked, wrapping an arm around the Slayer’s middle and ushering her through the nearest doorway he spotted.

He found himself inside what appeared to be an abandoned warehouse and without the faintest clue how to proceed. His mind was rapidly deteriorating—what had seemed so important just a few minutes ago had muddled into something beyond his understanding. Intellectually, Spike knew it’d be simple to off her now. Trap her gorgeous little head between his hands and give it a good twist until she was nothing more than a lifeless heap at his feet. She’d be nothing more than a footnote in history. A name with an asterisk beside it in some old watcher’s dusty volume.

But he couldn’t. God, he couldn’t. Bugger if he knew why, but he was powerless against it. Powerless against *her*.

She was weaving a spell around him—fogging his senses and dragging him into the murky place where dreams attempted to overpower reality.

And god help him but he was letting her.

“Hush now,” he murmured, his voice resonating with a tenderness he’d never used with anyone other than his sire. He placed her atop a crate, slid his hands up her body, barely skimming her breasts, and cupped her face as she’d cupped his outside. “Look at me. Slayer...”

“I’m so sorry.”

“For what?”

Her face began to crumble again. “You changed your hair,” she said, running her fingers through his platinum locks.

“Did I?”

“It’s...bright.”

“It’s a look I picked up in the seventies, love.” He slid his hands down the length of her, careful not to cross any boundaries, if there were boundaries to cross. “Fancy it?”

The Slayer shook her head and glanced down again, going rigid under his hands. “I...I...”

“Slayer...” He watched her dissolve again, feeling more helpless than he had in the whole of his existence. He didn’t know what to do. He wanted to shake her and wrap her in his arms. He wanted to beat her to death and kiss her blindly. He wanted so many things and none of them made sense. “What the bloody hell is going on?”

The world was swirling around him.

“I...I did...”

“Yeah?”

“A spell. I did a spell.” She glanced up again. “I did a spell. I summoned a demon.”

He blinked, a blur of rage coming over him. “You *what?*”

Well, at least that much made sense. Barmy bint had cast some sodding spell over him. Over the both of them. And as was typical, the spell had gone wonky.

The spell went wonky. Perhaps it was the reason his night angel suddenly wore her face. Perhaps it was the reason he suddenly couldn’t stomach the idea of ripping out her throat. Perhaps it was the reason he wanted to hold her to his chest and whisper that everything would be all right.

Bitch.

“I had to! I couldn’t...” Her voice failed her, her soft lips quivering as tears consumed her once more. “You were gone. I watched you leave me. And I tried, Will. I tried to... I didn’t know what to do. They tried to kill me a-and...”

Spike’s heart softened before he could help himself. He blamed it on the spell. “Who, pet?” he asked gently. “Who tried to kill you?”

“They thought I was a witch.” She paused and searched his eyes. “Do you remember that?”

It wasn’t the fact that she was completely off her tree that bothered him—it was the fact that he wanted to tell her yes. He wanted to reassure her of anything demanding reassurance.

He hated this.

“Kitten, I don’t—”

“I did it. I summoned him,” she continued. He could practically see her mind racing. “It was easy. I found one of Kenneth’s books. The sort he never let me near, you know?”

“Buffy..”

The sound of her name brought everything to a still. She glanced up at him with wide eyes, swallowing him whole into an abyss he’d never before ventured.

To keep himself grounded, Spike tried not to focus on how wonderful her name felt on his tongue. Saying it in his head was problematic enough—giving it life in the real world, calling her something beyond Slayer was a different ballgame. It humanized her, and while such was never a problem for him—as a vampire—something about her name made his nerves tingle and his body sing. Humanizing her was a dangerous move.

“Are you real?” she asked him, her soft breaths doing things to his skin that he’d never known a breath could do. “Please tell me you’re real.”

This was something he knew. He *was* real. He was as real as anything.

He just didn’t know what sort of real she needed him to be.

*And why the bloody hell does it matter?*

“I’m real,” he heard himself murmuring, his eyes falling shut as her hands took to exploring his face again. He’d fallen back into his human guise without realizing it, and fuck if her touch didn’t feel wonderful. “I’m real, Buffy.”

“Then can we... Can you just kiss me?” Her mouth brushed his. “Please? The rest—”

He smashed his lips to hers without allowing himself time to think. He didn’t want to think anymore. He just wanted to touch her. At the



moment, nothing seemed more important. Her thighs parted and he fell between them as though magnetized, the warm heat of her pussy doing more to set his skin aflame than any amount of sunlight could ever accomplish. The taste of her had him thoroughly drunk. His mind raced around in circles before collapsing completely. There was nothing but the feel of her. Nothing but the way her mouth moved against his, the way she held onto him as though trying to anchor herself. As though her existence in this world depended completely on how tightly he held her.

“Buffy,” he moaned and sucked her tongue between his teeth. He wanted to draw her blood but didn’t dare. That would shove him across a threshold he wasn’t prepared to cross. “God...”

“Please,” she whimpered again, her teeth ripping at his lips. “Please...”

“What do you need, baby?” Spike heard himself asking. He was losing himself further down the rabbit hole and bugger if he cared. He released her just long enough to hike her skirt up her legs and bunch the fabric around her waist. “Need me to touch you?”

Buffy sobbed and nodded hard, thrusting herself against his hand. “It’s been so long.”

“Lifetimes,” he found himself agreeing.

“Please...”

Spike inhaled sharply, his lips brushing the corner of her mouth. It’d been a long while since he undressed a woman in Victorian clothing—not that she was wearing Victorian clothing. No, the dress she sported was something before even his time. But he didn’t care. Whatever it was, it had her believing he was something other than what he was. Not even Drusilla had looked at him the way the Slayer was looking at him. He was falling too quickly to grab hold of anything but her, and with reality distorting around him, he couldn’t bring himself to give an honest damn.

“Please!” Buffy gasped again. “Will, please...”

He fought through what felt like yards of fabric, his body rejoicing when he finally touched skin. Christ, she was so hot. She was so bloody hot, and one touch was going to do rot to satisfy him. He ran his fingers over the soft curls of her mound, the heady aroma of her desire

tickling his tongue and making every inch of him hunger for a taste. He wanted to experience everything. He wanted to feel her wet, warm pussy clench around his cock. He wanted to tease her sweet little clit and thrust his tongue deep inside her body. He wanted her to drench him—drown him in her sweet ambrosia and mark him as no woman had ever bothered to mark him.

He wanted to ruin her for all men. He wanted anyone who ever looked at her to know she was claimed.

Buffy jerked against him with desperation he'd never before encountered. He'd never seen a woman so starved for him, and fuck if it wasn't brilliant. "William!" she cried. "Please! Don't tease me!"

"I live to tease, pet," Spike replied coyly, flicking a brow.

"It's been too long. I need you!"

"Want me inside you, sweetness?" He ran his index finger between her pussy lips. "Fuck, but you're wet."

"Oh my...ohhh..."

"This for me, kitten? All this juicy—"

"*William!*"

He'd never heard his name screamed that way before. He'd never known how bloody hot it could be. He'd never even considered it.

A bloke could get used to this in a big way.

Spike grinned as his thumb slipped over her clit, the symphonic moan that tore through her lips hardening every vessel in his body with lust.

He had to have her. He had to have her *now*.

Which naturally made the arrival of her chums one bloody inconvenience.



BUFFY WAS aware of several things all at once.

The first was the fact that cool, musty air was caressing her bare legs. The second was that Spike was perched between said bare legs, his fingers seated deep within her pussy, his thumb poised over her clit. The third was that every nerve in her body was on fire in ways her body had never before been on fire. The fourth was the stark awareness that she was on display, and her friends were crowded around the entryway, staring at her in numb shock.

Spike released a trembling breath against her, meeting her eyes in a swarm of furious confusion. He held her gaze, not speaking, not even reacting to the hurried shouts that exploded behind him. He just stared at her, lost, his fingers curled inside her, her wetness spilling over his hand. For endless seconds there was nothing but his eyes. The ocean of loss and bewilderment combating with outrage. As though he didn't know whether he wanted to kill her or love her, and the war between the two was driving him as crazy as it was driving her.

That wasn't it, though. That was hardly it.

Beyond the shadows clouding her mind, one constant shone remained impossibly bright.

She remembered. She remembered *everything*. It was so clear she

had to remind herself to breathe. A backward history beginning before her birth. One that ended in a pool of blood on her first watcher's cabin floor—her true first watcher. There was death and then renaissance. She'd been nothing but a memory, and now she lived again.

She was the Slayer still.

And she'd found him. The reason she was here at all.

The man she loved.

He looked the same yet so different. His eyes sparked with a need for recognition, and he looked at her as though he knew her. But he didn't.

The spaces in her mind quickly filled, bringing with it a torrent of questions. She didn't know how she'd come to the life she was currently living or why she hadn't remembered anything until now. She didn't know why Spike didn't know her, why she'd remembered now and he hadn't.

All she knew, in a blinding flash of light, was that she loved him. Buffy and Elizabeth collided and she loved him.

"I'm gonna pull out now, love," Spike murmured. "Don't move."

Buffy sucked in a breath and nodded awkwardly, gripping his forearms as he deftly slipped his fingers out of her pussy. They winced together at the wet suctioning sound that smacked the air as her body fought to keep him locked with her. Spike trembled hard, his breath crashing against her lower lip as he searched her eyes for answers she didn't have.

He recognized that her memory had returned—that she knew she was Buffy Summers, Vampire Slayer, that the girl she'd been just minutes before was gone. Well...not *gone*. Not in any way that would make sense to him. Elizabeth and Buffy were one: their histories, their memories, their everything.

And she knew *him*. She knew him completely.

He just didn't know it.

His mouth neared her ear. "Whaddya say you don't stake a bloke for thinkin' you're the most gorgeous creature he's ever seen?" Spike murmured softly, his voice so low she could barely make out words from the unneeded breaths he took. "Sides, pet, you came on to me."

Buffy nodded blindly and watched as he raised his fingers to his mouth and licked her juices off each glistening digit.

“Decent yourself up,” he murmured, nodding to her state of undress. “I’ll buy you a few seconds, savvy?”

There wasn’t an inch of her not trembling. She nodded again and got to work tugging up her panties and straightening the fabric with a noisy shuffle.

All eyes were on her. She was too shaken to care.

She was a woman without a time.

Spike cast her one more meaningful glance before turning around, remaining purposefully situated between her thighs.

“Lo all,” he said. “Don’t suppose the lot of you have ever heard of knocking?”

“Spike,” Angel growled, nostrils flaring. “Get away from her.”

Spike brought his hands up in some mock semblance of surrender. He tossed a wary look over his shoulder to size up the state of Buffy’s recovery, then turned back. “Some wonky night, yeah?”

The other vampire didn’t seem to be in the mood for small-talk. “What the hell are you playing at?”

“Just makin’ conversation.”

“A-and you’re sure he’s William?” Xander asked, his eyes shooting nervously to Angel. “The one she—”

“He’s the only William I know,” Angel all but snarled.

Spike shrugged easily and felt around his breast-pocket. “Only one worth knowin’, mate.”

“Why isn’t he ripping her throat out?” Cordelia demanded. “Isn’t anyone else wondering why he’s not ripping her throat out?”

“I don’t care,” Angel retorted, stepping forward, his eyes blazing yellow. “You touched her—”

“She was beggin’ for it.”

“Why you—”

The next thing anyone knew, the elder vampire had snarled something unintelligible and was marching forward, murder in his eyes. He might have been successful had Buffy not jerked herself out of her stupor and leaped to her feet. She moved like lightning—putting herself between Spike and her kinda-boyfriend, her arms outstretched.

“Stop it,” she said shortly. “Angel—”

Angel froze, likely more out of astonishment than anything else. “What?”

“What?” Cordelia and Xander echoed.

An excellent question to anyone who didn’t know she was Elizabeth Travers, love of William the Bloody.

Namely, an excellent question to anyone who wasn’t her.

Buffy swallowed hard, her mind racing. She knew she should think of a witty, if not intelligent response, but all she could summon was a weak, “He didn’t do anything wrong.”

Angel stared at her as though he’d never seen her before.

“Are you high?” Cordelia demanded, waving a hand. “He just had his hand in the cookie jar—and I mean that literally.”

“Yes, thank you, Cordy,” Xander said, “you again prove you are nothing if not valuable for useless commentary.”

“Oh bite me so hard.”

“Shouldn’t say that in the company of vamps, pet,” Spike piped in. “Just an observation.”

“Shut up,” Angel growled, turning his gaze again to Buffy. “Look...I don’t know what you thought. You’re confused—”

“You got that right,” Buffy agreed as she took a step forward, forcing him to step back. “But now’s not the time.”

The vampire’s eyes widened. “*How* is this not the time?”

“Just...stop.”

“You’re gonna let him run?” Xander squealed.

She favored him with a look but didn’t comment. Reality had torn around them and the ground beneath her feet was cracking apart. Her memories raced alongside reason. Everything existed in duality.

Angel couldn’t know that. Nor could Xander or Cordelia. None of them could know what she barely understood.

None of them could know what Spike didn’t.

And even if she tried to explain, they wouldn’t believe her.

She met Spike’s confused eyes and knew immediately that despite his lacking memory—despite everything—he was in her corner. Perhaps not tomorrow, perhaps not in five minutes, but he was now. He was more lost than she could ever be. He didn’t know that he

existed solely due to a deal she'd brokered with the devil nearly three centuries ago. He didn't know anything beyond whatever ties had brought them together tonight.

This was a different life and the rules had changed.

Everything had changed.

Buffy had no grasp on how much time actually passed in those endless seconds. She was lost in a sea of stormy blue and she didn't care if she was ever found. Spike had to leave before Angel snapped back to himself and tried to stake him. Now was not the time for this conversation.

Spike inhaled sharply and nodded. "See you around, Slayer."

Then he turned and walked out. And she let him.



THE WORLD HAD GONE BONKERS WHEN HE WASN'T LOOKING.

Spike stormed out of the warehouse, a swarm of unidentifiable emotions haunting his every thought. His hands still tingled from the feel of her skin. His mouth was an explosion of her flavor, the rich taste of her which he'd so foolishly licked off his fingers. He hadn't the slightest idea what had just happened—what he'd allowed to happen.

What he'd done with the warmth of a slayer beneath him.

What he'd done...

A growl tickled his throat, his hands gripping either side of his face as he rounded the nearest corner. He'd betrayed everything. He'd betrayed his oath to Drusilla—the one he'd given her without her ever demanding it. The promise he'd made to not emulate the great sod who had broken his sire's heart.

He wasn't the sort of bloke to add notches to his bedpost. Dru was the only woman he'd ever wanted. From the second she'd discovered him sniveling in the alleyway, he'd had nothing more to demand from life.

He'd never desired anyone else.

No one but his night angel.

But that was the bitch, wasn't it? His night angel wasn't supposed

to exist. His night angel was supposed to only live in his mind and never leak into reality. She wasn't meant for *this*.

She wasn't supposed to be a sodding slayer.

What the hell was wrong with him?

The cigarette he'd wedged between his lips remained unlit until he was near the factory's main entrance. He struck a match along the doorway and inhaled a lungful of nicotine. It wasn't much comfort but it was comfort enough.

He didn't want to face Dru.

He didn't want her to know what he'd done tonight. What he'd come so close to doing.

He didn't want her to know how desperately he'd wanted another woman, no matter how often she wordlessly reminded him how much she wanted other men.

This wasn't him. None of this was him.

It was easy knowing what he should feel.

Reconciling what he *actually* felt was a different matter altogether.

*William*. She'd called him *William*.

Bugger, he had a headache.

Spike sighed, propping himself against the factory's outer wall.

He didn't want to go inside. He didn't want the night to end like this.

He didn't want the night to end at all. What he wanted—what he truly wanted if he was honest with himself—was to hunt down the chit and demand what the fuck had happened between them tonight.

Demand how she could leave him like this. Confused and frustrated. Lost and somehow found. Loathing her and wanting her. Hard and in need of her soft body, and whatever comfort she was prepared to give him.

He craved both her pussy and her throat. But not for the kill.

Christ, how bugged was that?

How could she leave him like this?

And how in fuck's sake had he let her?



*NEW ENGLAND, 1700*

It was the darkest time of night. No moon. No stars. No warm glow of a lantern from a nearby cottage. Not even the wind offered companionship. Grass blades whistled against her bare ankles with every step, the stake in her hand growing heavier as minutes inched by. The vampire Kenneth had predicted would rise tonight wasn't being cooperative. Calculations had timed his rising at approximately seven minutes past eleven.

It was now approaching one in the morning and the grave had yet to stir.

Kenneth's predictions were typically off the mark. He was constantly piecing together mathematic formulae, determined to find a way to pinpoint a vampire's rising to the second. It never worked, of course. Not many of his ideas ever did.

Thus Elizabeth had wasted most of her evening. She was more than used to this, of course. These wasted evenings.

Not that she had much waiting for her at home.

Elizabeth fought a yawn, stuffing the stake between the small of her back and the waistline of her trousers. She propped herself up against the nearest tree, taking in the still graveyard with bored

acknowledgment. The part of her that had once regarded cemeteries as sacred ground had died the night of her first slaying. She used to think them hauntingly beautiful—a place resonating with spirits beyond the imaginings of the physical. A world grounded in flesh and reasoning instead of the mysteries of realms beyond theirs.

The romantic in her had died long ago.

It was a graveyard. One of many. A demonic playground—the birthplace of those she hunted. No more. No less.

Elizabeth sighed and glanced up to the starless sky.

It really was the darkest time of night.

It was also her favorite time of night. She loved it when it grew dark, even more so when it became so still she could hear things like grass blades caressing her skin. Silence and darkness might terrify any other human within proximity, especially in a village as superstitious as hers. But Elizabeth wasn't afraid. Not anymore.

When there was darkness, it was easy to detect movement. She had yet to encounter a demon whose eyes didn't glow in some fashion. When it was full dark—when the air in front of her face was colored with blackness—she was at her best. She was at her safest. If something came after her, she'd know exactly where to look.

Oh yes. Elizabeth loved this time of night.

She didn't, however, love being bored.

"I see the moon," she recited under her breath, her eyes fixed on the black space where the moon would be were it not shrouded by clouds. "The moon sees me."

"Moon can't see anythin', pet. This is what we call a starless night."

Elizabeth fought an eye-roll and crossed her arms, turning fully to face the owner of the voice. The chill she'd once felt at its sound was absent, as it had been for weeks now. There was only so much a person could shudder before boredom set in. After all they'd been through—the numerous times they'd tried to kill each other, the numerous times they'd come close—she felt she knew him well. As it was, she was fortunate if he wasn't around every corner she turned. He stalked the night—stalked her—at times beat her within an inch of her life and left her to heal before returning to do it over again. It was a mutual

thing, of course. They hadn't the healthiest relationship but it was one she'd strangely come to depend upon.

Her weekly nocturnal visits from William the Bloody.

"What are you doing here, Will?" she asked, heaving a long sigh. "Can you not see I'm otherwise engaged?"

"Oh right," he retorted with a huff, taking a step forward as a leer stretched his lips. "Watchin' the grass grow and waiting for one of my newest relatives to show and ugly head. Your life looks right entertainin'."

"Go away."

"Sorry, love. No can do." He grinned, hooking his thumbs through the waistband of his trousers, flicking his eyebrows devilishly. "I came here for a reason."

"To annoy me?" she ventured.

"To kill you."

Elizabeth couldn't resist it this time; she rolled her eyes. "How many times have we had this conversation?"

"Ah, ah, ah," he replied. "No need to get testy."

"Forgive me for recalling the fact that we've done this before."

"Yes, and I think you took our relationship for granted." William's grin widened as the bones in his face shifted, his fangs descending and his eyes burning a deep ember that had shivers racing down her back. "Always told you I wanted to do me a slayer."

"Will—"

"And while I feel our...arrangement has been mutually beneficial, this dance has run its course." He took a step forward. "You're brilliant and beautiful. And after tonight, you'll make a lovely footnote in one of your watcher's dusty ole books."

Elizabeth swallowed hard, her bravado vanishing. Her tough exterior betrayed her—the child inside was terrified. There were nights when she bested William, yes, but he was an old demon. An ancient, as Kenneth would say. A vampire whose legend was only preceded by his reputation.

A vampire who had, for whatever reason, made her his number one priority.

A vampire whose company had been oddly appreciated, despite everything.

“You taught me a lot, love,” William said, nodding. “Never saw a chit with moves like yours. A body like yours. You’re enough to make a fella want what he can never have.”

The words lent her pause. Elizabeth blinked and glanced up. “What he can nev—”

Her voice was severed by the biting smack of William’s fist smashing into her jaw. The ground swept up from under her and the next thing she knew, she was on her back, blinking numbly at the starless sky. She barely had time to gasp—to breathe—to do anything but register the dull pain spreading across her skin before he was on her, tossing her back to her feet if only to knock her down again. This time she managed to fall onto all fours—perched awkwardly with her open palms supporting her, her cut-off trousers sliding up her legs and introducing her knees to the cold forest floor. William came at her again, slamming his foot into her gut, knocking what little wind she had in her out again and sending her spiraling through the air before she collapsed once more.

“Unh...”

“Oh come on, Slayer!” William snarled, the toe of his heavy boot sinking into her ribs. “Don’t tell me you’re not even gonna fight!”

Elizabeth sucked in a breath so deep her insides ached, rolling over quickly to avoid another angry kick. She fought to her feet just in time to catch his swinging leg with her hands, clamping down her grip and bringing her own leg around in a roundhouse kick which had him soaring through the air in a flash of thunder.

The move made every part of her hurt. He’d taken her by surprise.

William had taken her by surprise.

“Why now?” she screamed, lashing with furious fists at his advancing form, each of her punches wasted on the dead night air around them. She was blinded with pain and outrage—too much to take note of her surroundings, or even calculate how close he truly was to her. “Why now, Will?”

“I’ve told you.”

His calm voice only strengthened the fire in her blood. “We were—”

“What? Getting along?” He managed to evade her swings and smash another punch into her cheek, forcing her to the ground again. “We’re not *meant* to get along, pet. Me vampire. You slayer. That’s how this thing works.”

Elizabeth recovered quickly this time, tossing her hair out of her face as her swollen eyes met the demonic glow of his gaze. Her face was wet—she had the horrible notion it was from tears rather than blood. Blood she could understand—could defend. Blood was expected, justified.

Tears were deadlier than blood. Tears meant something else altogether.

“I thought...” she began weakly, but her voice died without argument.

“You thought what? That I was enjoyin’ this? That I look forward to seein’ your annoying little face every night? That fightin’ with you makes me...” William trailed off, his eyes softening as he took her in, running his gaze down the length of her body. Something flashed across his face—something she didn’t know, had never seen before. It made her feel, of all things, self-aware and feminine.

Standing under a starless sky, bleeding and likely sporting more than one broken bone, and looking at her attacker as though only then realizing he was a man.

“Nearly two hundred years,” he breathed, shaking his head. “I’ve never felt this way.”

Elizabeth shivered, a confused frown wrinkling her brow. “What way?”

A few seconds of endless silence settled between them. She didn’t even know if he’d heard her.

“Not right,” William continued, shaking his head, his balance stumbling as he advanced upon her. She found herself walking back, but it didn’t register until her back collided with a tree. And William was still there—his eyes glued to the dip in her shirt where her small breasts made themselves known. Her nipples were hard and poking intently through the fabric, and seeing as Elizabeth had yet to come across

undergarments with enough freedom to allow for the sort of acrobatics she was required to perform nightly, she wore nothing beneath her clothing.

“Elizabeth.” Her name was a prayer on his lips. He had her stunned into immobility, her body rigid with anticipation, tight with the need to lash out or shove him away—do anything to get away from him. Drive a stake through his chest, even if the thought had her heart racing in a manner that was most curious.

“This isn’t right,” William murmured, his chest now rubbing her breasts, his eyes fixed on her lower lip. There was something hard pressed against her stomach. Something she’d never felt before—never been close enough to him to feel before. At least, not close like this. Not close in the capacity of a sudden lack of swinging fists and veiled threats.

She didn’t know what it was. It seemed unnatural.

And in the meantime, he kept talking. “Should just off you,” he said. “Be done with it. No more sodding dreams. No more wanking off to the scent of...Christ...”

“Will?”

A sliver of moonlight peeled through the curtain of clouds, hitting the length of his ivory fangs with such intensity that she was at once struck with the notion of kismet. Perhaps this was the way it was meant to happen. Perhaps fate had decided to intervene once and for all. Perhaps fighting it would only make it worse.

“Elizabeth...”

Then he was close. Sweet lord, he was so close. She felt a cool draft against her throat, his hands sliding up her body until he was holding her by the arms. Something soft, wet and wonderful laved at the pulse-point of her neck, and it seemed for a moment that he was content just to hold her there. His body in intimate contact with hers, the foreign hardness pressed against her, sending a blaze so intense throughout her that she was at once certain that this was how he meant her to die.

“William—”

Pleasure-laced-pain ripped through her insides as his fangs sliced into her skin, and Elizabeth cried out in a confused mixture of horror

and euphoria. Her cells burst and her blood burned, roaring toward a screaming inferno. And before she knew what was happening, William whimpered against her bloodied skin and his fangs receded. The movements of his mouth softened inexplicably, and suddenly there was nothing but the gentle caress of his lips across her flesh, the rhythmic thrusts of his hips against her increasingly pliant body, and the way his grip on her loosened into something resembling tenderness.

“Oh god,” he murmured, his hands sliding up her arms and over the sides of her neck until he was cupping her cheeks, his eyes level with hers. “Elizabeth...”

As a slayer, she'd been raised with limited purpose. To hunt. To kill. To protect. To die. There was nothing in her upbringing reserved for romance or the want of human contact. Kenneth had flatly refused to discuss the closeness men and women enjoyed with each other behind closed doors, and while her imagination was rather inventive, most areas of human relations remained a mystery to her.

She'd witnessed those around her find happiness. She'd attended weddings, occasionally stumbled across lovers stealing kisses, and pined for a connection of her own.

At the very least, she wanted to experience a kiss. If only a kiss. One kiss before she died.

How strange that a vampire would be the one to fulfill her desire.

His lips were cool but not cold, and they brushed against hers with such tenderness she could have sworn he was afraid to break her. He caressed her cheeks with his thumbs, the lower half of his body moving against hers in a way that seemed sinful. The skin between her thighs was wet and what she privately referred to as her *naughty place* was burning. He seemed to be grinding against her with fixed intent, the movements of his mouth melting her resistance and driving her insane.

“Open up for me,” he whispered, and traced the crack of her lips with his tongue. “I need to taste you.”

Elizabeth gasped and the next thing she knew, his tongue was inside her mouth. He licked every corner of her insides, his hands sliding down her throat again until he had a breast captured in each palm, his thumbs brushing the hard pebbles her nipples had somehow become.

“Oh my god...” she gasped, throwing her head back and hitting the tree hard enough to hurt. She barely felt it. “What...what are you...?”

“No one’s ever touched you like this, have they?” William replied, his eyes growing wide as a hand dropped to the hem of her shirt and slipped beneath the fabric. He looked, for all the world, like he yearned for her. She’d never seen anyone look at her like that—like she was something precious, something desirable. Like she was a woman. “God, of course they haven’t...”

“Like what?”

William’s eyes darkened and he growled softly, dropping another kiss across her lips. “I want you.”

“You...you what?”

“I want you, Slayer. I shouldn’t. God knows I shouldn’t.” He glanced away, clenching his jaw. “I’ve wanted you...I’ve wanted you so bloody long. Since the first time I saw you, I think.”

“I don’t understand,” she said hoarsely. “What does it mean to...to want me?”

There was a long pause. William’s attention remained glued to a spot on the tree, or something behind her where her eyes could not follow. At last, he glanced up again, and the storm in his gaze stole the breath from her lungs.

“Gimme your hand,” he said quietly.

The request surprised her. He didn’t seize her wrist, rather waited until she placed it in his care. Then with methodical slowness, he guided her hand southward until she was cupping the hardness she’d felt against her a few minutes before. At first contact, a short, passionate breath broke through his lips and he stole another kiss before he could help himself.

Elizabeth didn’t mind. The taste of him was addictive.

“This is what it means to want you, pet,” he murmured, eyes shining. “I want you. I want to be your first. No...no, I wanna be your...” He shook his head. “I want things I shouldn’t. From you. With you. I’ve been alive so bloody long, Elizabeth. So bloody long. And everything’s been the same till you. Till you showed up and all went to...”

“You want—”

“Inside you. I want inside you.” The hand still curled around her



breast gave her fleshy globe a tender squeeze. “I want inside that tight little quim of yours. I want you squeezing me until I can’t remember I don’t need breath to live. I want to mark you.” William held her eyes a minute longer, then dropped a kiss across the healing mark on her throat. The hand clamped around her wrist released her abruptly, his attention suddenly focused on stripping her trousers down her legs.

The warmth of his body disappeared the next second. Elizabeth’s eyes flew open and a gasp clawed at her throat. He was on his knees before her, his eyes on the skin he’d revealed, particularly the forbidden part which she’d never considered overly remarkable.

She had no use for undergarments when on the hunt. Not for binding her breasts and not for her bottoms. Thus she was completely naked to him from the waist down. Her blushing flesh exposed to his hungry gaze, the wetness between her thighs intensifying and the ache within her belly exploding into all-out need.

“I...I don’t...”

William raised a trembling finger to her skin. “You really don’t know about any of this...do you?”

“Any of...oh *lord*.”

His finger brushed the soft wetness at the opening of her vagina, rubbing that part in her body with such tenderness she swore she was going to melt. And then he was pushing upward until that small part of him was inside her, exploring flesh no one before him had ever before touched. Elizabeth feared her legs would buckle but she somehow managed to maintain balance, even when he leaned inward, parting her private-lips and favoring her skin with a long, sultry lick.

“Oh...oh...”

“This part of you is gorgeous, pet. You know that, right?”

She barely heard him, but she trusted the words were lovely.

His other hand, still warm from the heat of her breast, gently grazed her dark curls. “More than gorgeous, even, you’re...delicious.” William’s eyes traveled up the length of her torso until their gazes locked. Somehow the buttons of her dress-shirt had become undone, so she was completely open to him. No trousers, no undergarments—just her breasts peeking out through the lapels of her hunting-attire, her legs spread and a hungry vampire perched between them.

“You know what this is, darling?”

A long, hoarse cry ripped through her throat as his fingers slipped over something in her body she’d never known existed. “Oh *my god*.”

“This juicy little pearl is what we call a clitoris.” He encircled that part with his lips and gave her a good, hard suck. “Mmm. Do you know—”

“Oh my...”

“You like that?”

“I...I don’t know...I feel...so...”

“Hot?”

“Yes!”

He grinned and licked her again. “You taste divine, love,” he purred. “Bloody divine. I could eat you like this for hours.”

Elizabeth shuddered with something that definitely wasn’t revulsion. “E-eat?”

“Sweetheart, this”—William sucked her clitoris hard again, eliciting another husky moan—“is the only eating I wanna do. And that’s the problem, right?” He rubbed his face against her with a growl. “It’s always been the problem.”

“I don’t—”

“I need to be inside you.” He licked his lips, sliding two more fingers inside her body, massaging the flesh he discovered, sharing her moan when he felt the wetness she gave him. “Like this.”

“Oh.” She licked her lips and thrust her hips forward, forcing his fingers deeper within her. “Okay.”

William trembled and flashed a half-grin. “But with my cock.”

“Your...your what?”

There was a long pause in which she thought she’d said something wrong. In which she thought he’d pull away and walk away from her forever. Instead, when he glanced up again, there was nothing but awe in his eyes. Awe and adoration, and a thousand things she’d never thought she’d touch.

“You’re so pure,” he whispered. “How can you be so...fiery...and so bloody pure?”

“I...I don’t...”

William grinned and laved her clitoris with a long, parting lick

before rising slowly to his feet. “I know,” he replied. “You don’t understand.” He studied her for a long minute, then slowly turned his hands to his own trousers. “I don’t wanna alarm you.”

“Alarm me?”

“It’s gonna spring out at you.”

A beat. “What is?”

“Little boys and little girls aren’t built the same, love. Surely you know that.”

Elizabeth nodded at once. This she very much did know. She’d helped several of the villagers through childbirth—enough to not be surprised. Well, not too surprised. She wasn’t prepared for the size of his—as he put it—cock, nor was she prepared for the way it indeed sprang out at her.

“Ohh.”

William grinned and wrapped a hand around himself. “I want to be inside you,” he repeated, the fullness of his intent hitting her hard.

“That won’t fit inside me.”

“Oh, *yes* it will.”

He was against her again before she could react, his lips consuming hers in another burning kiss. Her legs fell further apart without prompt, his cock sliding up her abdomen until the hard length of him was resting against her belly. “I wanna make love to you, sweetness,” he murmured between kisses, slipping his fingers between their bodies to caress her clitoris. “Please let me in.”

The world spun madly around her, the touch of his fingers against her throbbing flesh had everything melting into shapeless colors. Elizabeth nodded hard before she could stop herself—before the thing she was consenting could to truly hit her—and found herself lost in another kiss. The way he whimpered against her lips had her reconfiguring what little knowledge she held about the universe. There was no way an evil creature could feel like this—taste like this. There was no way an evil creature could make her body cry out with pleasure with something as simple as a touch. There was no way an evil creature could get this close to her without dusting.

William was an evil creature. She knew he was.

What did that make her, then, if she could let an evil creature touch her this way?

*I don't care. I don't care at all.*

And the startling thing was...it was the truth.

"Hike your legs around my waist," William murmured before laving the mark he'd given her throat. She was quick to obey—quick to do whatever he asked of her, and he rewarded her speed with a quick, playful pinch of her clitoris. "That's my girl."

At some point, the ridges of his demon had receded and he was a man again. She honestly didn't know when that had happened—or how she hadn't noticed it sooner. The gaze meeting hers was a deep, royal blue, filled with such rich emotion that it became difficult to breathe. She hadn't thought she could see anything in this darkness, but god was she wrong. She saw him clearly. She could see nothing else. And the second her legs were off the ground, the second her balance was placed in his care, she knew she'd crossed some invisible boundary.

"You're so beautiful," he murmured, drenching his length with her wetness. He had a hand between them, navigating his cock so that the silky tip caressed her swollen clitoris once, twice, and again before slipping down her slit until he was poised at her entrance. "Figure I've never told you how beautiful you are before."

"Uhhh..."

"This might hurt a bit." He licked her throat and purred. "I'll be slow, okay? You tell me if you need me any slower."

Words had no meaning anymore, but she found herself nodding anyway. And then the world stopped—she heard only his ragged pants and the thunder of her heart. Then the walls around her collapsed and she was catapulted into a new world, the clouds above parting as he began to sink himself inside her. It felt at once that she was ripping apart completely—her flesh separated and her body split in half. She clenched and moaned, every inch of her going rigid, her hands clamping his shoulders and a hoarse cry battling her throat for freedom.

"Ohhh..."

"It gets better, kitten. I promise."

Elizabeth nodded and tried to speak but words failed her

completely. And even so, she didn't know what she wanted to say. The sting was minimal compared to sensation, and while her body strained around him, it was more for the alien feel of invasion rather than actual pain. She felt parted but strangely complete all in the same blow. As though she'd been made for this as naturally as anything else—more so, even, than her Calling—and she'd only just discovered herself. She inhaled sharply and nodded her silent consent when he asked her if he could move in just a little deeper. And then the walls of her existence were toppling over once more, the length of him pulling at her wet flesh as he seated himself deep within her body.

She was trapped, then, between the tree at her back and the vampire pressed against her breasts. She was speared through and she didn't care. She was at last whole—it took coming apart to render oneself whole. And while she didn't understand how or why, she wasn't about to question herself.

In all her life, there had never been a more perfect moment.

"Mmm," William murmured. "Fuck, you grip me good. Did it pinch?"

It took a few seconds to register his comment. "What?"

"Never been with a virgin before. Thought you'd... What the poets call your maidenhead, or what all. Most girlies do." With one hand supporting the weight of her thigh and the other at her cheek, he pulled her toward him and kissed her lips sweetly, his hips moving only slightly against hers. "Guess all those high kicks are good for somethin', yeah?"

"I don't...ohhh..."

"Ride many horses?"

She nodded, finding this an extremely bizarre conversation considering she had William trapped within her body. "A little."

"Coulda been that way, then." He grinned and nuzzled her neck. "You've never been anyone else, though. I'd know it. I'm your first."

"Wha..."

William chuckled, and the sound reverberated through her every cell. "Better watch it," he mused. "I could get myself in trouble."

"Trouble?"

He shook his head and kissed her lips once more, the hand at her

face sliding down until he had each thigh cradled in his palms. His fingers dug hard into her skin as he pulled back from her, his cock dragging against her flesh before plunging inside again. “Bloody hell,” he breathed. “You’re... Never had it...so tight.”

“Tight?” she echoed. It seemed all she could do was repeat whatever he said.

“Your sweet little pussy,” William purred, a rakish grin tugging at his lips. He forfeited the hold on one of her legs to brush his fingers through her soft pubic curls. “Squeezin’ me. Oh god, pet, squeeze me.”

“You’re vulgar,” Elizabeth gasped, though she couldn’t deny the thrill racing down her spine. She didn’t want to deny it.

“You love it.” He buried his face in her throat, growling hard as the thrusts of his body gained speed and fervor. Every slip of his cock from her burning flesh had her falling further into an abyss from which she could never climb free. “You have no idea how good you feel, do you?”

“Ohh...”

“So hot. Burning me up, you are.” He trembled hard against her, his eyes squeezing shut. “How do I feel, sweetheart?”

The hysterical screaming in her head fizzed into nothing but left no words in its wake to feed him. How did he feel? Elizabeth barely knew herself. The nerves he struck were ones she hadn’t known she possessed—the way his cock moved in and out of her body, slick with her wetness and seemingly determined to push her over some final threshold, had her skin humming with ecstasy beyond ecstasy and her heart fearing the inevitable plunge. He was thrusting against her, into her, slamming her between the tree and his chest. Cold night air whipped across her skin and in the distance, if she looked, she could see the gravestones of the cemetery she patrolled every night.

This place she guarded—this place she knew—was suddenly completely different.

“My sweet little Slayer,” William moaned against her skin, “please talk to me.”

Elizabeth fought off a whimper and thrust her hips against his. It was maddening, the way he attempted to remove himself from her body. She didn’t want him gone—she wanted him locked inside. Forever. She wanted her muscles clenching around him, holding him,

claiming this piece of herself she hadn't known to be lost until he stumbled into her life.

Until tonight.

Until this moment.

He couldn't give her his body and then take it away, no matter how brief the loss. She would battle him for custody, and she would win.

She was, after all, the Slayer.

Her revolt didn't land her the scolding she expected. Instead, his eyes about crossed and the hold on her tightened still, his thrusts hardening with need. "Oh *bloody hell*," William growled. "That's it, kitten. Fight me."

The words almost angered her, they seemed so inappropriate.

So she did what was natural. She fought. Every time he pulled his cock away from her, she slammed upward to claim it back again. Every time he pulled his lips off her skin, she seized his face and tore at them with her own. Every time he laughed she growled, and every time he growled she laughed. They fought each other with their bodies until their mutual snarls faded into whimpered moans. Until sound melted into the intimate smack of their flesh as they moved together, as he stabbed her insides and as she clenched around him every time she thought his thrust deep enough to capture him forever.

"Oh, Elizabeth..."

The ring of her name off his lips had her trembling.

"Tell me I make you feel good," William begged, driving hard into her, hunger straining his eyes. "Tell me you love me inside you."

A foreign sense of ascension sparked within her belly. "Love...love it," she agreed. "Feels..."

"This is mine, you hear?"

The spark was growing rapidly, spreading through her veins like wildfire. Pressure gathered and spread, moving and rolling into something so large she knew her small body wasn't going to be able to contain it. "Oh—oh—my god. Ohhh..."

"You're so hot. So bloody tight." William turned his attention to the bite mark on her throat again, caressing it with his tongue, slamming into her so hard she saw stars. "This is mine, Elizabeth. *Mine*."

"Oh yes. Yes."

“You don’t let *anyone* touch you like this, you hear?”

She didn’t bother to tell him that no one else would. Her brain had melted as it was—the fire spearing through her veins burning down the parts of her built for such reactions. She was driving forward at speeds she couldn’t believe existed, and she was headed directly toward an inferno unlike anything Dante could ever dream up.

Then William’s fingers found her clitoris again, and he rubbed her gently even as their bodies battled one another toward an unfathomable finish-line.

She was going to burn. Her body was simply going to burn until she knew how it felt to dust.

A fitting ending, she supposed. It was only fair.

“*William!*”

And then it happened—an explosion beyond anything the gods could have orchestrated. Her body clenched and spasmed, her grip on her vampire tightening so hard she was surprised when he didn’t cry out in pain. Instead, his thrusts grew harder, demanding more from her, murmuring dirty little confessions into her ears as her heart battled her chest for freedom. As her blood turned to lava. As her skin touched the heavens, wrapped in euphoria and drenched in the sweetest peace she’d ever known. Elizabeth buried her head in his shoulder and cried out, her arms finding their way around his neck as he continued pumping his cock inside her. And when his fangs found her throat again, there was no fear. There was no crying foul.

There was only liberation as he provided the fire burning her insides with cool release. The next thing she knew, they were falling together, bodies intimately locked and arms wrapped around each other.

She didn’t care to ever find freedom again.

Elizabeth truly had no grasp on how much time passed. How long it took for her chest to stop aching for the breaths she took. How long her body blazed with the aftershocks of what they’d shared before finally lulling into sweet, languorous satisfaction. When she blinked back to herself, she found she was resting upon William’s chest, his hand woven through her hair, his body still a part of her body, his greedy lungs claiming air he didn’t need. And while the earth had



moved and the night was forever changed, she was captured all at once in a moment of stark realization.

There was no going back from this.

Everything had changed.

*Everything.*

“What happens now?” she asked, surprised at how hoarse she sounded.

There was no reply. William tightened his arms around her, finding her brow with his lips, but he didn’t say anything.

Perhaps there was nothing to say.

Then, at last, words.

“Ask me again some other time.”

And before she knew what was happening, she was on her back and William was above her, smiling into her eyes.

Her heart stopped and warmth tingled her previously numb nerves. She felt him hardening within her body, and without want of stopping herself, she rolled her hips against his.

A moan crossed his lips, which twisted into a grin. “Right now,” he continued, “I just need you.”

And for once, she was not one to argue.

*SUNNYDALE, California, 1997*

“She did not!”

“Oh, but she did,” Xander replied woefully, sinking back against the Summers’ living room sofa and shielding his eyes. “Please don’t make me say it again, Will. It’s bad enough that the entire night’s stuck on repeat in my head.”

“Complete in techno-color with added surround sound,” Cordelia added, wrinkling her nose in disgust. “Seriously, what is her trauma?”

“W-well,” Willow said, her wide-eyes searching the group, imploring them for understanding. “S-she said she was trying to find William. Maybe...whoever she, ummm, turned into was all...with the... knowing-of-Spike pre his...being...grrr?”

“No,” said Angel, who was seated in a dark corner.

Xander thought he might look more appropriate if he was stroking a furry white cat. As it was, he, Willow, Cordelia, and Angel had simply congregated in the living room at Revello Drive and were currently waiting for a shell-shocked Buffy to emerge from her bedroom, which didn’t look to be happening any time soon. In the meantime, they had evidently settled upon discussing the night’s bizarre twist of events,

intent but not hopeful on figuring out when things had become even stranger than usual.

Had become a little *too* strange for the Hellmouth.

“No?” Willow repeated numbly. “J-just...just no?”

“Spike didn’t know anyone like her before he was sired.”

“And you would know this how?” Xander demanded. “And did you ever clarify what sire meant?”

Willow batted a hand. “It means being made into a vampire...or so Giles’s books tell me. A vampire’s sire is the one who made them into... well, you know.” She mimed pointy teeth, earning a dry look from the one vampire in the room. She quickly averted her eyes, blushing. “Were you...Spike’s...you know?” she asked timidly.

“He said he was,” Xander said. “Spike did.”

“He was speaking figuratively,” Angel all but growled.

“Figuratively?” Xander spat. “You can’t speak *figuratively* about being a sire!” He paused, shuffled uncomfortably, then turned to Willow. “Can you?”

She offered a decidedly unhelpful shrug.

“Spike was technically made by Drusilla,” Angel said, gripping the arms of his chair so hard it was a wonder they didn’t snap off. “She was too...crazy to raise him properly. I took over.”

A long pause settled over them.

“Whoa, back up,” Xander snapped.

“Who’s Drusilla?” asked an equally confused Willow.

Cordelia shrugged, fighting off a yawn. “And more importantly...who cares?”

A long sigh rolled off Angel’s shoulders. “Drusilla is Spike’s...well, sire,” he explained slowly. “She’s also the woman he loves...crazy as she is.”

Willow and Xander exchanged another long glance.

“Vampires can love?” Xander demanded.

“Is she in Sunnydale, too?” the redhead asked at the same time. “Cause with the way you guys talked it up...Spike was all...*into* Buffy. Did he and this...Drusilla person...break up?”

Angel shook his head. “Not a chance.”

Willow sagged, frowning. “Oh.”

“Vampires can *love*?” Xander demanded again. Why was this not wiggling the others out?

For his part, Angel was staring at Willow in bewilderment. “Oh?” he repeated. “What does that mean?”

She blinked. “It means...umm...oh.”

“Did I mention the part where you said vampires can love?”

Cordelia rolled her eyes. “Oh, drop it, Xan.”

“Bite me, Cordy.”

“There was so much in that *oh*,” Angel argued. “You couldn’t have just meant oh.”

Willow pursed her lips and shrugged. “And yet, see how I just did.”

“Ugh,” Xander moaned, dropping the vampires-in-love thing for the more important task of willing away a sudden headache. “Every time I close my eyes, I get this X-Rated vision of Buffy and Spike and the wrongness that is Buffy and Spike.”

“Okay, let’s forget Buffy the wonder-slayer and all her bloodsucking friends. There are much more important issues at hand.” Cordelia paused dramatically, tossing Angel a dirty look. “I’ve been crushing on a vampire!”

The room fell silent.

“You’ve what?” Xander asked.

Cordelia blinked and glanced around, perplexed. “What?” she demanded. Another beat passed before some inner light snapped on, and her face contorted into a mask of pure disgust. “Oh. Not Spike. Ew. I mean him.” She gestured to Angel. “Why did you have to be a vampire?”

Angel just looked at her. “Sorry to be an inconvenience.”

“You should be! I was really considering giving you seven minutes in Heaven.”

“Also known as three hundred years in Hell for those of us on planet earth,” Xander muttered.

Willow rolled her eyes and waved. “Guys, point. Buffy. You know, our friend who was macking on Spike earlier tonight? Spike as in *Spike*?”

“No need to remind us,” Angel growled.

Cordelia nodded. “Yeah, tell me about it.” She glanced up thoughtfully. “Buffy really is a vapid vampire whore.”

Again the room fell silent. Again three pairs of eyes focused on the self-obsessed cheerleader. Again she didn’t seem to care.

“Yeah,” Xander mused, “this is a good time to remind you that you *are* surrounded by Buffy’s friends...one of whom, as you’re so keen on pointing out, *is* a vampire.”

The brunette rolled her eyes. “No, I’m serious.”

“Not helping,” Willow moaned, sinking deeper into her seat.

“Well, how do you explain her being so gaga for Angel this morning—a *vampire*.” Cordelia emphasized the last word in case anyone had forgotten. “And then her weird spell-girl fixation on that walking Ken doll tonight?”

“That wasn’t Buffy,” Angel practically snarled.

“I don’t know,” the redhead replied slowly. “She gave us a name. And she was the only person who seemed to know anyone.”

“You knew us,” Xander pointed out.

“That’s because I didn’t change. I was just...ghost me.” Willow wiggled. “Buffy...well, she wasn’t Buffy, but she had a name. And she knew where she wanted to go. A-and she was still the Slayer.”

Xander shook his head. “You’re reading way too much into that.”

“Plus she wanted to find a guy called William,” Cordelia observed, nodding as though trying to solve a complicated word-puzzle. “Not Spike.”

“Once again,” Angel said slowly, his voice rung with irritation, “Spike *is* William. His name—his real name is William. Why is this so hard for everyone to remember?”

“We remember,” Xander and Willow chimed together.

Cordelia shrugged. “I just don’t care very much.”

Willow nodded slowly, her brow furrowed. “Well...she wanted to find William,” she went on. “She wanted to find William and she found Spike, who she identified as William.” She nodded to Angel. “Who you say is William.”

“*A* William,” the vampire stressed. “Just *a* William.”

“I think after the way we found them together that we can safely conclude he’s the William she was looking for,” Cordelia pointed out.

“That’s impossible.”

Xander shook his head. “Look, none of us are particularly thrilled with it, but there’s really no denying what happened tonight. As much as I wanna take a big scrub-brush to my brain and get all the thoughts of *ick* out for good, the fact remains that Buffy wanted to find Spike—or William—or whoever...and it wasn’t slaying she had on her mind.”

“And she *did* say he was a vampire,” Willow observed. “Remember? That’s how the whole *Angel’s a vampire* thing came up. A-and Angel... Your name was Liam, wasn’t it?”

Angel shifted uncomfortably. “Never really stopped being Liam,” he said. “I just...Angel’s...Liam was my human name. Angel—”

Xander rolled his eyes and threw his hands in the air. “What is it with you guys and changing your names the second you’re...ummm...”

“Sired,” Cordelia and Willow supplied together.

“Right. That. You became Angel—”

“Technically Angelus,” Angel murmured, his voice nearly inaudible.

Xander leveled another glare at him. “So you have *three* names.”

“Liam was my human—”

“And Angelus was his...grrr name,” Willow supplied, nodding. “I guess when you became all...soul-guy, you wanted to change again.”

“I couldn’t be Liam again. Angelus had killed Liam.” Angel licked his lips, his eyes growing distant as he sank further into his seat. “So I became... I just switched from Latin to English, and why are we talking about me? Shouldn’t we be worried about Buffy?”

“We need to figure out who William is,” Xander said.

Cordelia snickered. “Oh for crying out loud, it’s Spike! No!” She raised a hand to ward off any objections. “Look, I don’t know how or why other than my *Buffy is a vapid vampire whore* theory which, by the by, seems to be gaining more support the longer you guys spit at each other. She wanted to find a *vampire* named William. She found Spike, whose name, coincidentally enough, is *William*. Why is this such a mystery to you losers?”

“Because there’s no way Buffy could’ve known Spike as William!” Angel practically snarled.

A look of pure condescension washed over Cordelia’s face. “Two words, precious: *and yet*.”

“She wasn’t Buffy, though,” Willow said. “I mean she was but she wasn’t. She said her name was Elizabeth—”

“Buffy is a derivative of Elizabeth,” Angel murmured, sinking even lower into his seat. “I don’t think her real name’s Elizabeth, but... Well, there’s a connection.” He paused, then spoke so softly it was a strain to hear him, “If she’d been born in an earlier century, her name would’ve been Elizabeth.”

Xander frowned. “Better and better.”

“So...” Willow said. “Buffy is a nickname for Elizabeth. And she said her name is Elizabeth. A-and Spike’s real name is William...and she wanted to find William.”

“You’re reading *way* too much into that,” Xander protested with a weak, nervous chuckle. “Angel, tell her she’s reading way too much into that.”

Cordelia rolled her eyes again, springing to her feet. “I can’t believe I’m still here with you social cretins,” she drawled. “You wanna waste what’s left of a perfectly good holiday talking yourself into circles—fine. But this seems pretty open and shut to me.”

Willow raised a hand. “Except for the part where—”

“No. Stop. I seriously think my head will explode.”

“Then, by all means, keep talking, Will,” Xander prompted with a smirk.

“Buffy will make sense of this,” Angel said softly, casting a gaze heavenward as though he could see through the ceiling and into the upper-level of the Summers’ home. “Once she comes down here—”

“Presuming she has any idea what happened to her,” Willow added. “I mean, she was macking hard on her mortal enemy. That has to...” She met the vampire’s eyes and shriveled. “Okay, so she’s done that before, but this is different. Spike’s very much of the Unsouled and Proud Nation.”

“He didn’t try to kill her tonight,” Cordelia pointed out, assuming her seat again. “Maybe he wanted to find her, too.”

“There’s no way,” Angel insisted, shaking his head. “No way. I knew the woman Spike was obsessed with before Drusilla killed him. I watched her beg him for mercy...which he granted, because he...well, Spike’s always had...” He paused and glanced up when he realized he

was digressing and cleared his throat. “Point being, she wasn’t anything like Buffy. And her name wasn’t Elizabeth. Her name was Cecily, and she was an aristocratic snob. She wasn’t the Slayer. She wasn’t...anything.”

Another still beat settled through the room.

Xander shifted. “So...”

Willow nodded, leaning forward and rubbing her hands together. “So Buffy wanted to find William, who’s Spike...”

Cordelia heaved a long, suffering sigh and leaned back, propping her cheek upon her fist and looking as bored as Giles at a computer convention. “Oh great,” she droned. “Here we go again.”



SHE BARELY RECOGNIZED HER OWN FACE.

Her hair was too short—too bright. Her skin was too tan. Her face was too youthful.

But then, this was the face she’d known for almost seventeen years, just as long as she’d known the face she’d left behind. The face buried some three centuries in the past. Ostensibly, there was nothing different but a few cosmetic changes. Her once-brunette locks were now blonde. Her eyes were painted with make-up, and her lips were a ruby red. She presented the picture of a girl born into the twentieth century, rather than a slayer from the eighteenth.

She was Buffy Summers. She knew that. She’d been Buffy Summers all her life.

And before that, she’d been Elizabeth Travers.

The orphaned daughter of Henry and Joyce Summers.

The only reason she was here at all—that she wasn’t some footnote in history—was due to a bargain she’d made with a demon.

A King of Hell.

There was no doubt in her mind. No second-guessing. No thinking it might be a dream concocted by the night’s bizarre twist of events. No, Buffy knew her purpose. She knew everything. Her memories of the past were as fresh as her memories of yesterday.

The things she remembered. *Oh god.*



Spike—William. *Will*. Her William. The way he touched her. The way he smiled. The life in his eyes. The way he held her at night and kissed her tears away when she woke up crying. The way he loved her.

Now he didn't know her. He didn't know her at all.

Just as she hadn't known him. Not until tonight.

She'd come into a future she'd wished for herself—wished for them—without remembering a damn thing.

Paimon had deceived her.

Buffy met her reflection's eyes and laughed herself insane.

Of course Paimon had deceived her. He was a King of Hell. His job was to deceive. To lie. To take.

To *take*...

Buffy glanced down, rubbing her arms and fighting off a shiver.

He hadn't taken anything yet. Perhaps the terms of the bargain hadn't been met. Perhaps he'd forgotten. Except that was impossible and she knew it. Bargains made with Hell were written upon unbreakable stone tablets and signed in blood. She knew it because she'd watched Paimon carve out the details of their agreement with a hardened quill. He used the last of her blood to capture her signature, then wished her a happy death before leaving her in oblivion.

No, Paimon hadn't forgotten her or her debt.

He just hadn't collected.

Buffy released a long, pained breath, tears prickling her eyes. She glanced up again and gazed into the face of a stranger.

She'd lived a decade and a half not knowing who she was. Not really.

Now by the grace of some cosmic accident, she did.

She was here because of William.

William, who went by Spike.

Spike, who didn't remember her.

Paimon hadn't intended for them to ever reunite. He hadn't intended for any of this.

Only now Spike was here. And he was drawn to her, as he'd always been. And she was drawn to him, as she'd always been. Buffy understood now—she understood the way her heart had stopped the second he'd stepped out of the shadows at the Bronze. It had been unlike

anything she'd ever experienced. Unlike any response she'd had to another vampire.

It had been a response built on recognition. She'd met his gaze, and she'd known him.

Buffy sniffed and wiped her tears away. She'd tasted his lips and felt his hands on her body. William always had been drawn to her. He'd barreled into her life and nothing had ever been the same. They'd fought for months before giving in to the dance, and then her love for him had gotten him killed.

Had killed them both.

And then she couldn't help it—Buffy couldn't help it. The pressure on her chest exploded into a thousand tiny shards of pain, and before she could catch herself, she'd slumped forward in a storm of tears.

She'd come three hundred years to find him.

And he didn't know her at all.

THEY WERE STARING at her as though she'd announced she was pregnant with Abraham Lincoln's lovechild. This was not altogether unexpected, but she couldn't pretend she wasn't disappointed. A part of her had hoped her friends would rally around her with support, regardless of the insanity of what she told them.

"Ummm...Buffy..."

She looked up. "Don't."

Willow shuffled forward. "We think you're confused."

"Very confused," Xander agreed, his eyes wide.

"I'm not." Buffy glanced doggedly at Angel, who had yet to react at all. "For once... I'm not."

"It's *insane*," Cordelia offered, though she displayed little interest one way or another. "You're insane."

A wan smile tugged on Buffy's lips. "Thank you for that."

Xander rubbed his eyes, heaving a hard sigh. "You're saying you were a slayer in the seventeenth century—"

"Eighteenth," she corrected, then paused thoughtfully. "Well, I guess I was actually Called in the seventeenth century. I was..." She trailed off, blinking. The blank stares had returned, blanker than ever. "I've just lost you, haven't I?"

“It’s not anywhere in the history books,” Angel supplied softly, the soft timber of his voice surprising her. The thrill that used to accompany his presence was gone now—completely gone. Strange how the simplest events could turn everything she’d known on its head.

Then again, there was nothing simple about learning she had lived three centuries before. There was nothing simple about learning the life she led now was a consequence of a spell she’d cast after losing her lover. A spell to summon a demon.

Nothing simple about that at all.

“What’s not?” Buffy asked. “In the history books, that is?”

“Anything about a slayer called Elizabeth Travers or record of William the Bloody prior to his siring in 1880.”

Her heart leaped. “Well...it has to be a part of the deal. Paimon told me he had to reconfigure a lot of things. Major things. He had to make sure Will—Spike and I were reborn. I mean, my mother has *always* been Joyce Summers.”

Willow worried a lip between her teeth. “Buffy...”

“It was just... Kenneth raised me. My mom and dad were killed and Kenneth raised me as his own. He trained me. He—”

Angel held up a hand. “Enough.”

“But—”

“No, Buffy. Enough.” He narrowed his eyes. “Don’t you understand how ludicrous this is? How it sounds?”

“Well, now that you mention it, *dub*.”

Xander quirked a smile, provoking Cordelia to elbow him.

“Of course I know how it sounds,” Buffy continued. “What do you think, I was born in a barn?”

“Were you?” Cordelia asked. “Cause if you were born in the 1600s or whatever, you might’ve been born in a barn.”

Buffy glared at her. “Okay, who gave you permission to speak?”

“They had midwives then,” Willow said slowly, as though explaining a complicated math problem. “I-if Buffy... If this was something... She was probably born in a house with a midwife present.”

“She wasn’t,” Angel said with finality. “She was born in Los Angeles, January 19th, 1981 at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center.”

Buffy blinked. “Okay. Creepy.”

“Do I wanna know how you know that?” Xander asked.

“No.”

“Okay then.”

Angel turned back to Buffy. “The point is, you were born in *this* century. You’re human. There’s no way you could—”

“Do I really have to go over the ‘summoning a Hell King’ thing again?”

“No.”

She shivered and nodded. “Good. Because I tell you, Paimon gives me the wiggins.”

“You wouldn’t summon a Hell King. Not for a vampire.”

The calm certainty in his tone was infuriating. “Look, Angel—”

He held up a hand. “I’ve been watching you a long time now—”

“Yeah,” Xander interjected dryly, rolling his eyes. “We’re getting that.”

“—and you’re...you’re too *good* to do whatever it is you think you did.” He frowned and shook his head. “I’m not saying you’re not capable. Lord knows we’ve all seen what you’re capable of accomplishing. But Hell Demons, Buffy?”

Resolution hardened within her. “You didn’t know me then.”

“I didn’t—”

“We’re talking well before you were born, mister. I was different then. I didn’t have you popping up every time some big ugly apocalypse was going to kill me. O-or Xander and Willow there as my...” She paused and cast her friends a grateful smile. “As my backup. I didn’t have Giles, either. I had Kenneth, who never treated me like a daughter. And I had Will. For a little while, I had Will. And then...”

“That’s so sad,” Willow whimpered.

“That’s bogus,” Cordelia countered.

“Buffy,” Angel said, his voice tempered like he was fighting for control. “I’ve been alive for a long time. I’ve gone through every manuscript there is on slayers and...well—”

“You, I’m guessing,” Xander offered. “He seems to be a walking encyclopedia of all things Buffy Summers.”

“You know what would be nice?” Angel snapped, shooting her friend an angry glare. “If you would shut up for about five minutes.”

“Okay, no need for that,” Willow said.

Buffy held up a hand. “Look, I don’t care what you know, or what you think you know about me. I don’t care that my name never appeared in the history books. I don’t care about that. All I know is I’m here because of something I wished for. Something I set into motion. Something I wouldn’t have remembered had...had whatever happened tonight not happened.” She glanced away, a cold shudder commanding her body. “Paimon never intended for me to know who I was. I was too... I was obsessed with getting Will back when I summoned him. I wasn’t specific. I was rash and devastated and I needed...”

“Oh Buffy,” Willow mewed, earning dual glares from Xander and Angel.

“Did Spike—William—whoever...did he have a soul?” Angel asked.

A smile graced Buffy’s lips. “No.”

“Then how—”

“We just did, Angel. Get over it.” She remained quiet for a moment before heaving a wistful sigh. “He was just there. For so long, it seemed...just there. In the background. We fought all the time. And then he said...he got to the point where... We fought, but we never killed each other. I came to depend on it. Besides Kenneth, Will was the only person who was always there. Always. Then one night he came to kill me for real, and...”

Buffy broke off and glanced away again, her cheeks reddening.

“I’ve always heard that death threats are the way to a girl’s heart,” Xander mused. “Whaddya know?”

“Buffy...” Willow held up a hand, smiling. “We’re all your friends here—”

“I’m not,” Cordelia said shortly.

“...except for Cordy. Could we just...for a second...allow for the possibility that you’re just a little frazzled about what happened tonight?” She paused and licked her lips. “Y-you spent a lot of the night...thinking you were—”

“I spent the night as myself. Just not the me you know.”

“I know it felt real, but so did Xander’s soldier thing to him. We can’t know that it was real.”

Buffy shook her head and heaved a sigh. “Okay. Sure. This is me. Allowing for the possibility. I’m allowing all over the place. It’s possible that the life I remember is completely bogus. It’s possible that whatever I had with Will—Spike—was dreamt up for my little costume persona. It’s possible.” The words made her insides recoil and sent dark shivers down her spine. “But if it’s...why would Spike have reacted to me like that?”

The group exchanged a series of uncomfortable glances.

“Spike has a thing for slayers,” Angel said, his tone soft. “He always has.”

Buffy pursed her lips and nodded, her mind racing back. William had always told her that she’d been his first slayer. The first he’d ever met, and the only one he cared to meet. He’d stumbled across her by accident, but, as he said, he’d quickly found himself fascinated with her. With the strength she possessed. With the way she was a walking contradiction of any other female he’d ever crossed. It was the reason he hadn’t killed her. The reason he couldn’t bring himself to do it. The reason he lingered as long as he did.

It was how he’d fallen in love with her.

Giles had confirmed that Spike had claimed the lives of two slayers. Perhaps his slayer obsession was residual from his first life. Perhaps he’d subconsciously been searching for her.

The thought had her eyes welling with tears.

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” Willow said quickly, the intrusion of her voice nearly startling Buffy out of her skin. “Spike...and slayers. I’m sure—”

“Why are you doing the reassurance thing?” Xander demanded. “This is Spike we’re talking about.”

Willow slumped in her seat miserably, motioning to Buffy in defeat. “She just... With the tears. We should be sensitive, at least.”

“Sensitive in her nervous breakdown?” Cordelia demanded, snorting. “Thanks, but no.” She turned back to Buffy with a look of pure derision. “You’re getting weepy over a *vampire!*”

Buffy just stared at her. “Cordelia...who invited you in?”

“She keeps threatening to leave,” Xander offered with a half-shrug. “No follow-through.”

“I just don’t see why we have to pretend to be understanding.”

It was probably best to ignore her if one wanted to keep a level head about anything. And with everything up in the air—with her sanity already under scrutiny—losing her cool and screaming her head off at the tactless cheerleader would likely not do much to earn her any sympathy.

“Okay,” Buffy said, rubbing her palms along her hips. “So I’ve allowed for the possibility that I’m all kinds of crazy and my macking on Spike tonight was a complete wiggy side-effect of whatever spell was put over us.” She paused. “Can you guys at least admit that I might *not* be so crazy after all? We live in a world—”

“Where you make deals with demons?” Angel asked.

“I lost the man I loved, Angel. My watcher had betrayed me.” She paused, her stomach curling again at the thought of Kenneth’s frozen face, his unblinking eyes staring up at her with naked accusation. “I was completely alone.”

“So you decided to conjure a demon?”

“The only person who’d ever loved me was dead. What do you think—”

“He’s not a *person*, Buffy.”

She snickered and rolled her eyes. “I think I know him a little better than you do.”

“No you *don’t!*” The last word came as a shout as he leaped to his feet, his eyes flaring with a look she knew well. A look of a vampire fighting the face of his demon.

It was one William had given her numerous times when she was being ornery or teasing him about something insignificant. He would get in moods where anything and everything bothered him—such moods almost always resulted in a screaming match that would inevitably lead to William begging for forgiveness of whatever thoughtless thing he’d said. Sometimes she’d thought he instigated the arguments because the make-up sex was so good.

Another wave of tears crashed over her, and she sniffed hard to



fight them back. Buffy hated showing weakness. And showing weakness in a room full of people who thought she'd lost her mind wasn't exactly her idea of a good time.

"Buffy," Angel said, snapping her back to the present, "Spike is a killer. Whatever he did tonight...it was to—"

Laughing was probably the worst reaction, but she couldn't help herself. Angel hadn't the slightest idea what Spike had done tonight. The war in her vampire's eyes had ripped her to shreds. He'd looked at her with such confusion—with hatred wrapped in longing. He could have torn her throat out when she'd thrown herself at him. He could have shoved her away when she attacked his mouth with hers. He could have done anything but what he'd actually had.

Instead, he'd carted her through the nearest doorway. Instead, he'd poured his bewilderment into her mouth as his hands pried her thighs apart so he could explore her. Instead, he'd become her William.

In action if not in memory.

She couldn't stop laughing.

"What?" Angel finally demanded, his eyes blazing with indignation. "*What?*"

"You," she replied, covering her mouth, the tremors seizing her refusing to let go. "And how you... You weren't there, Angel. Not until the end. You weren't—"

"Buffy—"

"He doesn't remember. I know he doesn't remember. But if he'd wanted me dead, he could've killed me at any time." She shook her head; the laughter just kept coming. "I jumped into his arms the second I saw him. He had a whole troupe of demons behind him and I didn't give a damn. He had every chance to kill me and he didn't. What part of that falls into his evil plan?"

There was also the case of the words he'd whispered after she returned to herself. He'd known it the second she was back—the second she remembered the life behind Buffy Summers as well as Elizabeth Travers. He'd met her eyes and whispered that she was the most beautiful creature he'd ever seen.

Then he'd bought her some time to straighten her clothing. He

could have left her flushed with her legs spread, but he'd spared her the humiliation and stepped in front of her. He'd put himself between her and her friends.

Perhaps there was a part of him who knew who he was. Who remembered. A part of him that his conscious self didn't recognize.

"Not to side with the crazies or anything," Xander said slowly, earning a jolt of shock from everyone in the room. "But...the Buffster kinda has a point."

"What?" Angel demanded.

"What?" Cordelia echoed.

"Yeah." He shuffled and shot her a wary grin. "Spike did—and I am in no way condoning the wrongness that is you two together in any way, shape, or form. But he did seem weirdly protective when we stormed in."

"He was three seconds away from getting lucky," Cordelia pointed out, rolling her eyes. "Of course he was—"

"Yeah, but why did he stick around?" Xander shot back. "He stayed...long enough so that..." He met Buffy's eyes, then glanced down. "He was outnumbered, too. Why would he care?"

All eyes fell to Angel then, as though he possessed a magical explanation.

But he didn't, of course.

"I'm not saying I buy any of this reincarnation mumbo jumbo," Xander clarified a second later. "But...something definitely of the wiggly is going on."

"Of the wiggly and the not-so-easily-explained," Willow agreed.

Angel looked at Buffy a minute longer before sinking back into his seat, his expression bewildered and lost.

"You should talk to Giles," Willow pressed. "Giles can make sense of the...nonsense."

"It's not nonsense."

"So says you," Cordelia murmured.

"But you're right," Buffy continued, pointedly ignoring the cheerleader. "I should...talk to Giles. He might have an answer."

*And he might run Will through with a poisoned arrow.*

She shivered and battled the image of Kenneth away. Kenneth was dead. Kenneth was three centuries dead. He wasn't Giles.

Giles cared. Giles would listen.

And even if he didn't, she wasn't about to make the same mistake twice.

Not when she'd gambled everything to set the world right.

*NEW ENGLAND, 1700*

It was bloody dangerous coming here.

William sighed, casting a wary glance to the ominous storm clouds brewing above. He reckoned he was in a cosmic time-out as far as the Powers were concerned; not that he cared a lick. Not that he ever had.

It was going to storm. If God or whatever lurked in the great beyond thought a little rain would scare him off, they were setting themselves up for disappointment. He wasn't going home until he saw her. He wasn't going anywhere until he knew she was all right. No amount of verbal confirmation would do it for him—not anymore. Now that he wasn't trying to fool himself.

Three nights ago, he'd sought Elizabeth Travers out with a mind aimed to kill.

Never had William thought he'd be so reluctant to harm anything. He'd been around for a while—not as old as some, but older than others. He'd seen some remarkable things in his time: the first performance of a Shakespearean play, the defeat of the Spanish Armada, the rise of Peter the Great—things he'd never imagined seeing when he'd been sired. The world had become a larger place overnight. He was a poet from England and now he stood on American soil.

The years had certainly been good to him.

Very good.

And very lonely.

William propped himself against a tree, gaze glued to the window he knew to be Elizabeth's. There was a light burning inside but he had yet to catch a glimpse of her. A silhouette would do—anything to verify she'd made it back safely. Not that she'd faced anything particularly dangerous tonight, but there seemed to be so much more at stake.

So much more.

More now that he knew he loved her.

William had heard many stories about many slayers, each more ludicrous than the last. For years he'd brushed them off as nothing more than a celestial bogeyman to keep the demon community in line. For years he'd laughed at the idea of a delicate female posing any threat to any vampire, concluding that those who dusted at the Slayer's hand were more in awe of her Calling than bested by her aim. For years he'd formed presumptions based on aged ideals of the frailty of the human condition.

For years he'd been wrong.

He was certain, however, no matter the strength of any slayer that he would not have fallen so hard for any woman who wasn't Elizabeth. The girl defied convention. She was everything he'd ever wanted—everything he was afraid to want.

She was so glorious. So radiant. So strong and courageous.

So alone.

William had thought his existence lonely. He hadn't known loneliness until he'd met Elizabeth. She walked through darkness with nothing at her side. She relied strictly on her own cunning to ensure she made it through the night. She was often afraid but never revealed her weakness. She didn't cry when she was owed her tears.

She was innocent in ways he hadn't thought were possible anymore. She had a child's laugh and a warrior's will. She didn't know how beautiful she was. She didn't see the way the men in town looked at her like she was the pinnacle of everything they could ever want. She didn't notice anything that might emphasize her humanity. And while the reason wasn't ambiguous, it made him darken with rage all the same.

Her wanker of a watcher regarded her as less than human. To Kenneth Travers, Elizabeth wasn't a girl at all. She was a weapon.

She was *disposable*.

There was nothing disposable about Elizabeth Travers. God, he'd known it the second he'd seen her. Fighting under the pale light of a full moon, drenched in sweat, her body contorting to kick the vampire behind her as she thrust a stake through the heart of the vampire at her head. A third had lurked in the shadows, intent on surprising her, but he'd exploded into a thousand gold flecks of dust before he had the chance to lunge into her warpath. Elizabeth had fought them all with grace, not once betraying fear or alarm. Her senses were impeccable, her instincts flawless. She'd finished them off one-by-one, turned to face William even if she couldn't see him for the trees and the darkness separating them, and waved.

She'd *waved* at him.

And he'd fallen. Hard.

Granted, it had taken a bloody long time to admit as much. William had fought loving her with everything he had. He might not be the world's most conventional vampire, but he drew the line at going soft for humans. For *slayers*. While true, the Slayer had never sent cold shivers down his spine, he'd never envisioned himself going so far the other way as to fall over himself in love.

He'd occupied months fighting Elizabeth—fighting his growing feelings. Fighting his admiration with what he tried to call loathing. Even when he beat her within an inch of her life, she refused to beg for mercy. He'd gotten close to killing her so many times. He'd wanted it—no, he'd wanted to want it. He made himself lash out at her in the hopes of reclaiming his demonhood. In hopes of beating back the love in his heart into something twisted and dark—something he could truly call hate.

Three nights ago he'd had enough. Three nights ago he'd been determined to end it—either Elizabeth had to go or he did.

Instead, he'd tasted her blood, and surrendered.

God, how could he help from loving her? He might not be human, but he was still a man. And Elizabeth was the closest to perfection he'd ever come. She was witty, funny, strong, and beautiful

—she was her own woman without even trying to be. She wasn't afraid to fight with him, knowing him as she did. Nor was she afraid of the dance.

She wasn't afraid of anything.

And he was sick of trying to fool himself.

Anyone who tried to take her from him would find themselves on the wrong side of dead.

“What are you doing here?”

William blinked and turned, somewhat surprised he hadn't heard her approach. He met her emerald eyes and was surprised when a shiver commanded his body. Now that he wasn't fighting his love for her, he'd spend the rest of her life and all of his worshipping the ground she walked on.

When William did love, he did it with all he was. There was no half-and-half. No in-between.

Not that he had much experience with love; he just knew himself. And in time, Elizabeth would too.

“How'd you do that?” he asked, pouting.

She blinked innocently, then crossed her arms as though to hide. His sweet, innocent slayer. There was no hiding from him—not now. Not now that he'd tasted her every forbidden crevice of. Not now that he'd explored the paradise between her thighs. Not now when he knew how she whimpered when he stroked her, and how her tight pussy squeezed him when she climaxed.

No, there was no hiding from him, if there ever had been.

“How did I do what?” she asked, shifting her weight from one leg to the other.

“Sneak up on me.”

“I didn't sneak. I was just—”

“Overly quiet?” He'd been too lost in his thoughts to notice her approach, but he didn't want to tell her that. Especially when caught lurking outside her cottage. “You just getting in?”

She nodded and licked her lips. He wished she'd let him do that for her. “Kenneth sent me to the Mill Lane House. Mr. Wells had a demon caught in his armoire.”

“Demon?” William took a step forward, determined to close the

space between them but mindful not to move so fast he startled her. “What sort of demon?”

She hesitated a beat, and he knew why. They had parted the other night on uncertain terms—Elizabeth limping slightly as a result of their passion, but quite adamant on managing her way home unaided. There hadn’t been time to talk about what had happened, or how things had changed. Perhaps she didn’t think things had changed.

Perhaps she thought they were going to resume the relationship they’d had prior to their lovemaking. Perhaps she thought he wanted her dead, as he’d claimed only nights before.

“Talk to me, Liz,” William murmured, closing another space between them. “What sort of demon?”

“A boggart.” Her gorgeous eyes grew wide but she made no move to recover the step he’d claimed. “Will...”

“Bloody shapeshifters. Bet ole Wells didn’t know—”

“No, he was petrified.”

“You should’ve waited, love. I’d’ve tagged along.”

Elizabeth inhaled sharply, suspicion clouding her eyes. “I don’t think that would have been a wise move,” she said, tossing a quick glance to the front door of the Travers cottage. “I need to go. Kenneth is expecting me.”

Before he could stop himself, he’d wrapped a hand around her wrist and tugged her forward. “Don’t,” he pleaded softly. “Stay out here with me.”

“I don’t—”

“Dangerous vampire here. Kenneth wouldn’t want you neglecting your duties, would he?”

Elizabeth’s gaze softened with longing, and the wave of relief which crashed over his chest was potent enough to flood the bloody village. “What are we doing, Will?” she asked, her tone dropping with gravity he’d never before heard color her voice. The idea that he’d put such conflict in her life tore him in two, but he wasn’t about to let her go without a fight. “I...the other night—”

“Was just the bloody beginning, love.”

“The beginning of what?” She shook her head hard, her eyes



suddenly shining with tears. “I’m so confused. What we... What we did the other night...it—”

“You don’t regret it, do you?” God, he wouldn’t be able to stand himself if she regretted what they’d done together. The beauty their bodies had created simply by joining. She couldn’t regret it. She *couldn’t*. She’d changed him—changed everything—and if she regretted it, he didn’t know what he’d do with himself. “Please, Liz—”

She shook her head again, but the tears spilling down her cheeks spoke volumes for what she couldn’t put into words. And he was at a loss. He wanted to wrap her in his arms and will the world away. He wanted to toss her over his shoulder and make a bloody run for it. Sod the watcher. Sod her duties. Sod it all—he was the one who truly loved her. She should be with him, not the wanker who sent her out to face ugly death every night.

She belonged to *him*.

“I do not regret what we did,” Elizabeth whispered. “But Will... We can’t again. It’s too dangerous.”

“Making love with me is too dangerous?”

It was a bloody stupid question. Of course it was dangerous. A slayer entrusting a vampire with her body. He was a fool to ask.

Her answer, however, threw him off his feet. “If Kenneth finds out, he’ll kill you.”

For long, empty seconds he could do nothing but stare at her in astonishment. She was worried about him. Elizabeth was *worried* about him. About what would happen if her watcher discovered what was happening right under his nose—if he found out that his slayer had thrown her hat in with the enemy. The idea that any human could ever best him was beyond ridiculous, let alone an aging sod who lacked the strength or the will to fight beyond sending a young girl out to face the night’s dangers alone. But Elizabeth was worried.

He’d never had anyone worry about him before. Never.

*God.*

“He won’t kill me, darling,” William promised softly. “He doesn’t—”

“No, you don’t know him. If he ever found out, he’d—”

“He won’t find out.”

“But if he did—”

“He won’t.”

She shook her head, her tears coming harder. “He’d kill you.”

“He would *try*.” William turned his attention to her gorgeous mouth, unable to keep his lips to himself a minute longer. He needed to taste her kiss. He needed to feel her body against his, rocking against him, squeezing his cock until he saw stars. He needed her hands on him and her mouth on his skin. He needed *her*, plain and simple. “He would try, but he—”

“You don’t know him.”

“I don’t need to.”

“He—”

William kissed her again, hungry and demanding this time, tongue shoving past her lips to explore the hidden secrets of her mouth. It seemed forever had passed since he’d last tasted her and he wasn’t going to deny himself a minute longer. Not when she was here. Not when she cried over the thought of his death, ridiculous as the notion was.

Elizabeth cared for him. She truly did. Even if the words never breathed life, he had proof enough in the liquid crystals trailing down her cheeks. She cared.

God, he was so completely hers.

“Please,” William whispered against her mouth. “Please...fight with me a bit.”

She batted her pretty eyes in confusion. “Fight?” she repeated, her hips moving against his erection in a manner he knew had to be subconscious. “You want to fight?”

He couldn’t help it; he grinned. She was so cute. So innocent.

And completely his.

“Oh yeah,” he purred and nipped at her lips. “All night long.”

“But Kenneth—”

“You’ll have bruises enough to prove to him you were tied up by a particularly nasty beast.” William grinned, squeezing her tighter to him and thrusting his hips forward. He loved the wanton widening of her eyes—the comprehension there. She now knew what her body was capable of, just as she knew his. She knew what they were capable of together.

And that was just in the bedroom. She had no idea of the world waiting at her doorstep. The world he'd show her once he managed to sever her ties with the watcher for good.

"I want you," he whispered. "I want you like I've never wanted anyone. I always have."

Tears formed behind her gorgeous eyes again, but this time, not out of fear. "Always?"

"Since the first moment I saw you. I've been fightin' it forever. Tryin' to convince myself you hadn't turned my bloody life upside down." He dipped his head, tongue eagerly laving the mark he'd given her with his fangs. The one he was itching to make permanent. He wanted her at his side for all time—not just in the limited span humans were given on this wretched planet. No, he wanted to make her his always.

"Have you wanted me like I've wanted you?" William asked softly, dropping sweet kisses along her throat as he made his way back to her lips. "Wanted me like this?"

She hesitated. "I didn't know what it meant to want anyone before you." She spoke like she was apologizing, like she was ashamed of her former innocence.

The idea, however, that she'd never wanted anyone before him had him soaring. She didn't know what a gift her desire was; how it felt to be the first man she'd ever touched, or would ever touch.

She didn't know her own worth, and the knowledge nearly made him weep.

"Do you want me now?" he whispered. He knew the answer, of course; he just needed to hear it.

Elizabeth inhaled sharply and nodded, another wave of tears striking her gorgeous face. "Will..."

"Then have me, sweetheart. I'm right here."

He found her lips again and rejoiced when she didn't fight him. Instead, she whimpered against him and surrendered, linking her arms behind his neck as his own wrapped around her waist. Her tongue pushed inside his mouth, eagerly stroking his as her body molded against him. The warmth of her surrender had him swimming in bliss.

There was nothing in the world like this. He'd settle for nothing less.

Elizabeth was the only one for him.

"It's going to rain," Elizabeth observed, looking heavenward.

"Better get inside."

"No." She brushed a tender kiss across the corner of his mouth.

"Will you dance with me?"

"In the rain?" He grinned. "Sweetheart, I'll dance with you wherever you like."

She looked again at the cottage behind them. "He'll be expecting me."

"Evil vampire," William countered. "Right here. You can't let me go, can you?"

A fond smile crossed her lips and she shook her head. "Never."

Never was a promise he'd make her keep.

They'd saved each other without knowing it.

It was just a matter of convincing her.

SUNNYDALE , *California* , 1997

There was absolutely nothing worth watching on television. And he should know—he'd spent the past two and a half hours flipping through the same fifty-five channels with nothing to show for it. There was news, sitcoms, home-shopping channels, late-night television. Nothing that grabbed his interest or did anything to take his mind off his growling stomach. He hadn't eaten tonight. The hunting grounds were flooded with an arse-load of fledglings, most of whom had been privy to his earlier humiliation, and he didn't particularly fancy showing his face among a lot of two-day-old soon-to-be dust clouds just so they could poke a laugh at the red-faced Big Bad.

No, Spike didn't feel like doing much of anything and it didn't help that the things that sounded appealing were currently off-limits. Things like killing whoever looked at him funny. Or bugger it—anyone who looked at him full stop.

This self-imposed restraint nonsense wasn't going to last long, especially with his temper being as it was. When he was in moods like this one, Spike had the habit of venting on whatever was convenient. Tonight, the most convenient recipient had been the desk-clerk at the

dingy motel where he was parked for the night. The kid wasn't dead—a death would bring about the incompetent human police force, and that just paved the way for attention he didn't need or want.

Being shackled up in a motel room was humiliating enough. Toss in the bit where his sire had kicked him to the curb in front of the lackeys who were technically under his control...

There was only so much a bloke could take.

Spike heaved a long-suffering sigh, raising the beer-bottle he'd been nursing all night to his lips as his fingers manipulated the telly-clicker. There was absolutely nothing on. And for a man who enjoyed his spot of television, that was saying something.

He wasn't asking for anything beyond a distraction from the waste he'd managed to turn his life into in just thirty-six hours. Anything beyond forgetting the taste of the Slayer's kiss and the feel of her hot, silky pussy around his fingers. The way she'd looked at him like he was worth something. The way she'd sobbed against him and begged his forgiveness for some unknown offense. The way he'd felt, in those few minutes, more valued, more cherished, more *loved* than he ever had in the whole of his existence.

There was nothing in the world that made a lick of sense anymore.

Spike heaved a sigh, took another hearty swig of beer, and flicked the channel again. A rerun of *Seinfeld*. Fantastic.

This was the way vampires spent their Sunday nights. Lounging on beds in rented rooms, drinking piss-poor American liquor, and listening to television characters talk about women with man-hands.

All the while wishing he was with a certain slayer. Spike honestly had no bleeding clue what he was going to do when he got his hands on her again. His visitations from his night angel had become more intense since their impromptu tryst, fueled now with the knowledge of her taste and the warmth of her body. His sleep was often interrupted by the ring of his own pleased moans, and he was always disappointed to discover the hand pulling on his dick was his own. That Buffy hadn't found him with her special slayer-powers and invited herself into his bed.

Just two nights away from Dru and he was already going out of his mind. It figured he'd spend over a century with a certified loony and

only begin to lose his own marbles the bloody second he got away from her.

Spike snickered and shook his head, turning the channel again. *Now that's what you call ironic.*

So lost in his musings and the badness that was late-night television was he that Spike did little more than offer a bored blink when the door to his motel room exploded open. He didn't know whether to be annoyed or amused when he met the glowering eyes of Angelus and settled for indifferent.

"Lo Pap," he said, nodding without sitting up. "What brings you to these parts?"

Typically, the appearance of his so-called sire did little more than infuriate him. It was what had made going along with Angel's skit at Parent-Teacher night so bloody entertaining. If the great sod knew him at all, he would have known instantly that Spike had been calling his bluff. Even when they had been tentative allies, they had never been the hugging sort or blokes who'd share a drink. No, Angelus had never been one for sharing anything. Drusilla was testament enough to that.

"I want you to stop," the other vampire said as he stormed across the threshold.

"All right. I'll stop." Spike smirked and waved at the door with his beer bottle before tossing the rest of the contents down his throat. "Though if you're planning on stayin', you'll need to fork over some cash. I only booked a single."

"I'm serious."

"So am I. Y'know how hard it was to find a bloke with a healthy bank account 'round here? I'm gonna have old-man taste in my mouth for weeks." Spike shuddered, flicking off the television and swinging his legs over the side of the bed. "Do I honestly need to ask you what the bugger you're doin' here, or are you plannin' on sharing?"

Angel was quiet for a long minute, staring at the cracked walls and the numerous stains littering the carpet. "What the hell are you doing, Spike?"

"Well, before you showed up, I was debating between Italian and Chinese." He paused. "Chinese was winning."

"No, *what* are you doing?"

Spike blinked, fighting back a chuckle. “What’s it you wanna hear, mate? Plottin’ the apocalypse? Tryin’ to figure just how priceless the look on your face will be when I finally decide to put you out of your soul-havin’ misery?” He grinned. “Fantasizin’ about how glorious your slayer tastes?”

The other vampire twisted around. “Stay away from her.”

“She threw herself at *me*, mate. What’s a bloke to do?”

“I mean it, Spike. Stay *away* from her.”

Spike brought his hands up. “Can’t help it if she needs a bit more monster than you have to offer, now can I? How else do you figure she came around huntin’ me down and leapin’ into my arms like I was—”

“It was a spell.”

He rolled his eyes. “Really. And here I was thinking there’s somethin’ wonky in the water.”

“Buffy’s really confused right now—”

Spike gave a dramatic gasp, slapping a hand across his chest. “And you want me to cut the poor twig a break? Not kill her so thoroughly when her head’s all in a tumble?” He snorted, even if the words fell short of intent. Even if the thought of harming the Slayer made his stomach clench and his demon roar in fury. “I’m evil, Angelus. Somethin’ you know more than your fair share about, if memory serves.”

Angel leveled a useless glare at him. “I could kill you now.”

“Yeah.” He faked a shudder. “Scary. Come on, mate. We all know how you feel about family.”

“Didn’t stop me from killing Darla last year.”

“Word has it you only did it so she wouldn’t pump your delicious slayer full of lead.”

The rage in Angel’s eyes was strangely comforting. “Are you really so arrogant to think I *won’t* kill you?”

“Are you really so arrogant to think that you could?” Spike countered, dipping a hand into his pocket to fish out his fags. No fags to be found. He’d have to make a run to the nearest Kwikie-Mart. “Y’don’t know me like you used to. Bloody hell, pretty sure you never knew me at all.”

“I know you enough to know you haven’t changed. You *don’t* change.”



“And because you have the clarity of a handy dandy soul, you—”

“You said it, not me. Remember?” Angel took a step forward. “Demons are non-changing.”

He fought an eye-roll. Bloody figured that much would resurface to bite him in the arse. It was a philosophy he’d held near and dear to him such a short while ago. How was it that so much had changed in just two or three days that he felt *himself* changing along with it?

Fuck if he ever confessed as much.

“Is that it, then?” Spike demanded, tossing a pointed glare to the door. “You hunt me down just to tell me it’s all right to wanna kill your girl, but fantasizing about shagging her’s outta the question?”

“So you are, then? What I saw wasn’t just the spell... It was you, too.”

He groaned and threw his arms in the air, twisting around and marching to the cooler he’d swiped from the local wannabe Walmart. If he couldn’t smoke, he might as well keep drinking. “Whaddya want from me? She’s a walking, talking masterpiece, and I’m a vampire. Vamps appreciate beauty. So yeah, I’ve thought of fucking her into the ground. Doesn’t rightly help when she throws that luscious thing she calls a body at me.” He popped the cap off his beer bottle and took a healthy swig. “So the Slayer has a few loose screws, and you’re afraid I’m gonna worm my way into her knickers on the road to snappin’ her neck? Not that the idea doesn’t hold its fair share of appeal—”

“I swear, Spike—”

“—but that tactic reeks of your MO, mate. Not mine. I’m not one to screw with my food. Seems a certain sire of mine learned that particular lesson the hard way.”

Angel held his glare for a few seconds before breaking away with a sigh, his massive shoulders slumping. A few uncomfortable beats of silence spread between them. They seemed at an impassable standstill.

“What the hell are you doing here, Spike?” he asked softly.

“I thought I already told you...debatin’ what to grab for dinner.”

“No, what are you...” Angel paused and broke off, holding up a hand. “Why aren’t you with Dru?”

Spike perked an eyebrow. “You found me here. You’re tellin’ me you haven’t heard?”

“Believe it or not, I’m not that interested in your life.”

“Yeah, you’re here because you’re diseased with apathy.” He snorted and waved a hand. “Dru gave me the boot.”

Angel blinked. Hard. “She what?”

“Came home the other night smellin’ like ripe slayer musk, and she tossed me out on my arse. It’s almost funny.” Spike paused but couldn’t bring himself to laugh. “All the foolin’ around she’s done and I’ve always turned a blind eye. Knew she’d come back to me in the end, and she always has. I get mauled by a dizzy blonde and Dru’s suddenly—”

“That doesn’t sound like Dru.”

“Well, by all bloody means—”

“No. No. It *really* doesn’t sound like Dru.”

“She’s a woman, mate, and outta her sodding mind, thanks to you. Do you really wanna try to make sense of anythin’ she—”

“I think I know Dru well enough to—”

“Yeah. You know me. You know Dru. You know your slayer...you just know everythin’, don’t you? Wanna read me off tomorrow’s lotto numbers while you’re at it?” Spike shook his head, crashing onto the bed again and ignoring the spring that crunched beneath his weight. “Look, you came here to tell me to lay off your girl. You know, ’course, that she’s the one who needs to keep her hands to herself.”

“Buffy’s confused.”

Spike snorted. “So you said.”

“She thinks...” Angel fell silent for a long beat. “She thinks you two... She thinks you knew each other.”

“Yeah, I worked that much out from the way she kept pawing at me and calling me *William*.”

“You’re saying you didn’t do anything to encourage her?”

Spike huffed at that. “Much as I’d love to take credit for the girl’s breakdown, I’ve barely had time to work out what actually happened.” He held his arms out, indicating his surroundings. “One second I’m thinkin’ about how great a mouthful of the Slayer’s blood’ll taste, and the next she’s kissing my lips off. And before I can make a lick of sense outta what happened, Dru’s showin’ me the door. I’m parked in this bloody awful hellhole—”

“Why?”

He blinked. “Huss’at?”

“Why are you *here?* Above ground? Why aren’t you lurking in a crypt or...” Angel sighed, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. “Why are you living among them? Like...”

“Like you, you mean?”

“Well, now that you mention it...”

Spike snickered and shook his head. “You really think I’d be emulatin’ you on purpose? You’re a housebroken ninny who trails after the Slayer, waitin’ for her to give you tasty treats. Just so happens I don’t plan on bein’ in this piss-poor excuse for a town long enough to find a crypt with running water and a workin’ cable-box.”

“She thinks she knew you back in the eighteenth century.”

Well, that much Spike hadn’t seen coming.

“Buffy,” Angel clarified, like clarification was needed. “She thinks she knew you—”

“I heard you.”

“Yeah.”

Spike found a spot on the wall and focused. There was nothing about this that made any sense. His life was getting wonkier by the minute, and it was entirely the Slayer’s fault. “She thinks she knew me...”

“1701 is the date she gave Willow.”

“The girl *is* aware I wasn’t even alive around that time, right? Oh, and yeah, neither was she.”

“She says she did a spell that summoned a demon, that planted the two of you into this century and into each other’s paths.”

Well, that would certainly explain why the girl had rushed up to him, whimpering his name and attacking him with that lethal weapon she called a mouth.

It would explain a lot.

It *wouldn’t* explain her role as his night angel. It wouldn’t explain his reaction to her; why he hadn’t twisted her pretty little head right off her neck the second she’d thrown herself at him. Why he’d whimpered against her kiss and pried her thighs apart. Why it had seemed so bloody important to explore the virgin softness of her plump, molten pussy. Why he’d wanted, in those wonderfully confusing minutes, to

sink his cock inside her rather than his fangs. Why he wanted her more than he'd wanted any woman.

In a blink, Buffy had eradicated his desire for any woman who wasn't her.

He wanted to kill her for it.

He wanted to fuck her for it.

He wanted to...

He didn't know what he wanted, nor did he know why Angel was entrusting him with any of this. Perhaps Angel believed Spike was as smitten as he was—which was beyond ridiculous, as there was a fine line between wanting-to-shag and wanting-to-love.

Suppose, though, if he *did* shag the Slayer. Suppose he got her out of his system...

Angel likely thought of Buffy as invincible. Either that, or he was planning on lurking over her shoulder even more than he did. He probably didn't think Spike could do Buffy any harm, no matter how much knowledge he was fed.

Or perhaps—just perhaps—he'd sought Spike out to ensure the girl's story wasn't true. That they weren't old lovers that had been torn apart by circumstances beyond their control. That she hadn't summoned a demon to insert their lifelines into some wonky version of the future so that they might cross paths again.

Spike's life was very much real. It wasn't pretty and never had been, but there was nothing fake about his past.

It was a nice thought, though. The idea that someone would truly care enough for him to bargain with a demon and leap into the future.

Too bad the Slayer was clearly out of her head.

Too bad he intended to kill her.

Spike snorted at that, refusing to meet Angel's gaze.

*Intend being the operative word.*

He'd do it. Eventually, he'd do it. Once his demon stopped snarling at the thought of bruising her dainty skin, he'd rip out her lungs and be on his merry way.

Until then, he'd wait.

It was only time.

❧ I I ❧

*NEW ENGLAND, 1701*

Paint had long since crusted against her skin and she knew without a doubt that she'd be scrubbing herself raw for hours to eradicate the evidence of her artistic adventure. She was supposed to be training. She was *always* supposed to be training. The light of day was a shield to protect her from the evils at night—the sunlit hours were, therefore, occupied by Kenneth and a variety of exercises she was expected to have accomplished by suppertime.

Once upon a time, her watcher had accompanied her into the daylight. He would stand under the cool shade of an oak tree, barking orders and criticism in equal measure. Sometimes he would have her hunt down demon breeding grounds and take out whole clusters of otherwise nocturnal creatures when they could not fight back. Sometimes he would send her on missions to find some ancient artifact rumored to be buried or hidden in the woods and caves surrounding their village. Sometimes he was simply content to allow her to practice new moves on the scarecrows he was constantly piecing together. There was no pattern to Kenneth's orders. He simply threw whatever he wished at her, and expected nothing less than her complete compliance.

Today, she was to be dismantling the hay-stuffed dummies with a series of new moves and low punches. Once she was finished, she was to piece the dummies together again and repeat as needed.

Elizabeth turned her hands over and stared at her open palms. Yes, it would take hours to scrub the paint away.

But it was worth it.

She glanced up again with a grin. William was going to love this.

Things had changed between them so rapidly it was hard for her, at times, to grasp that it was actually happening, that she wasn't dreaming, that she hadn't lost her mind. Nights were something she anticipated now with the patience of a child at Christmastime. It was becoming increasingly difficult to smother her grin upon leaving the cottage at sundown, as it was keeping from skipping every other step and humming along with the song occupying her heart. Her patrols were fun. Adventurous. Passionate.

Because William was there. William was always there. He'd meet her smiling eyes with a twinkle in his own, grab her around the waist and maul her lips, demanding kisses as though it hadn't been only a matter of hours since they had last seen each other. Then he'd fall into stride next to her, and while he didn't participate in the fight every night, he always kept vigilant watch at her back. He was always prepared to jump in if she needed him.

More often, though, William simply enjoyed watching her. She moved like poetry, he said. And he was a man who had an appreciation for poetry.

The months had been good to them, if not a little stressful. Elizabeth didn't know why, but she had assumed that it would become easier to keep their secret the longer they were together. She'd thought the eggshells on which she treaded would become pliant with age, rather than harden.

And even though Kenneth remained none the wiser, she was terrified.

It was one of the reasons she insisted that William remain in the makeshift cellar they had built during daylight hours. Even if Kenneth *did* find the cottage William had secured for them, he

wouldn't find her lover slumbering, and therefore wouldn't have the opportunity to catch him off guard.

While William was touched at her concern, he was certain she had nothing to worry about. He did as she begged him, of course, and had a second bed stored in the subterranean room. After their nightly patrols, they would race each other to their small home, warring with each other to see who could get naked the fastest. Limbs entangled, tongues battling tongues as they pawed at each other with need beyond anything any poet ever put in words. They would crash onto their bed and make love for hours, holding each other in the sweet aftermath while talking about everything and nothing at all—about things which held no consequence, but somehow made her happy all the same. In the early hours of morning they would take solace in each other's bodies again, argue whether or not William would walk her home, and end their night with hungry, desperate kisses a safe distance away from the Travers' residence and promises that soon they wouldn't be forced to say goodbye every morning.

Elizabeth just had to make the move to leave Kenneth. She had to tell him it was over—that while she appreciated his guidance and his role as the father she'd never known, she was ready to live her life.

She knew, of course, that Kenneth wouldn't see things quite her way. Chances were he wouldn't even acknowledge her beyond a quick chuckle and a nod to the day's itinerary. William, however, remained unconcerned.

If Kenneth didn't acknowledge her independence, he said, it was his problem. Once she declared herself free of him, she was no longer bound to his orders or subject to his anger. Once she declared herself free, she and William would leave the village and go somewhere where her watcher would never find them.

It sounded lovely, as far as dreams went.

She just hoped she had the courage to make the dream a reality.

“Have you been here all day?”

Elizabeth jumped and turned, slightly mortified her special William senses hadn't buzzed.

“Will,” she breathed, heat tingeing her cheeks. She hadn't wanted him to see her smeared with paint, but there was nowhere to hide so

she didn't try. She was on her knees on the bedroom floor, hands saturated in a blend of orange and yellow, the wall for the most part complete, if not perfect. "I...ummm...is it sunset?"

"A few minutes ago," he replied. "Didn't answer my question, pet. Have you really been here all day?"

She shrugged. "About an hour after you walked me home, Kenneth had me out again. I'm allegedly destroying scarecrows."

"Because after fighting the spawn of hell all night, a lot of straw-ridden dummies are gonna provide you with good defense techniques." William rolled his eyes, which landed, not so subtly, on her artwork. "This your alternative?"

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose and wiggled, feeling at once very self-conscious. "I'm sorry it's not good. I just thought..."

William turned back to her, his gaze tender, the lines of his face softened with awe. "Buffy..."

A thrill raced down her spine. She so adored that name. Not that she'd ever admit it, of course, but she adored it just the same. She loved the freedom of being Buffy with him. Buffy the girl. The lover. The woman.

Buffy, who was with William. Who was only Buffy when with William. He never expected her to be anything more, and never thought of her as anything less.

"Do you like it?" she asked gently, rising to her feet.

"Did you... God, you did this for me?"

"It's still wet. Don't touch it." Elizabeth glanced down with a small, secretive smile. "I just thought, if we ever got the chance, we might watch the sunrise in here." She indicated the small window that sat across from the entrance to the bedroom. "It should strike the wall every morning. I'm not sure if—"

She would like to think she would have said something profound had William not moaned her name and stormed forward, capturing her paint-smeared cheeks between his hands and brushing his lips over hers. And as always, the taste of his kiss had the walls melting and the world swirling away until there was nothing left but the two of them. Nothing but the sensation of William's mouth moving against hers, his thumbs stroking her cheeks, the smooth whisper of his tongue



stroking her tongue, the firm feel of his body against hers, the hardness of his erection as their hips moved together. There was nothing but this.

Nothing but William.

"You painted me the sunrise," William murmured before pressing a kiss across the corner of her mouth.

"You deserve it," she murmured back.

"Oh Buffy..."

"Do you like it?"

"You made it for me."

Elizabeth grinned and curled her arms under his shoulders, walking them backward not-so-subtly until her legs hit the edge of their bed. "Pretend for a second that I did not."

"But you did."

"I used the word *pretend* for a reason, Will."

He smirked against her mouth, dropping his hands to her waist so he could drag her dress-shirt over her head. "Someone's feisty t'night."

"I'm always feisty."

"And that's why I love you." William grinned, tossing her top to the ground so his palms were free to cradle her breasts. "Have I told you I love you?"

Warmth flooded her insides. The words never grew old. He whispered them a thousand times a night. He'd kiss her hello and then tell her he loved her. He'd shout his love for her in the middle of a particularly nasty fight with the local demons. He'd make a mantra of the declaration as he unwrapped her from her clothing. His lips would whisper love as they kissed her skin. And the second his cock was inside her, his body sang all else which couldn't be entrusted with words.

William loved her.

"Not yet tonight," she replied cheekily.

William's eyes twinkled. "Shame on me."

"Yes, shame." She hissed and thrust her hips against his as he guided her onto her back, his body falling easily between her thighs. "You're a bad man."

He grinned, skimming his blunt teeth along her jugular. “The baddest.”

“Ohhh...touch me.”

“I am touching you, sweetheart.” He thumbed her nipples before dipping a hand between them to unfasten her trousers. “God, I love you.”

“I love you too.”

William glanced up and smiled into her eyes. “I love hearing that.” He watched her face as his fingers grazed through her curls, uncovering her clitoris and favoring the small pearl with a delicate caress. “Have you given any more thought to what I asked?”

Elizabeth’s heart skipped and her breath caught in her throat. Thought? She’d been able to think of little else since the question had crossed his lips; since he explained what it would mean to him—to *them*. It was one of the reasons she’d been desperate to occupy her mind with something meaningful.

She wanted to say yes more than anything.

The part of her that was afraid of taking the final step, however, could not be moved. If she consented to what he’d asked, they would essentially be transformed into fugitives. They would have to run from Kenneth. From the Watchers Council. From the world. There would never be any rest.

But they would be together. And even though her mind was in conflict, her heart was decided.

She wanted this. Any life with William was better than the half-life she was living now.

She wanted to be alive always and not only in the hours shared with him.

“I’m afraid,” she murmured.

“Bollocks,” William replied. “You’re afraid of nothing.”

“I’m afraid of what Kenneth could do to you if he finds—”

He rolled his eyes, sliding his index and middle fingers between her slick folds, his thumb settling over her clitoris. “Not this again,” he muttered, though his tone was good-natured. While she knew he didn’t like her constantly tormenting herself over his safety, she also

knew there was a part of him that very much loved having someone worry over him.

“Will, you need to listen—”

“I’m not afraid of the old git.”

Elizabeth inhaled, jerking her hips forward to drive his fingers deeper. “I’m afraid for you,” she replied. “You don’t know what he’s capable of...”

“Vampire, kitten. Remember?”

“He’s killed vampires.”

“Buffy, please.” William ducked his head, flicking his tongue over one of her nipples. “We’ll go away. Far away. We’ll go anywhere that’s not here. I’ll take such good care of you...”

A watery smile crossed her face. “You already do.”

“We won’t have to say goodbye every morning.” William paused, his fingers adapting a cool rhythm driving in and out of her aching body. “If it’s the part where you’re mine forever—”

“It’s not.”

If anything, it was the promise of eternity in William’s arms that acted as the strongest counter to her head’s logical argument. An eternity with the man she loved was worth anything. Eventually, eternity would turn in her favor. Kenneth wouldn’t live forever. Not like she would. Another slayer would be called and free her of her mission. Kenneth would be angry, of course, but powerless to do anything about it. And eventually he would die, and she would be entirely liberated of his control.

She would be liberated of him entirely.

“Yeah?” he asked hopefully, the hand at her breast deserting her sensitive skin to free his cock.

“I want that with you.”

“Then take it.” He grinned and nipped at her ear. “We’ll watch the sunrise tomorrow.”

“I need to go home—”

“You are home, love. This is the only home that matters.”

Elizabeth tossed her head back and gasped as her vampire’s lips found her throat again, his tongue laving the bite mark he’d given her their first night. Arousal tugged at her gut and she felt herself drench

his fingers. Then his hand abandoned her center and the head of his erection nudged the wet flesh of her sex, pressing into her body with slow intensity that had her insides swirling into an unconquerable storm.

The only home that mattered.

The home she had with William. This small place where they lived for a few short hours a day. Where they were together.

“Come on, sweetheart,” William gasped, thrusting himself all the way home. “Watch the sunrise with me. The one you painted...”

She was drowning in his eyes.

“Buffy. My Buffy...”

“Oh...”

“Please. *Please...*”

And then there was no question. None at all. The clouds parted and the stars pierced through the darkness, allowing perfect clarity. Any price was worth paying if this was what she came home to at the end of the day. If she could have this—have William—for always.

“Yes,” she gasped, arching her hips off the mattress in desperation. “Yes, Will.”

Awe overpowered him. “Buffy...?”

“Make me yours.”

She heard his gasp and saw his fangs, and then she was plunged into ecstasy beyond grasp. He thrust into her with raw animality, need surpassing tenderness. The air around them exploded into the illicit smacks of their bodies rocking together, the wet suctioning sound that hissed through the air every time he tried to pull himself away from her pussy. He drank hard and deep, commanding every part of her that she had to give.

“Mine,” William growled against her bloodied flesh. “You’re mine.”

“Oh yes.”

“Oh god. God...” He pulled back and smashed his mouth to hers, too much in need to shake his demon away. His fangs nicked her lips but she didn’t care. She was drunk on his taste, lost in the sensations he sent racketing through her. Pain and pleasure often went hand-in-hand with him, and even if it rendered her hellbound, there was

nothing about being with William that she would trade or change. Not for anything.

“Buffy? Please...”

She needed no direction. Elizabeth snapped to herself and lodged her teeth in his throat, clamping down until her tongue was bathed in the taste of blood. His blood. Her lover’s blood.

And after this...after tonight...

*Mate.*

“Mine,” she whispered, and licked delicately at the mark she’d made. “William...”

“*Fuck*, yes. Yours. Always yours.”

Her vision blurred, pleasure seizing her every cell. “I love you.”

“I love you. God, how I love you.”

“Yours.”

William nodded hard and kissed her again, thrusting harder, as though he could chase his desperation. “Always. My Slayer. *Mine*.”

It was done, then. It was complete.

She was one with him. She was whole.

And from this, there was no going back.

*SUNNYDALE, California, 1997*

After a year and a half under Giles's care, Buffy considered herself fluent in his many expressions. She could almost time how long he would be able to keep from dropping his spectacles into a waiting handkerchief. The furrow of his brow always marked confusion over a teenager and-slash-or American colloquialism. The narrowing of his eyes was his way of telling her wordlessly that, yes, he did, in fact, think she'd lost her mind. And, of course, the at-times-comical blanking of his face meant an absolute loss of words.

Never had she expected to fall witness to the entire library of Giles's expressions in one sitting. In one glance.

Buffy inhaled and averted her eyes. This was uncomfortable enough without her staring him down.

Even if the silence between them was deafening.

Finally, he broke with a pointed clearing of his throat. "Do you... Do you want to...say that again, perhaps?"

She shuffled. "Which part?"

"The ur..." The corners of his mouth tugged upward, desperation straining his eyes. "The part that sounded...absurd?"

“I’m *not* crazy.”

Giles nodded hard and took a step back. “Of course you’re not crazy. I just thought you...perhaps...I thought you...”

“You think—”

“I think you might be confused.”

“I’m not confused.” Buffy shuffled again and heaved a long sigh. “Really, I’m not. And I know how it sounds.”

“I don’t think you can.”

“No, I do.” A pause. “And maybe if I wasn’t absolutely certain that this is what happened... Giles, my memories are crystal clear. I might as well have been there yesterday.”

“Yes, well...” He exhaled, turning a quick corner around the library check-out counter to retrieve one of his many aged texts. “According to Xander, he remembers everything about his...persona’s past as well. Including the layout of the nearby military base, as well as how to put assorted weaponry together. I even took the liberty of looking up that Sergeant Nichols fellow he mentioned. The man exists, and he holds the rank—”

Buffy held up a hand, her temper growing short. If she didn’t watch out, she was going to lose what little patience she had left.

She didn’t know why no one was taking her at her word. While true, her story did have its gaping holes and its healthy dose of *say-what-now?*, she was reasonably certain it wasn’t the strangest thing that had ever happened—especially in the world they lived in. A world crawling with night-time uglies, undead fiends, and creatures otherwise inclined to make the sort of deal she made with Paimon.

Creatures inclined to feed upon the devastation of others.

Buffy remembered so many things; she remembered how she’d felt making the deal. How she’d trembled while sealing her fate, while her blood poured over Paimon’s quill and the clouds above her head crashed together. She hadn’t minded the price then—she hadn’t cared. At the time, it had merely been the cost of doing business.

Paimon hadn’t shown his head once. Not once. In the three years she’d been slaying vampires, fighting demons, and averting apocalypses, she hadn’t once crossed paths with the Hell King or his legion.

The knowledge was rather unnerving. Had Paimon intended for her to remember him and their deal before he came to collect? Was he planning to collect in person—so to speak—or would she just wake up one morning with an essential piece of herself missing? And if he hadn't intended for her to remember anything, how was it that she did?

*A fluke.*

A human spell gone wrong.

God, she didn't know. And not knowing was going to drive her mad.

Then there was Spike. Spike—her William—reborn. Spike, who was likely confused and furious and a thousand other things she didn't wish to consider. She'd sold herself to come and find him—to give him life again so that they might be together, and he hated her, no matter how drawn to her he was. William wasn't William here. He'd had a very different upbringing. He was a part of the Aurelian line—Angel's line. He was Angel's grand-whatever here.

When she'd known him, he hadn't had anyone but her. He'd been alone most of his unlife. He'd tumbled into her village and everything had changed for both of them. She'd been so lonely—so miserable. So isolated from others that she truly forgot, at times, that she was more than just a living weapon. That she was someone to be loved.

At least William had loved her. He'd given her so much and asked for so little. He'd wanted forever with her and she'd happily acquiesced. Only she hadn't been brave enough to take the final step.

The part that could have saved his life.

Now she was here, in a world with the man she loved but without him. Everything about William was the same. His nickname, beyond *Spike*, was William the Bloody. There was no note of how he'd acquired this nickname in any of the texts she'd picked up, but Buffy had managed to finagle a confession from Angel. It stemmed from poetry.

Just as her William had. He would tell her such unbelievable stories about his human years she never knew whether or not to believe him. The subject of his poetry, however, had always been a sore one. There was very little about his writing that he was proud of.

Except for the time he'd run it by Thomas Kyd, who thought it



was *charming*. Shakespeare had given it a cursory glance as well, and while his criticism ranked more on the side of praise, William had been quick to downplay the encounter as though it had meant nothing at all.

*“Now that I think about it, it’s possible the git was trying to bugger me,” he whispered into her hair, followed by a quick explanation on what the word ‘bugger’ truly meant.*

*Elizabeth rolled her eyes and giggled into his chest. “Oh, Will...”*

*“The man was a bit of a poofster, love. Sorry to burst your adorable little bubble.”*

*“He wrote the greatest romance of our time!”*

*“Yeab. And two blokes had to act it out.” William winked and licked his lips, then proceeded to lick hers. “Not sayin’ his poetry wasn’t...poetry...but I wouldn’t shag him over it.”*

There was every possibility he had lied off his ass about meeting both playwrights, but she hadn’t cared then and she didn’t now. It was a part of William—his poetry and his affinity for telling tall tales. Whether it was drinking with Sir Thomas Moore or stealing jewels from King Philip II, he would spin yarns, then crack with a shit-eating grin when he saw she was hanging on his every word. Mock-fights would inevitably ensue, typically with her beating him over the head with a feather pillow until he confiscated it and mauled her with hungry, playful kisses.

Buffy sniffed hard, her eyes filling with tears.

How was it possible she’d lived nearly seventeen years of a life she’d bartered for without knowing it until two nights ago?

How was it she hadn’t remembered the man that had saved her from herself?

They were mated—they had been mated. He’d claimed her and she’d claimed him back. It was supposed to be the strongest of the ancient bonds. More powerful than any spell or incantation. Stronger than any demon in this or any other world. A union forged with blood and held together by love. It was a dangerous thing, binding oneself with a vampire. Vampires themselves rarely enacted the practice because vampires were, by nature, possessive and fickle creatures. So

few of them cared for the frailties of human emotion. There was lust, of course, but rarely love.

Not love like what she and William had shared.

He'd wanted eternity with her. She'd given it to him. They were linked by blood.

And yet she hadn't remembered him. She'd sacrificed so much for him, but she hadn't remembered him. Not even after seeing his face.

William had become Spike. And Spike was in love with someone else.

And yeah, that hurt the most.

It occurred to her that she'd been very quiet for a very long time. With a hard sniff, Buffy looked up and met her watcher's worried, compassion-filled eyes. And not for the first time, she felt herself swelling with daughterly love and gratitude.

If only Giles had been alive three centuries prior. If only he'd been her watcher then.

"I know it's crazy," she said slowly. "I really do. But it's real, Giles. It's very, very real. All of it. And even if... Angel said there was nothing about me and Will in the history books. Fine. But you don't know this demon I... The demon I summoned wasn't a garden-variety guy. He was powerful. *Is* powerful. One of the most powerful demon-lords in the history of those kinda guys."

"What was he called?" Giles asked, flipping through his book. "The demon?"

Buffy bit her lip and wiggled. It felt good—this teenage reaction stuff. Made her feel a bit more normal. "You're gonna wig."

"Buffy..."

"He's major bad news."

"And if..." Giles sighed his exasperation. "If I believe you...that you made a deal with this demon, we need to know all we can about him and his powers so we have a way to stand up to him whenever he comes to collect whatever it is that you bargained."

She swallowed hard and rubbed her suddenly chilled arms, desperate for some friction. "I don't think it'll work," she replied. "What I... I signed a tablet. A stone tablet. With blood. I don't think

this is the sort've bargain you can just ring up an attorney and try to find a loophole."

"I still think it best to know what we're dealing with...if it comes down to it."

Buffy inhaled sharply. "I don't wanna."

"What?"

"I don't wanna tell you. You'll get all..." She shifted again, feeling all at once very itchy. "It's something..." It was something he would definitely pull a massive wig over, and given the fact that she'd made the deal when she'd been in mourning and in a different century, she didn't feel up to getting an earful. "I plead the fifth?"

A long sigh peeled through his lips. "Buffy—"

She needed a distraction and fast. "Who was the Slayer?"

There was a long pause. "I beg your pardon?"

"The Slayer. In the time when I was the Slayer?" Her brow furrowed—her mind playing a rapid game of catch-up. "Who do the history books list as being the Slayer? If not me... Paimon had to—"

Giles blanched, his face draining of color. He ceased page-flipping and glanced up. "Paimon?"

*Rats.*

"Ummm..."

"The...the Hell King? That Paimon?"

Buffy smiled uneasily. "Unless you know of another one...?" Her stomach dropped when her watcher met her eyes, and cold invaded her skin. "He has the kind of power to make the universe his playground...right?"

Giles swallowed audibly and nodded. "He does."

"He had to do some major mojo, then, to make it so there wasn't a slayer during the time when I was the Slayer. And to make sure Will was born to his mother...and me to mine." Buffy looked down again, a long shudder commanding her tired body. "He never wanted me to remember, Giles. He did what he said he'd do. He put me in this world and he put Will here, too, but we were never supposed to cross paths. Never."

The numbed look on her watcher's face slowly thawed into some-

thing more encouraging. “But you did,” he said. “Paimon’s plan was thwarted by Spike’s coming here.”

Buffy glanced up slowly, her heart thundering with hope. “Giles, you’re talking now like you like you believe me.” She paused. “Do you believe me?”

“I...” He flushed. “You know Paimon. You know the name. That much makes me. It lends you credibility. We’ll leave it at that.”

She rolled her eyes but couldn’t contain her relieved smile if she tried. “Gee, thanks.”

“You have to admit, Buffy, books and demon names are not your specialty.”

A long, dry laugh rumbled through her throat. If she wasn’t careful she might laugh until she cried. The wealth of what she could tell Giles now would have his jaw permanently stranded on the floor. The things Kenneth had made her remember. Recite. Memorize in seven different languages. Oh lord, she could teach Giles a thing or two now. She could become the watcher.

Thankfully, the conversation rolled on before she could drop that particular bomb. She didn’t want to give her surrogate father a complex. Not now.

“Something went amiss,” Giles mused. “In Paimon’s scheming, there was something he wasn’t banking on. Something that threw Spike into your path again.”

Buffy nodded slowly, the wheels in her head at last beginning to turn. “Yeah. You’re right. If Paimon never intended for me and Will to get back together, to find each other, then—”

“But you said he doesn’t remember you. Spike doesn’t, I mean.”

“No, he doesn’t, but there was something. When we were in the... When we were together, there was something.” Buffy worried a lip between her teeth, her brain desperately pulling on fact and theory, trying to make sense out of a senseless world. She wanted something concrete—something she could grasp and hold. Something to give her some form of hope. “Giles, he could’ve killed me. I was completely defenseless. I thought... I thought he knew exactly who I was. I thought he was just lost and confused, like me. I mistook the confusion and stuff for, well, confusion of a different kind. There was a part

of him that recognized me. Not a big part, but part enough. And he got all protective of me when the gang showed up. He stood in front of me so I could..." Her cheeks went hot and she cleared her throat. Giles didn't ask her to elaborate, and she was glad because she wasn't about to get chatty about how Spike nearly ran all the way to home plate with her in just a few minutes. "There was something about me that he knew."

"Something else Paimon hadn't considered," Giles mused. "Any semblance of recollection."

The implication in his words made the world stop spinning. Buffy held her breath, hope seizing her tattered heart. "Do you think..." Her eyes fell shut. She tried to rein in control, but it was so hard. "Do you think, if Paimon didn't consider this—if he didn't plan on Will, I mean Spike, remembering me, but a part of him does at least on some level... do you think it's possible—"

"That Spike might one day remember you completely?"

Tears prickled at her eyes and she nodded, choking in a sob that desperately wanted freedom. "Giles...he was..." She inhaled sharply. "I loved him so much. I still do. And knowing he's out there with someone who's not me, not remembering me or what we had... It's..."

"There's a chance," he said quickly. "Buffy, all things are possible."

"Did I tell you he gave me that name? He's the one who first called me Buffy."

Giles blinked but didn't ask. It was probably wise. "All things are possible." He glanced down, focusing on the page his fingers had landed on. "As it is...I believe your remembering might have opened a gate."

She sniffed and wiped at her eyes. "A what?"

"Unlocked doors of history. As long as no one knew what had happened, it was as though it *hadn't*. Understand?"

"Uhhh..."

"But now that you remember, the history cannot be concealed. The missing history occurred." He looked up again, an odd twist of astonishment and pride sweeping his eyes. "Elizabeth Travers. Born 1682, died 1701. Slayer to one Kenneth Travers."

Everything stopped. Her blood ran cold.

“What?”

“It’s here. A page that wasn’t here before.” Giles held up the thick, aged manuscript and turned it around for her viewing. “No picture. Just a name.”

She saw it immediately. There was no way she could not.

It was her name.

And beside it—beside her name—was William’s.

Listed as her killer.

*NEW ENGLAND, 1701*

It was impossible to keep his eyes off the goddess currently massaging his foot. William knew; he'd tried but found himself drawn back to the curve of her mouth and the way she seemed to glow every time she glanced up.

He couldn't look away. There were times he feared she'd disappear if he so much as blinked.

Elizabeth's creamy skin reddened and she ducked her head. She moved her hands over his foot with such attentive affection he had to wonder, truly, if he'd been staked and somehow managed to sneak through the pearly gates. "You're staring."

"Am I?" he replied.

"You know I don't like it when you stare."

"You should try to be a little less beautiful, then."

She wrinkled her nose at him and he couldn't help from grinning. "You needn't say such things," she said, lightly tickling the soft underside of his foot. William grinned and wiggled—not that it did any good. Elizabeth was the only person, living or dead, who knew how ticklish he was. He didn't mind that she knew. It was amazing—the

wealth of things he didn't mind she knew. Things he'd believed made him vulnerable or weak. Things he'd wished had died with his human self. Things not befitting for a demon.

Especially a demon with his reputation.

William truly had to wonder when he'd stopped caring so much. Or if he'd truly ever cared. There had been a point in life where certain things had seemed so important—things he reflected upon now as a fool's gamble or an all-out waste of time. He remembered well how he'd felt upon first arriving in their village. How he'd come to the Americas to kill the Slayer, and how a part of him had known the first second he saw her that he was lost.

No matter how he'd tried to hide the revelation from himself.

Not much of his pre-Elizabeth life seemed to matter a damn to him anymore. He still hunted and fed, though he tried to leave his walking-meals alive. While Elizabeth had never asked him to be anything other than what he was, he knew the idea of him killing would eventually drive a wedge between them and he loved her too much to hurt her if there was an alternative.

There were other things, of course. Things like his reputation, something he'd once thought his most valuable asset. William found he didn't give a lick one way or another anymore. What did it matter what other vampires thought of him? He'd had that reputation for damn near two centuries. Two long, lonely centuries.

A reputation was worth rot against the awesome power of love. He'd give it up. He'd give up anything and everything.

Elizabeth was worth any price, and no price would ever be enough. Any fool could see it.

He just happened to be the fool she'd chosen.

And somehow, this creature of light loved him. She loved him. She'd let his fangs mark her throat and had whispered she was his. She'd let him claim her.

This woman belonged to him for an eternity.

It hadn't been an easy transition, and there was still a ways to go. Elizabeth hadn't yet mustered the courage to break the news to her wanker of a watcher, and while William tried to remain sympathetic,



his patience grew shorter as the days went by. Not with her, but the git who had raised her.

Elizabeth was terrified of breaking away. Kenneth Travers was all she knew. She'd been brought up to believe herself less than human. A weapon forged in flesh and blood, born with only one purpose. She was the Slayer. Nothing more. She wasn't made to love. She was made to die.

It was a callous existence, but it was the only one she'd ever known. And hate it though she did, there was a part of her holding on to it. William understood—truly, he did. Her life had been based on this understanding of herself. To grasp something else entirely, to abandon the person she'd been before, was a huge step.

And there was bugga all William could do about it other than caress her scalp and try to keep his manly giggles restrained to amused chuckles when her fingers manipulated his most ticklish nerves.

In the meantime, he had this. And this was so much more than he'd ever hoped to touch. Lying in a bed they shared. The sunrise she'd painted for him was on proud display on the wall. Elizabeth—his little Buffy—gloriously naked and rubbing his tired muscles. She liked doing little things for him. She liked giving him pleasure in any way she could.

“Why?” he asked, trying unsuccessfully to bite back a moan when her fingers gently skimmed the arch of his foot. His cock had taken notice of her gentle touches a long while ago—something he knew she'd noticed, as he was rather naked himself. He didn't know whether or not she'd evaded touching him there out of coyness or because her massage was intended to satisfy a need that wasn't sexual. Not that it did any good. His Buffy could sneeze and he'd want her.

He always wanted her.

“Why what?” she repeated, pinching his big toe.

“Why shouldn't I say such things?” William perked an eyebrow and shot her his best seductive look. “You're gorgeous.”

“You have me. Flattery is unnecessary.”

“And the truth? I'd expect you'd still want the truth from me, yeah?”

Elizabeth made another face, skimming her hand up the inside of

his left leg, her big gorgeous eyes at last landing on his aching cock. “Sometimes I think you say things just to get me to...”

William grinned and thrust his hips up. “We both know I don’t have to say a bloody thing to get you to—”

“Will!”

“You just take it when you’re hungry.”

He loved provoking her, loved watching her moonlit skin turn red. Loved knowing that the part of her innocence remained untainted. He could be as verbally vulgar as he pleased and he knew she would never become jaded. There was a part of his little Buffy which would perpetually remain the fluttering virgin, and he absolutely adored it.

“You’re a bad man,” Elizabeth declared.

“The baddest.” William offered a wink, wrapping his fingers around his erection and favoring his aching shaft with a long stroke. “Wanna kiss me and make it better?”

She slapped his chest and giggled. “You arse.”

“Well, if you’d rather kiss that—”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake, Will...”

He grinned devilishly and sat up, cupping her cheeks and seizing her lips in a hungry kiss. The world could end several times and he wouldn’t care. “Mmm,” he purred against her mouth. “You taste so sweet.”

She grinned against him, skimming the underside of his erection before her fingers dipped to tease his testicles. “I know what you’re after.”

“Well, God gave you this mouth for a reason, woman.”

Elizabeth’s eyes brightened. “I thought the reason was kissing you.”

“One of *many* reasons.”

“And talking? Or are you the sort who prefers his woman silent and submissive?”

“Buffy, sweetling, if that was what I wanted, why in the world would I be here?”

She giggled. “I love you.”

His heart lifted and his demon rejoiced. “I love you more. Now suck me.”

She flashed him a look of pure defiance, a smirk stretching those

utterly kissable lips of hers. However, rather than shoot him another barb, she dipped her head and licked his erection from root to tip.

“Oh god...”

“Is that enough?” she asked, her mouth already descending again.

“I said suck me. Not lick.”

“So no licking, then?”

“Bloody hell, Buffy...”

Elizabeth grinned, welcoming his swollen head into her wet mouth, her tongue immediately crashing against him to explore his sensitive slit. She knew what she was doing—Christ, did she know what she was doing. He’d set out to teach her just how to drive him wild, and she was the best student a man could wish for.

“Deeper,” William pleaded, thrusting his hips. “Take me in deeper.”

She rolled her eyes and did the opposite. And the second his wet cock smacked the cool, unforgiving air that wasn’t his Buffy’s mouth, he could have dusted in frustration. “You’re rather bossy tonight.”

“And you’re a bloody tease.”

“So says the man who...” She broke off and flushed, and despite the heated rage of his need, William couldn’t help but crack a grin. Heaven help the day she ever tried to verbally describe a sexual act. Thankfully, he knew exactly what she was trying to talk about.

The way he’d bury his face between her divine thighs and eat her juicy quim until she was trembling hard and bucking off the mattress. Then he’d pull away, lick his lips, and leave her aching for him until he decided to take pity on her and give her what she so desperately needed.

He maintained this wasn’t the ideal way to get back at him. No, William much preferred teasing from the other end. When he was the torturer and not the torturee. Still, a part of him couldn’t help but beam with pride.

She certainly had learned from watching him.

“Oh stop,” Elizabeth grumbled, albeit good-naturedly. She wrapped her warm hand around his erection and began to pump.

William blinked, the picture of innocence. “Stop what?”

“That look on your face. Don’t think I don’t know what you’re thinking.”

“I have to think it, love. If you’d ever finish a thought...” He grinned. “Sometime I wanna hear you say it. Try and say it. Say anythin’, really, as long as it’s right nasty. It’d be bloody adorable.”

“You’re swine.”

“You love me.”

Elizabeth heaved a long-suffering sigh. “It’s my burden to bear, I suppose.”

“You love bearin’ it.” His grin stretched wider as he wove his hands through her hair. “Please, sweetheart. I need to feel you. Need...need your mouth.”

Her eyes danced and she began to dip her head again. “Here?” she asked and brushed a hot, wet kiss against the crown of his cock, followed by a sultry lick. “You need my mouth here?”

“Buffy!”

A sinful smile stretched her gorgeous lips as she slowly welcomed his cock into the pleasure-dome she called a mouth. William gasped so hard he could have sworn his heart leaped, his head flying back to the mattress, his hips thrusting upward in a needful frenzy. There was nothing about her that wasn’t perfect. The stroke of her tongue along the underside of his erection, the way her teeth gently skimmed the length of him, the light that sparked her eyes at his every whimper. She closed her lips around him and sucked hard, pulling on his flesh and tugging him so close to paradise he could have sworn the walls around them didn’t exist.

“Oh god, Buffy...”

“Mmm...”

And *god*. The way she whimpered and mewled around him. He was completely unmade.

“So hot. So bloody hot, you are.” He bit down on his lower lip, tightening his grip on her hair. “Love you so much.”

“Mpphffe yew,” she replied.

Then the head of his cock brushed the soft, warm back of her throat, and she contracted her muscles around him, squeezing him so right. William howled and bucked, the hand at her head defying reason and dragging her upward until he was free of her exquisite torture and sitting up again so he could kiss her perfect mouth.

“I wasn’t finished,” she complained when their lips parted.

It took a few embarrassing seconds to remember he didn’t need the breaths he was gulping. “I was gonna—”

“I know.”

“You don’t like—”

Elizabeth winked and kissed him again. “I suppose I’m...acquiring a taste,” she replied, gently shoving him back until he was pressed against the mattress again. By some divine mercy, her tongue returned to his length, licking him like he was a treat designed to be savored. And as much as he loved the feel of her mouth on his cock, he much preferred it when her wet cunt surrounded him. When her breasts were pressed against his chest and her lips were his for the taking.

“Buffy...need...need to be inside.”

She glanced upward with a pointedly arched eyebrow but didn’t argue. Instead, she released him completely and began a slow prowling up his body, looking positively catlike, stealing kisses of his body with every pace she made. She sampled his stomach, his abs, bit lovingly at one of his nipples—she drove him out of his sodding mind, and she did it with such tenderness he wanted to weep.

“God, you feel so perfect,” William murmured as the head of his cock rubbed against the fleshy wetness at her center. She was drenched for him.

“I bet you say that to all the slayers,” she retorted and nipped his mouth.

“Buffy...” He gripped her hips, holding her above him. “Need...”

There was one thing to be said about slayers—they didn’t take to direction very well. At least this one didn’t, and he couldn’t be more grateful. She silenced him with a kiss and sank down, plunging him into the warmest homecoming it had ever known, or would ever know.

“Oh Will,” she whimpered, beginning a slow dance against him without any need for direction. She’d transformed into a sex goddess overnight. A sex goddess who blushed through her innuendos. “You feel...”

“So good,” he finished for her, sliding his hands up over her perfect skin until he had a breast cradled in each palm. “So...hot. I love—”

A shard flew through the sanctuary they’d constructed—a small,

nearly indiscernible disruption, but a tangible one nonetheless. William froze immediately, grasping her hips again to cease their love-making. When she fired him a questioning look, he raised a finger to his lips.

And just like that, the mood was broken. Reality settled in. With Elizabeth perched on his lap, her pussy wrapped around him, the fog of their fantasy melted into the real world again. A world where she was the Slayer, he was the vampire, and this thing between them was forbidden.

He hated the way her heart thundered. He felt it, just as he felt the aching rush of her pulse and saw the way the passion in her eyes faded had into fear.

There was a chance he was wrong, but he doubted it.

“Will?” she asked, her voice a harsh whisper.

He waited for another beat. And another. And another.

Then it came again. Louder this time. More definite.

It was a quick decision, really. A call he made without bias, with his Buffy in mind—a call that forfeited everything his true nature demanded. Now was not the time to start another argument about confronting her watcher. Now was the time to get up and get her downstairs. Down to the cellar where he spent his days. To the hiding place no one save his mate knew about.

“Will, what—”

William shot up, clamping his arms around her middle, his cock slipping out of her. She wound her legs around his waist, locked her arms around his neck, and then he was moving. Moving too quickly to be walking, but silently enough not to betray their presence. He refused to let her go—not even when he bent over to move the rug that concealed the trapdoor aside. Not even as he hurried them downstairs. It was only when his feet touched the ground that he felt it was safe enough to lower her to the floor.

If only so he might straighten the upstairs’ appearance as best he could.

Elizabeth was usually the one who situated the rug over the door. Elizabeth had never hidden with him down here. There had never been a reason.

There wasn't enough time to make things look perfect, if such was even possible. He heard voices and heavy footsteps outside and made the final duck downward with only seconds to spare.

When he turned again and took her in—his beautiful, courageous Slayer—and saw the fear in her eyes, a part of him shattered.

This was killing her, perhaps so slowly she hadn't even noticed yet. The fear of the watcher. A fear she probably didn't recognize. A fear she likely brushed off as something overly insignificant.

William reached for her and she was in his arms the next second, her face buried in his shoulder, her body pressed so tightly against his that her tremors became his own.

"Shhh," he murmured into her hair and kissed her temple.

And then, from above, voices.

"Not in here," one said gruffly. "Though the bed's all in a tangle."

"They were here recently," came another voice. A colder one. One that had Elizabeth freezing against him.

That had to be Kenneth Travers.

"Spect they got tipped off?"

"No," Travers replied. "I think, once again, you and your men were too bloody loud."

"We was quiet!"

"Ey. Look 'ere," a new voice said, inspiring a parade of thunderous footsteps as men shuffled toward the attraction. "Pretty. Didn't think 'ouses came with murals."

"They don't, you simpering buffoon," Travers snapped. "I told you, one of Elizabeth's pastimes is painting, didn't I?"

"Oh. Right." A pause. "Whassit s'posed to be?"

William couldn't help it—he rolled his eyes. Honestly...

"She painted the sunrise for her lover. How...sickening." There was another pause. "Search the premises and the grounds. I doubt they got far."

"And if we find the girl firs?"

"Elizabeth is my concern, not yours. You're to bring her to me." Travers was quiet for another long beat. Then, "The vampire, you may do whatever you want."

HOLLY DENISE

William tightened his grip on Elizabeth to keep her from gasping. She didn't. She didn't do anything. She just held onto him.

Trembling.

Cold.

Crying.

But not making a sound.



*SUNNYDALE , California , 1997*

So that was the way history would have written it. Had she never made the deal with Paimon, she would have been immortalized as Elizabeth Travers, victim to William the Bloody. History would have recorded the only man who had ever loved her as her killer.

Giles had done his best to reassure her, saint that he was. He told her records of slayers and their deaths were often fuzzed over. None of the records of final battles had been proven absolutely legitimate. Most watchers became so close to their slayers that memory of their death was too painful to place into words. Often, the details became muddled and confused, sometimes split with the details of another. The lack of accountability in Elizabeth's history was unfortunate but not uncommon.

Encouraging thoughts, those. But she supposed she could understand, in some small way. Of all the details of slayers' past that Giles shared with her, the pivotal last moments of her fallen sisters had never been among them. Even though she felt the study was worthy of attention if only to avoid the mistakes others had made.

The mistakes she had made.

Buffy inhaled and shivered, making a sharp left turn as she headed

through the cemetery. She wasn't in the right mind for patrol, but she knew she would be better off out here than at home. Home offered nothing but silence, and silence paved an unwanted path through self-reflection and other dangerous musings. She didn't want to offer her brain the chance to taunt her.

She didn't want to think about Spike and his mistress. The one Angel said Spike had loved for over a century. She didn't want to think about Spike—her William—touching another woman. Kissing another woman. Making love to another woman. Loving another woman. She couldn't stomach it—her gut tied up in knots and her lungs became stingy with oxygen.

William hadn't had anyone before her. It was why he'd been so resistant to fall in love with Buffy in the first place. He hadn't known what it was, and when he'd put a name to it, the knowledge that he loved the enemy had nearly torn him apart. He'd responded violently and in haste—not that it had done any good. What was supposed to have been their last fight had *indeed* been their last, but they had walked away more alive rather than dead.

Would William have loved her if he'd had a woman before her? One he'd loved as Spike loved Drusilla? Or would Buffy not be here at all?

God, she was so foolish. She hadn't asked for enough. Perhaps this was the unspoken price Paimon had collected—the cost of living in a world with William came at the expense of knowing he didn't love her here, and the looming certainty that he never would.

It was amazing what a little knowledge could do. How far it could go. Buffy heaved a sigh and turned her eyes heavenward, taking in the stars. She was no older now than she had been when she'd first lived, but she felt wiser. The unlocked gates of her mind provided knowledge she would never have appreciated in this life. There were things she looked upon now with shame. Arguments with her mother, the way she so often neglected her friends, how she flippantly bent the rules around Giles. How she took her support system for granted. How she took everything in her life for granted.

Chills spread down her arms as she planted her butt on the surface of a gravestone. She didn't feel like walking anymore.

Foolish to think she'd be safer from her thoughts here than at home. She wasn't safe anywhere. Not from herself.

"I believe the words you're looking for are *be careful what you wish for*."

Buffy froze and the world froze with her. The wind fell silent around her. All shadows hardened into stone. The voice was one she figured she would know anywhere, even if Halloween hadn't opened her eyes to her true past.

The first time she'd seen Paimon, he'd stood well over seven feet in height, his head adorned with a jeweled crown. That much had not changed. She didn't remember much else of him aside from his pale and strikingly effeminate face, and the black robes his body had then been wrapped inside. There were no robes now, rather a tailored suit of fine Armani, complete with shoes that would have most gay men drooling all over themselves. He struck her as a very tall and very deadly David Bowie and had she not been paralyzed with terror she might have laughed herself silly.

"I admit it a tad cliché," Paimon continued, stepping fully out of the darkness and under the pale moonlight, making him appear more than ethereal. Making him look, for a split second, like nothing more than a common ghost. He was truly formed from shadows—shadows composed his limbs, sculpted his face, and blended seamlessly into his skin.

"Cliché?" Buffy repeated. "You take everything from me and call it a cliché?"

Paimon shrugged easily. "I cannot take what you do not willfully bargain."

"I never wanted this."

"No? I beg to differ." A lecherous smile stretched his inhuman lips, his long, gangly legs sweeping a grand step to her left. "You were most determined when we first met. Do you remember? You gave all away without demanding the price. You were adamant about that, as long as I did not possess your soul." He paused thoughtfully. "And even so, I believe you would have gambled that as well. Anything and everything you could summon to get your precious William back."

“Will doesn’t remember me,” Buffy barked, fear giving way to rage. “He doesn’t remember me at *all*.”

“So sad, sweet Elizabeth.”

“It’s *Buffy* now.”

Paimon inclined his head. “Buffy,” he agreed. Then paused and added, “Did you like that bit? I thought you might appreciate his name for you becoming that by which you were known in this life. Call it a gift.”

“Your generosity overwhelms me.”

“I aim to please.”

“He doesn’t *remember* me,” she snapped, her eyes stinging. The last thing she wanted to do was give this unholy creature her tears. He had everything else. Blood, her bargain, William’s love—God kill her before she gave him her tears as well. “He doesn’t—”

“Ah, ah. You said it earlier, did you not? You said dear William recognized you.”

“Recognizing me and *remembering* me is hardly the same thing, and you damn well know it.”

Paimon didn’t attempt to argue the point. Rather, he offered another apathetic shrug. “You did not ask that he remember you.”

This statement had her seething in a blink. Buffy jumped to her feet, seizing the stake she kept tucked between the waist of her sweats and the small of her back. It was a feeble weapon against him, she knew, but it was all she had. And she was determined to prove she wasn’t afraid.

“Wrong answer,” she nearly growled. “Wanna try again?”

The Hell King offered another indifferent shrug, not even blinking. “You did not ask that he remember you,” he replied. “Nor did you ask that you remember him. All you wanted was William back, and I gave it to you.”

“Will was in love with *me*.”

Paimon’s eyes sparkled. “And are you saying it is impossible for William—oh no, I’m sorry, *Spike*—to love you? He simply doesn’t know you. I’m sure, given time...”

“He—”

The demon held up a hand. “Enough.”

“You lying—”

There was a break then; the creature laughed. He looked at her and roared with laughter, and the sound was as chilling as anything she'd ever heard. It sent shivers of absolute hopelessness down her spine. He mocked her with an openness that left her insides bleeding.

“Imagine that,” he sniggered, rubbing his jaw with pale, near-skeletal fingers. “A thing of Hell, lying. I simply can't imagine what I was thinking. My apologies, dear *Buffy*. I assure you, it won't happen again.”

“You son of a—”

“Sorry. Forgive me. That was a lie.” He shrugged, laughing still. “I can't seem to help myself.”

“How would you feel about me ripping out your ribcage?”

“A little disconcerted, seeing as I don't have one.” Paimon smirked, but the mirth in his eyes was fading. “You were a foolish child, *Buffy*. Perhaps if you had listened to your dear watcher, you would have learned the value of not making bargains with the devil.”

“You're not the devil,” *Buffy* spat, tightening the grip on her stake.

Another unmoved shrug. “You say tomato,” he replied. “And truly, dear, I would love to spend my evening catching up, but I have business to tend to. You know: souls to capture, havoc to reap, the virtuous to corrupt. You were an unexpected stop, I admit, but a necessary one. Since you remember everything now—and much sooner than I would have preferred—I have concluded that it is time to collect.”

Everything stopped again. Movement ceased to exist.

“What?” she demanded, her voice suddenly raspy.

“Your debt,” Paimon said simply. “Within one week's time, I will be collecting your debt.”

*Buffy* drew in a sharp breath, every corner of her body paralyzed. “You can't.”

“That's funny. Your signature on an unbreakable stone begs to differ.”

“You didn't do what I asked... Will is—”

“Here. As are you. What you mean, dear, is you didn't ask for all you should have. And you know it. You have admitted as much to yourself and others. Do not lie to me. I am many things, admittedly, and I

confess as much with pride. But I always uphold a bargain. You simply didn't ask for what you truly wanted which, sorry as I am, is not a problem of mine." Paimon tilted his head, the slits of his eyes drinking her in. "You threw me off, see. And while the timing is rotten, there's little more I can do. You know too much now."

"I know too much?"

"You know yourself. You know Spike. You know the true past rather than the one I forged in your favor."

A fresh wave of anger rolled within her and she grasped onto it. Anger was good. She liked anger. Anger was always preferable to fear. "The past where you listed Will as my killer, you mean? Big shocker, that. Demons fudge over the details."

Paimon blinked. "But he was."

"Ummm, maybe your memory isn't that fresh, but mine is clear in the crystal sense."

"Yes, and had it not been for William you wouldn't have died." He shrugged again; she was coming to really hate it when he shrugged. "William died and you sold yourself. His death led to yours. It was the inevitable conclusion. Were it not for William, you would not be here. He killed you." Paimon broke off at that, his brow furrowing in what could be called frustration. "I just hadn't anticipated the claim."

At the slightest hint of their blood-link, Buffy felt her veins surge with life and warmth caress the frozen tundra of her heart. "What?"

From the look on his face, Paimon hadn't meant to say that much, which gave her a rush of hope. And for a moment, it seemed as though he'd leave it at that—walk away now without answering. But he didn't. At length, the demon rolled his eyes and heaved a sigh.

"Doesn't really matter either way, I suppose. These are things you would have eventually discovered on your own." He paused. "Were it not for the claim, you wouldn't have remembered a thing. Claims are especially powerful, you see. More so than demons such as I remember when, oh say, making bargains with grief-stricken slayers. Then again, they are so wretchedly rare that the specifics can't help but escape us every few millennia. Blood never changes—death cannot eradicate spells, oaths, bargains...or claims. How else do you explain the outstanding debt at your doorstep?"

Buffy shook her head hard. “You can’t have it.”

“My sweet, your defiance is charming, but I’m afraid this isn’t a matter of you handing over your debt. It’s a matter of my *taking* it. Whenever I like. However I like. You won’t see it coming and you won’t be able to stop me.” He grinned. “The timing, as I said, is off, but no matter. I’m sure I can put it to use during the next apocalypse.”

She swallowed. She didn’t wish to betray how hard she was shaking but she couldn’t seem to help herself. Her walls had collapsed and she was on full display. There for the viewing. The useless stake she held was covered with a cold coat of sweat, and she gripped it so tight it might well never leave her hand again. “There was an apocalypse,” she pointed out. “Why not then?”

“You mean the Master? The Hellmouth?” Paimon shook his head and took another step forward. “Child’s play. To waste what you signed into my ownership on something so...well, easily avertable...it wouldn’t be a smart investment, now would it?”

He caught her eyes again and for an unbearably long minute, everything around them ceased. Everything. There were no trees. No headstones. No soil beneath her feet. No town surrounding them. There was nothing at all. She looked into his eyes and saw flames licking his pupils—saw the silhouetted dance of a thousand terrible things. At once the sound around her was deafening with the shrieks of millions. Her heart galloped so fast she feared it might explode within her chest. Her skin grew hot and slick, as though trying to escape her bones. It only lasted a few seconds but the effect would remain with her forever—the sting of fire, the sorrow of Hell. Everything he’d shown her by simply inviting her into his eyes.

“Until next time, my lovely Elizabeth.”

Something scalding brushed her cheek, and then he was gone. Melting back into the shadows, which latched onto him as though he were a favorite cousin.

It took long minutes to gather her bearings. Buffy remained stationary, her chest heaving, her hungry lungs gulping down air. Her skin was numb but there. Her heart raced but didn’t abandon her. And when she raised her hand to her cheek to make sure he hadn’t burned

her with his kiss, there was nothing but the smooth feel of her flesh. No scar. No raw, angry mark. Nothing.

Buffy heaved a long sigh, her wobbly legs at last complying with her need to move.

She was so shaken she didn't feel him. Didn't sense him. Didn't even hear him. And when she turned, she found herself once again captured in a man's eyes.

Only there was no damnation here.

"Will," she breathed. The air around them hummed in pleasure at the sound of his name.

There was nothing at first. Spike remained motionless. He looked, for all the world, simply stunned by the sight of her.

He just looked at her, and she looked back.

Then, at last, there were words.

"Hello, cutie."



*NEW ENGLAND, 1701*

Elizabeth couldn't stand doing nothing. She never could. As a child, she would occupy empty minutes of her day by doing housework, no matter how tedious. On days when there was no housework, she would retreat to the backyard and practice whatever moves and techniques Kenneth wanted her to perfect. It had been easier when she was young—she'd simply done what she was told without thought to how the outside world operated or the staggering differences in her upbringing versus other children her age.

She'd known she eventually would be selected by the Powers to carry on the Slayer's noble work, of course. She'd known because Kenneth had known, and Kenneth was never wrong.

The change hadn't come until the day of her actual Calling. When playing slayer versus vampire in the woods had become real rather than a child's pastime. Even then, however, she'd taken her affinity for keeping busy into every aspect of her training. She couldn't be stationary; she couldn't do nothing when there was evil to defeat.

She couldn't do *nothing*.

Kenneth had invaded her home. He'd threatened her mate. He'd come after her.

It wasn't the sort of thing she could just ignore and she sure as hell couldn't wait for another nocturnal attack.

She had to do *something*.

She had to something or she'd go mad.

Elizabeth forced her thoughts to happier things as she trekked the familiar path to her former home. William was sleeping in the safety of their cottage cellar. He would be furious when he discovered she'd made the journey alone, no doubt, but the shield of daylight gave her courage she didn't have at night. It was the *only* advantage sunshine gave her. William couldn't follow her—couldn't put himself in the line of fire. He was safe where he was; even if the cellar was discovered, she had faith enough in his strength to pity whoever attempted to take him out.

The only person she feared was Kenneth. And as long as she was with Kenneth, he couldn't be searching for William.

After this—after *doing something*—perhaps her life could take route down a happier path. She didn't have any delusions of leaving on amicable terms, but some resolution would be better than none.

She still hadn't decided whether or not she was going to tell Kenneth this was goodbye. With as much faith as William had placed in her courage, it felt almost a disservice to his love for her to remain silent. At the same time, however, her mate understood her courage was not foolhardy. She feared when fear was appropriate, and while she didn't believe Kenneth would physically harm her, it didn't make the threat of his wrath any less terrifying.

*This one final burdle...*

She could do this. She *could*.

A strange, nervous sense of familiarity settled over her the second her eyes landed on the entrance of the Travers' cottage. Elizabeth stopped short and pulled her hair out of her face, heaving a long sigh.

This was something she had to do.

The swing of the entryway door was very squeaky. The echo of her footsteps across the wooden floor could undoubtedly be heard from miles away. The breaths rocking her chest trembled upon every release, and she was sure the reverberation sounded far and wide through the cottage's solemn walls.

“You look mightily like a foreigner trespassing upon unexplored land,” a dark, rough voice observed from the far right corner of the small room. Elizabeth whirled around, immediately finding Kenneth’s eyes. He was sitting in a wooden chair he’d fashioned for himself years ago, a bottle of wine open at his side, a goblet resting in his hands. “Would you like a drink, my dear?”

“It’s early.”

“Not for us, I don’t think. Those who walk with the night adhere to a different set of rules.” He arched an eyebrow, reaching for the unused glass that sat opposite the wine bottle. The silent indication spoke volumes. He’d anticipated her arrival. “Have a drink, Lizzie.”

Elizabeth frowned and fought off a shudder. She wasn’t Lizzie anymore and hadn’t been for a long time. She was Elizabeth the Vampire Slayer.

She was Buffy, the lover and mate of William the Bloody.

There was that and nothing else.

“Please.” Kenneth waved the drink at her. “I insist. I didn’t teach you to forget your manners when in the presence of elders.”

“No sir,” she agreed softly, accepting the goblet.

“Have a seat,” Kenneth said. “We have much to discuss.”

She found herself obeying before her mind could catch up with her. It was second-nature. “I didn’t come here to—”

“To barter? To plead your case for your vampire lover? To tell me how he whispered poetry in your ear and did sinful things to your body. How he *made you a woman*.” Kenneth arched a condescending eyebrow and sipped at his wine, indicating silently that she should do the same. Again, she found herself obeying. She was helpless to do anything else. “Please, Lizzie. Spare an old man the details of your disgusting trysts. I don’t wish to know of it.”

She swallowed hard, tears blurring her vision. “I never meant to displease you.”

“You have an odd way of showing it.” Kenneth sighed and rose to his feet, sliding his hands into his pockets. “I don’t suppose you have given much thought to how this affair of yours has affected me, have you? I raised you as my own. I taught you everything you know. I gave you all the care a father could muster for a daughter...especially

knowing the destiny you were to fulfill. Did it never occur to you that I forfeited my own right to happiness for the sake of the duty I vowed to upkeep?”

Elizabeth took another impulsive swig of wine and shook her head.

“There are things greater than us in this world—greater than earthly desires and other such flights of fancy. When priests take their holy vows, do you know what they are asked to sacrifice? Hmm?” Kenneth tapped his fingers along the side of his goblet. “Possession, attachment...celibacy and chastity, of course...for they are married to God and God alone. No woman should ever come between the Lord and—”

“But I am not a priest!” Elizabeth leaped to her feet. “And neither are you.”

He took a slow drink of wine. “Are you implying our mission is not in some way holy? We fight the demons of Hell itself. Nothing should stand between us and the Calling which has been bestowed upon us.”

“Priests *choose* their fate, Kenneth,” she argued. “They are not arbitrarily selected from birth to be summoned for service to God.”

“Does the Lord not put the summons in the hearts of men?”

Her jaw fell slack and words gathered in her throat, but none would come.

“Priests and bishops and all members of the Church are designed to protect the demons of men’s minds and hearts,” Kenneth continued. “We are to protect people from the tangible demons of this world.”

A strangled choke fought her throat for freedom. “I didn’t *choose* this.”

“Nor did I, but you find I honor my calling.”

“Your calling is to sit here and teach me tricks that will save my life most of the time but not *all* the time.” She threw her hands up in exasperation and her wine glass went soaring through the air before shattering against the floor. “I will eventually die doing what I do. And then what? An entire life thrown away at the Powers’ choosing—”

“You will die saving the world. All slayers do.”

“Armageddon doesn’t lurk around every corner, Kenneth, no matter what your priests tell you.”

He didn’t flinch. “Even if a slayer doesn’t die averting Armageddon,

she still sacrifices her life in the fight against evil. The fight will eventually conclude in the world's end, child. Surely I have not failed you so much that you don't realize this."

There was a slight tingling in her nerves. The air around her head felt monstrously thick, but she fought through it. Her eyes remained locked on Kenneth. She couldn't allow him the upper ground, no matter how ill the conversation made her. "You haven't failed me at all."

"And yet you roll in filth every night."

"William is *not* filth."

"Ah. So the devil has a name, does it?"

Elizabeth stepped forward, though her feet were confused and a wave of dizziness crashed over her head. "William is not an *it*," she practically snarled, blindly grasping for a surface on which to maintain her balance. "He's...he's..."

"The devil assumes many pleasing forms," Kenneth mused. "It is easy to see how one might be tempted."

"Nor he the devil, you callous bastard!"

"Of course he's not, child. He's merely the demon who seduced you away from your Calling."

"I love him." The words sounded feeble, but they needed to be said. "I don't care what he is. He's mine. I love him. You can't take him from me."

There was a long silence in which he simply glared at her. Nothing passed in between. No condemnation. No anger. No, only the cold harshness of his eyes and the whispers of nature outside the cottage walls. Distantly, she thought she heard the loud ticks of a pocket watch, but she could have been mistaken. She didn't want to betray weakness by looking away. She refused.

"No," Kenneth said, at last, his voice dropping in something almost resembling defeat. "I don't suppose I can."

And on those words, the effects of the poison at last claimed her body, and Elizabeth went crashing to the floor. Pain pierced her every inch, spreading through her veins and leaking through her insides, a slow crawling disease that zapped her will and stole her strength. Her vision blurred and her throat ran dry. She tried to scream but her voice

had abandoned her. Instead, she was left only with the stoic face of her watcher, who looked on dispassionately while nursing the rest of his wine.

“The fact remains it would be much easier to take you from him,” he said after a long, pause. “Especially with what you are.”

Elizabeth’s mouth opened and she tried to speak. The air stung with the hoarse cry she produced.

Kenneth blinked. “Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “I haven’t killed you. Even after betraying your Calling, I couldn’t do that. What you’re feeling are the effects of a potent drug watchers utilize upon every slayer’s eighteenth birthday, mixed and brewed, of course, with my own special ingredients. It’s much better to have you fully incapacitated than merely without your ordinary strength.”

Her eyes went wide. Kenneth had drugged her? He’d *drugged* her?

She glanced at the shattered pieces of her fallen goblet, startled fury seizing her every pore.

“Yes,” he agreed, nodding as though she’d said something. “I’d imagine you’re very angry. I would be, too, were I in your shoes. No matter. I expect you’ll black out before the searing pain kicks in.”

Elizabeth made a sound that would have been a scream had her voice cooperated.

“There is a rumor a witch inhabits the village,” he continued. “A rather nasty witch at that. The rumor was given notice several months ago when Mr. Wells noted the appearance of a boggart in his armoire. He claims a young woman appeared to assist him with the matter, utilizing means well beyond her physical capabilities.”

An angry growl tore at her throat.

Mr. Wells. The boggart.

That had been so long ago. Just three nights after she and William first made love.

“Mr. Wells was naturally quite fearful,” Kenneth continued, sounding now like a schoolmaster. “He believes the young woman in question bewitched his armoire...as only one of extraordinary power could inflict such a creature in this world, only one of extraordinary power could remove it. The poor chap. His luck has been rather unsa-

vory lately. I don't suppose you heard all his crops have wilted? And his livestock are growing sicker by the day..."

Kenneth knew she'd never touched magicks in her life. He kept his books in his room—a place she had never entered. Never cared to enter. If Mr. Wells had been cursed, it was at her watcher's doing.

She was just a convenient scapegoat.

"It doesn't help that uncommonly loud, often satanic sounds are heard from that cottage you're regularly seen entering," he added. "The one I investigated last night to find woefully empty. And I believe you have similarly been spotted at the graveyard, associating with demons and other creatures that defy the laws of death."

The watcher's eyes met hers and every cell in her body froze.

"I'm afraid I misjudged you, Lizzie," he said. "I can't well have a practicing witch under my roof. The townspeople have taken a vote. No, no. There is no need for a trial, dear. You see, I am considered your guardian. I speak for you in all public affairs. You are a strange, unnatural girl. Never mingle with the youths in town. Never seen but at night. Always lurking about when something mysterious happens. It's all very vexing."

Shapes around her began to blur and swirl. Kenneth at once sounded very far away.

Very far...

"Sleep well, Elizabeth. I'm afraid I won't attend the burning—the thought of watching you die is unbearable."

God, how had she been so blind?

*William.*

Elizabeth's lips tore apart, a choking sob fighting for freedom.

*I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry.*

It was the last thought to cross her head before the world turned black.

*SUNNYDALE, California, 1997*

He didn't recognize her.

It was important to remember that. The eyes staring her down didn't remember gazing endlessly into hers as their bodies rocked together. He didn't remember laughing under her merciless hands as she tickled him into submission. He didn't remember holding her against him until it was impossible to tell where her body ended and his began, twirling her in the falling rain as the sky roared and thundered above them. He didn't remember kissing her brow whenever she fell asleep in his arms. He remembered nothing.

Nothing she could touch.

And yet, Buffy couldn't help herself.

"Will," she breathed again, if only to relish in the feel of his name on her tongue. It was beyond strange having the sensation of missing something she, so recently, hadn't known to miss.

But this wasn't her Will. This was Spike, and Spike did not know her.

A point he emphasized the next second, a low growl rumbling in the back of his throat. And before she could even muster a gasp, the biting smack of his backhand rocking against her jaw had the ground



vanishing beneath her, her back smashing against the rocky cemetery ground.

“Don’t,” Spike snarled, rapidly seizing her shoulders and jerking her back to her feet, only to knock her down again, “call me that.”

Buffy’s lungs clamored for oxygen, pain blistering her skin. So that was that. Tears blinked behind her eyes and her chest ached with a pain too deep to be merely physical. She was utterly alone.

*To thine own self be true...*

She had to pull her mind out of the eighteenth century and clamor back to the girl she’d been before the walls around her mind had fallen. Just because she remembered her life as Elizabeth didn’t mean she had to forgo being Buffy as well.

Buffy was her present. She *had* to be Buffy.

“Do you have any idea what you’ve done to me?” Spike spat, his steps heavy as he trekked around her again. “You conniving little bitch, you—”

Buffy shot up her leg as he leaned over her and smacked hard into his brow. Spike howled and flew back, giving her the opportunity to roll to her feet. Then she was facing him, her hands poised upward, her chest heaving, her mind racing.

“What I’ve done?” she repeated. “Oh, you mean give you a hell of a concussion?”

Spike just growled and lunged at her again. He lunged but it came slowly—so slowly. She saw everything unfolding as though it were captured on a reel of film, rolling out before her eyes frame-by-frame. She knew at once what his next move would be. And the next. And the next. In an instant, she saw a blueprint of the battle laid out before her with Spike’s moves beautifully choreographed. She saw it all.

They had done this a thousand times.

He just didn’t know it.

“Come on, Spike,” Buffy continued, a fresh rush of adrenaline pumping her veins as she sidestepped his attack, bringing up her hand to block his swinging fist. “Don’t hold back on me now.”

“Shut your gob!” He made a move to kick her off her feet, but she was already airborne by the time his leg took the swipe at hers.

“I don’t know what your problem is,” she retorted, ignoring the

pangs each word shot against her heart. “And here I thought we were getting along.”

“Cause I *didn't* kill you when you were beggin' me to fuck you raw? You're off your bird.” He snorted and dove for her again. And again, Buffy shot into the air, her body flipping over his and landing with gracious ease directly behind him.

She sucked in a breath. “How can one be *on* a bird?”

“You wanted it, didn't you?” Spike demanded, rage flaring behind his eyes when she deflected yet another blow. “You wanted me to plunge my dick inside that hot little cunny of yours.”

Heat flooded her cheeks.

“I don't *do* slayers, Slayer. Sorry to burst your monster-lovin' bubble.” He growled again, then grunted in frustration when she blocked his next attack. Every failed assault only seemed to fuel his outrage. “Sure, you tasted sweet, but—”

“Aww, are you saying I'm *not* the most gorgeous creature you've ever seen?”

“What idiot put that idea in your head?”

Buffy rolled her eyes, catching his leg when he attempted to kick her again. “You, you dummy.”

“You're barmy.”

“You just have a lousy memory.”

Spike roared again, then again when he swung his fists for her head and missed. “Rot,” he retorted. “I remember just fine. I remember the dark princess waitin' for me at home. The way she feels and tastes...” He closed his eyes and released an overtly theatrical moan. “Tell you, pet. Can't get enough.”

Revulsion and horror churned her insides, and without warning, Buffy felt the all-too-familiar sting of tears.

“Didn't stop you from copping a feel,” she shot back, her voice shaking. “I don't seem to recall you putting up a struggle.”

“Chit throws herself in any man's arms and he goes wonky upstairs, provided he's not a poof.” Spike shrugged, but she didn't miss the way his eyes glazed over. “Doesn't mean a lick, sweetheart. Sorry to burst that pretty little fantasy.”

“Well, if that's all,” Buffy continued, kicking him back when he

began to advance, “I don’t see what the big is. You got to feel me up and you’re not dust. Complain about it a little more.”

“You say that like it’s some prize, love,” he retorted, swinging at her again. Again, she blocked him with ease that had his eyes blazing with rage. “I’ve been tryin’ to wash your nasty scent off for days. Doesn’t wanna take.”

There was no way she could walk away from this unscathed. Hurt swelled her insides. “Sorry to be an inconvenience,” she replied. “It’s not my fault my senses were overtaken by a bored demonologist.”

“Don’t seem to recall you complainin’.”

“Funny. Neither were you.”

He growled and swung again. “How the *fuck* are you doin’ that?”

“Doing what?”

He didn’t answer, instead shaking his head. “Just stop wigglin’ so I can kill you properly.”

Buffy blinked, a laugh erupted between her lips. “Sorry sweetie,” she replied, shaking her head. “I didn’t realize this was Shoot A Slayer in a Barrel night at Western Sizzlin’.”

Spike ignored her and busied himself with another easily deflected attack. “How are you doin’ this?” he demanded again, brushing himself off. “How are you—”

“Anticipating your every move?” Buffy shrugged sweetly. The many times she and William had fought had schooled her well. She could script out his attack plan and hand it to him if so asked. As it was, even with the ego-killing running commentary, there was a part of her relishing this. The thrill of being with him again in any form—a feeling so familiar, so known, she couldn’t help but soak him in.

He didn’t remember her, but he knew her.

“Now that you mention it,” Spike muttered, stalking forward yet again. His goal wasn’t to attack this time—there was a tell in his eyes that always gave him away. Always. She decided, however, not to let him know.

“I know you,” Buffy said simply.

Spike’s eyebrows perked. “You mean the rot about you and me bein’ lovers from days past? Don’t tell me you actually buy into that.”

Buffy balked. That was a bit more on the nose than she'd anticipated. "How?" she asked.

"Let's just say we have a vamp in common."

"Angel."

Spike nodded and took a methodical step forward. "He dropped in a couple nights back," he said. "Wanted to make sure my intentions were honorable and all that nonsense. Then he told me the funniest story..."

The cold was rapidly thawing into fury. Angel had no right to tell Spike *anything*. It was *her* story to tell—or not tell. Especially with the way things were. Especially with the man she loved looking at her like she was a stranger, and a crazy one at that.

*Oh god.*

The weight of her solitude came crashing down.

She was alone. Giles believed her, but there was nothing he could do to help. Paimon was coming for her and William didn't remember her.

William was now Spike, and Spike was in love with someone else.

She was alone.

"I'm going home," Buffy said numbly, turning. She didn't worry about showing Spike her back; somehow she knew he wouldn't attack her again. Just as she knew his eyes would narrow and he would shift his weight from one foot to the other before giving up the pretense and racing after her.

She knew him well. No matter what he remembered.

No matter what he believed.

"Buffy." Spike barreled forward just as she'd predicted. The next second he was in front of her, his hands clamped around her shoulders. "Don't."

"Don't what? Go home?"

"I need to know."

"You wouldn't believe me. God, you already don't."

Spike shook his head and tightened his grip on her shoulders. "Try me."

The words struck her like bullets. He was a walking contradiction.

"Let go."

“If this is about the whole ‘I’m here to kill you’ thing, you should know it was just a cover.”

“I know.”

“I’m goin’ outta my mind. Every time I close my eyes, I see...” As though in need of whatever it was he saw, Spike closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath. “I see you. And I don’t know why. You’re everywhere. God, you have been for...”

“If you’ll just let me go—”

“It’s crazy. Y’know it’s crazy, right?”

“You mean the whole time-jump thing? And here I thought it sounded like another Thursday afternoon in Sunnydale.”

Spike didn’t laugh. She didn’t expect him to. “You called me Will,” he murmured instead. “You called me Will tonight.”

“And you asked me to stop.”

“No one’s ever called me Will.”

Buffy inhaled a trembling breath, every inch of her threatening to crumble. She was divided between truth and evasion. A few minutes ago there would have been no question. No hesitation. No blinking. But Spike knew—he knew enough, thanks to Angel. He knew what she thought, even if he didn’t believe himself, and she had no answer that would satisfy him. He’d proven as much already.

“Go home, Spike,” Buffy said with intent. She ignored the inner screams that begged for William, ignoring how the scattered pieces of her heart shattered into something lost beyond recognition. To save herself, she had to ignore it.

“I’ve no longer got a home.”

The confession froze her feet and her heart along with them. “You...” She broke off, shuddering. “You...earlier...I thought...your girlfriend...”

Spike snorted. “Come now, Slayer. Don’t tell me you don’t know a smoke-screen when you see one.”

“What?”

“In the world according to Dru, she’s history. No longer a factor. She’s made it clear she wants nothin’ to do with me.” He met her eyes, trembling. “Dru booted me all the way to the bloody curb after...well, after you.”

“Me?”

“She smelled you all over me. Drove her right nutty. Or nuttier, I should say.” He released a short laugh that held no humor. “It’s a bloody riot when you think about it. The bitch never could keep her mitts to herself, but the second I wander...”

The words, when said over and over, finally began to form a sensible pattern in her head. “Drusilla...kicked you out?”

“Made quite a scene about it, too,” Spike agreed. “Surprised this is the first you’re hearing of it.”

“I don’t exactly read *Vamp Weekly*,” she retorted with a small smile. “Dru *really* kicked you out because of me?”

He nodded. “Didn’t like it that I got a taste of someone else,” he said. “I don’t, either.”

“I didn’t ask you to kiss me.”

“No, you grabbed me before you could ask.”

Heat touched her cheeks, and for the millionth time, she considered how far gone she was. How deep into the labyrinth she’d allowed Paimon to drag her without stopping to consider the consequences. How it must have been for Spike to encounter her, a sniveling girl making with the heartfelt confessions, lunging into his arms and assaulting his mouth. How he must have felt then—how everything in his mind could have shut down from logic and gone strictly to primal instinct. And perhaps there was a bit of their shared claim leaking through in the revelation—the reason he hadn’t been able to thrust her aside as though she meant nothing.

Perhaps the claim had saved her life that night, just as it had saved the hope of regaining herself. Paimon couldn’t erase from her what was ingrained in her blood, nor could he thoroughly eradicate her memory from William’s subconscious. Somewhere inside her vampire was the man she loved, beating against plated glass doors and screaming for freedom. Memories were pushing at the corners of Spike’s brain. memories that might well be lost forever. What was important, however, was the fact that they existed.

As long as they existed, there was hope.

“I was hoping you’d forgotten that part,” Buffy admitted, her voice low. “The part where I...kinda attacked you with my mouth.”

A strange light penetrated her vampire's eyes. "Forgotten?" he rasped. "Christ, love, how could I forget? You changed me. Bollocks, you changed everything. You..."

"I didn't mean to."

It was the truth, but even standing here as she was, Buffy knew she would take it back for nothing.

"But you did. You called me..."

"I won't call you Will anymore," she told him again. "You don't have to... I know it now. You're not Will."

No, but Will *was* Spike. Will lived inside him.

Will loved *her*. Loved *Buffy*. Will wouldn't have given a damn about this Drusilla or getting kicked to the curb. Will would have taken her in his arms, laughing and peppering her face with kisses as he twirled her under the stars. Will lived within Spike, and if he ever broke free, he and Spike would be one in the same. But Spike was not Will.

This was not a vampire who loved her. This was a vampire who was infatuated with her. Haunted by her, perhaps. But he didn't love her.

"I'm not Will," Spike repeated, and it sounded, for all the world, as though he were trying to convince himself of that fact. "I wasn't around then. In the sodding eighteenth century, or whatever it was you told Peaches. I wasn't alive. And sorry to break it to you, sweetheart, neither were you."

"I made a deal—"

"With a demon," he supplied, nodding, his feet carrying him a step closer. "That's what I gathered."

Buffy swallowed. Hard. "And you don't think it's possible?"

"No."

The word was barked—forced. He was trying to convince himself. The tell was back in his eyes.

"I know my life, Slayer. I know it too bloody well. There's no way I went through all that for rot. To what? Meet up with you so we could have our merry happily ever after?" He snorted. "Where were you, then, when I was trailin' after Cecily like a hapless pup? Where were you when I stumbled into the alley and met my redemption? Where were you *every sodding night* of my life when I needed—"

"I can't help when I was born."

“No you can’t, and that’s what I’m tryin’ to get through that gorgeously thick skull of yours.” Another step. He was so close now. “It didn’t happen. None of it. There was no you. There was no me. There was no brilliant shagging. There was nothing. It didn’t happen. And that, love, is that.”

A frog the size of Texas leaped into her throat. “Brilliant?”

“Slayer...with you, it’d have to be.” He paused and frowned, shaking himself to his senses. “Point being... whoever you think I am doesn’t exist.”

“Never say never.”

Something broke behind his eyes—the last snap of his restraint, and all was lost without warning. A snarl tore through his lips and he captured her face between his cool, firm hands. “I’m. Not. *Will*,” he snarled. “This is *Spike*. You hear? This is *all* Spike. Nod for me if you understand.”

Buffy nodded. There was nothing else to do.

And then it was gone. The outrage. The anger. The everything—it poured out of him in a blink, and suddenly his eyes were sweeping over her, searching hers before landing on her lips. A ragged beat stilled between them and for a long, wondrous second, she saw him fighting for memories he could not reach. Something he sensed was important but knew not how.

In that instant, she saw William.

“My name,” he murmured hotly. “Say it.”

Buffy steadied herself and gave him what he wanted. “Spike.”

“Good. Try to remember that.”

Then his lips came crashing upon hers, and reason melted into song.



WHILE HIS EXPERIENCE with women was rather limited, Spike was certain that tears weren't the normal reaction to a man's kiss. Dru was no basis of comparison; she laughed when she should cry and cried when she was at her happiest. He'd come to understand it—he knew her special blend of insanity. Where others might lose their own minds in trying to comprehend her, there was a certain amount of intellectual stimulation to be gained in unraveling her riddles. In responding to her like she was an adult rather than a child.

If Dru cried when he kissed her, there would be a reason. She wasn't a mystery to him and she hadn't been for a long time.

Buffy, however, was a bloody enigma. And the second her lips opened to him, the second her hot, silken tongue drifted over his and explored the cool cavern of his mouth, her body trembled and she began to cry.

There were no sobs. No hysterics. No beating against his chest in demand of justice. There were only tears. She rumbled small whimpers against his lips but didn't allow them to seize her completely, and she wept. She wept so silently, so perfectly; she wept as though she wanted to protect him from whatever could inspire sorrow from a simple kiss.

Then again, there was nothing simple about this kiss. Buffy had

every inch of him burning to a bloody crisp. If fire had a taste, she was it. There had been nothing like her before. The life sparking through her skin, the way she whispered against his mouth without making a sound, and the tears scalding her gorgeous cheeks. She consumed him without trying—drawing him further into her mystery and the abyss surrounding the world she'd constructed around herself.

The place where he knew her. Where she knew him. Where they knew each other.

It wasn't that he didn't believe her, but it wasn't that he bought into her crackpot idea, either. There was definitely something there. Something beneath the surface of their complicated relationship. He'd rolled Angel's words over again and again, contemplating the chance of truth behind the Slayer's claim, ridiculous as it was. But there was no explaining the way he felt now.

Drusilla had kicked him out of her bed. He'd come home smelling of the Slayer and he was no longer welcome between her legs—no matter that half the world's demon population had taken residence there during their years together.

*"You're not mine, my prince. You never were. I've but borrowed you."*

There wasn't a lick of sense to be made.

And the bitch of it was he didn't care. Sure, it smarted like hell but he was too preoccupied with the taste of the goddess whimpering into his mouth to give an honest damn. He was sure that once the numbing melted into something tangible, his feigned outrage at what Buffy had cost him would turn into something concrete.

For the moment, though, he was just lost. Lost in the way her lips moved against his, the way her tongue stroked his tongue and explored his mouth. The way she cried nearly silent tears at his kiss. The way she linked her arms around his neck. The way she gave into him without a fight. Without protest. Without anything beyond desperate surrender.

"Mmm," he murmured, sucking hard on her bottom lip, walking her backward until her back was pressed against a tree. "Fuck, but you taste sweet."

Buffy gasped and trembled in his arms, thrusting her hips against his denim-clad cock with wanton abandon he was near certain she

didn't mean. This girl was untouched—the world could see it. He'd known it the instant he set his eyes on her. She was every man's temptation, but she'd never been touched.

Not before him, anyway. Not before Halloween.

"You're playin' with fire," he warned.

Buffy met his eyes without bothering to blink her tears away and kissed him again. "I've played before," she replied, her voice low and certain. "Our first time was against a tree."

A rush of irritation seized his insides, but he honestly didn't know if he was upset with her delusion or that he couldn't see what she saw. Whatever glorious memory was playing in her mind was for her eyes only. And with as nutty as the claim was, Spike couldn't shake the notion that at least part of it was the truth. There were too many things in the air—too much to own entirely to coincidence. The way Buffy had whispered his name. The way she fought him as though she knew him, blocking his every attack without blinking. The lack of fear in her eyes. He didn't believe her story but he didn't *not* believe it, either. He didn't know what to believe anymore.

Of one thing he was certain—Buffy knew him. The knowledge was right terrifying, but it didn't make it any less true. The rest—the details—were up for grabs.

"Yeah?" he heard himself murmur.

Buffy nodded through her tears, a small, indulgent smile crossing her lips. "You came to kill me."

Spike snorted. Even in their warped fairytale, he was a ruthless bastard. "Yeah," he agreed, dragging his hand down her cheek until the heat of her breast was cradled against his palm. "That sounds like somethin' I'd do."

A gorgeous smile graced her perfect lips, and he felt something within him collapse. No matter what the girl thought, the fact remained that she was here. She was with him.

"You were...ohhh...Wi...Spike..."

He heard the way her voice caught and decided to ignore it. The warmth of her breast in his hand was worth the price of being called the wrong name. He grazed his thumb over her nipple, his other hand sliding down, intent on undoing the clasp of her jeans before sensi-

bility caught up with either of them. He'd felt her pulse around him just nights before. Her hot cunt around his fingers—he wanted to feel that again. Wanted to feel just how much she wanted him and only him.

“Tell me about our first time,” he whispered.

Buffy blinked, her head flying back so hard she nearly knocked herself out on the tree behind her. “You want...”

His other hand abandoned her breast to drag her jeans down her legs, and he was on his knees before he could keep up with himself, working the cuff of her pants over one of her shoes. It didn't occur to him until her leg was free to just remove the damn thing, and by that time, he didn't care. He just wanted her open to him. “I came to kill you,” he started for her. “Why'd I come to kill you?”

Spike glanced up, his eyes immediately centered on the simple white cotton of her panties and the damp line of slayer-honey pooling in the crotch. Christ, she was wet. He didn't think he'd ever seen a girl as wet as she was. Not for him, anyway. His bed had been occupied by a woman who took her pleasures and enjoyed them, sure, but never responded to *him* as an object of desire beyond what he could do to her body.

Buffy was wet for him because it was *him*. Not because he was touching her. Not because she knew what was to come. No, she desired *him* and *him* alone.

A thrill raced down his spine.

There was nothing in the world like this.

“I'm the Slayer,” she said, her voice trembling, her hips thrusting forward. “You came to kill me.”

“Seems reasonable enough,” he agreed, raising his hand to the tantalizing fabric that guarded her pussy. “You Slayer. Me vampire.” He pressed his index finger against the wet center, trembling when she threw her head back and moaned. In all his years, he'd never seen anything so sexy. Dru had dolled herself up in black lace and decorated her pale legs with fishnet stockings a time or two, but she had nothing on Buffy, in her plain panties and her worn T-shirt. This girl was purity. She was radiant. She was wet and warm and wiggling and...

*Mine.*

She was his.

“You...you were angry...”

“With you? Somehow I don’t fancy that much of a stretch, either.” Spike grinned and licked his lips, hooking his fingers around the crotch of her panties and baring her juicy flesh to his hungry eyes. Her mound was almost as he remembered from their magic-induced tryst on Halloween. She was smooth, plump, slick and...shaven? This was new. This was something she’d changed since he’d last touched her. Had she done it for him?

*Christ*, he hoped she’d done it for him.

“Did I do this to you?” he murmured, finding her clit with his thumb. “Did I get on my knees and taste this juicy quim of yours?”

Buffy choked a sob and nodded.

“I did?” he repeated, not bothering to mask his surprise. He honestly hadn’t expected her to confirm anything. Virgins were never too imaginative—at least that was what the years had taught him to believe. Not that he’d spent too much time deflowering virgins. Dru was the only woman he’d ever bedded, and she’d been far from chaste the first time she’d welcomed him inside her body.

He supposed his opinion of virgins came from a Victorian frame of mind. And just when he’d thought he’d banished every vestige of his former self...

“Yes... You were...” Buffy dragged her teeth along her lower lip. “You were...teaching me.”

“Teaching?”

“Y-you... I’d... I’d never...”

Spike pulled his haze from her face, focusing again on her pussy. “What did I teach you?” he whispered. He already had the answer—he just wanted her to say it. “Tell me what I taught you.”

Buffy gasped and bucked against his hand. “What my body can do.”

“I taught you that?”

“Then you bit me.”

Just the idea of slayer blood had his cock at full attention. A low growl rumbled in the back of his throat. “I bit you?” he repeated, his voice suddenly hoarse. “God...”

The Slayer nodded and arched again into his touch. “Will...”

“Spike,” he corrected. It was important for them both to make the distinction. Calling him *Will* impressed upon him the burden of memories he didn’t possess. If he was going to have Buffy, he needed to know she knew who was doing the having. He needed her to know it was *him*—Spike. England’s native son, sired in 1880 by Drusilla, and slave to his sire’s every whim until this blonde bombshell literally danced onto the scene. “My name, love, say it.”

Buffy cooed, thrusting her pussy against him with reckless abandon he didn’t think she was entirely aware of. “Spike.”

“That’s right. *Spike*. Say it again.”

“Spike...”

“Mmm. That’s lovely, that is.” He rewarded her obedience by taking a quick lap up her drenched slit, rolling her flavor in his mouth. She tasted so sweet. So warm. If purity had a taste, it was to be found in Buffy Summers. “So is that it, then?” he asked and smacked his lips.

A long mewl tore through her throat. “Will...”

“*Spike*.”

“Spike,” she agreed, but she was only half with him—only half listening. And while he loved knowing he could drive her mad with but a few simple touches, there were things too important to gloss over.

“Buffy...my name.”

She blinked and glanced down, meeting his eyes. “Spike,” she said. “I’m sorry. You’re—”

“I’m not him, love. I’m not your sodding white knight.” He clamped his lips hard around her clit and favored her with a good suck, slipping two fingers across her labia and massaging her juicy flesh with a mind solely aimed at driving her as crazy as she’d driven him. And fuck if he’d ever tasted anything like this. He’d never get enough of her. Of this. He wanted to drink this every day.

He’d never known anyone who wanted him like this. It was intoxicating.

“I’m not him,” he said again, flicking over her clit as he poised his fingers at her opening. “I’m *not*.”

“I wished for you,” she insisted on a sob.

“You got somethin’ else. There’s no way I’d ever forget this.” He nipped at her, easing his fingers into her pussy. She clamped down hard

around him, sucking him in. It was beyond anything he'd ever experienced.

She was so tight—Christ, she was tight. Tight and the hottest girl he'd ever known. Ever touched. Beyond other humans whose heat was at times inebriating, Buffy was a new drug all in herself. And he wanted her. He wanted everything she had to give him. He wanted to feel her body pulse around his fingers just as he wanted to watch his dick slide in and out of her. He wanted it all.

But above all else, he wanted her to know his name.

"No way I'd forget this," he murmured again, pumping his fingers into her sweet little hole. "No way I'd forget fighting with you. Fucking you. Watchin' you bounce on my cock. No way."

She trembled hard beneath him, a hoarse, desperate gasp clawing for freedom. "I loved you."

The words made his heart sing and his demon purr with delight, but he had to shove them off.

"You can love me like this," he countered. "Learn to love me like this."

"I do."

Spike froze. There was no way she meant to say that. No way she even knew what she was confessing. The girl was dumb with love for the bloke she wanted him to be—she couldn't mean she loved *him*. The one with her now.

"Don't say that," he growled, angrier than he'd intended. "Don't say things you don't mean."

Buffy blinked stupidly. "But I—"

"You can't even get the name right, you daft bint." Spike huffed and gently tugged her clit between his teeth again. He toyed with her without hurting her, rolled her in his mouth and trembled when she whimpered and quivered against him. Then, just as quickly, he pulled back and slipped his fingers over her.

His tongue was in the mood to dive.

"I do love you, Spike."

The voice barely sounded like hers. Not the Slayer he remembered. Not the girl he'd fought in the darkened halls of her school. Not the

girl he'd watched dance with her friends at the Bronze. There was desperation in her tone that didn't sound like Buffy at all.

"No you don't."

He channeled his outrage at the injustice of her declaration with his tongue, plunging inside her hot, tight cunt with the intention of marking her so she'd never again mistake him for someone else. He should have known, of course, that he was fooling himself. The drops of dew he'd licked off his fingers had nothing on the unbridled taste of her at the source. Spike was a goner, and he knew it.

There was no coming back from this.

"Will..."

The phantom's name enraged him, but he couldn't deny himself. Instead, Spike poured all his aggression into devouring her as she'd never been devoured. He rubbed her clit with his fingers and stabbed her with his tongue, and felt as she came apart. The welcome baptism of her orgasm had him drenched, but he didn't care. He hogged it all. He could tease her forever. He could remain here forever. He could.

Only nothing could prevent the truth from separating them.

How much time passed, he didn't know. Spike found his cheek pressed against the warmth of her belly, her fingers curled lovingly through his hair as the cool breeze of night settled down upon them.

"I know who you are," Buffy whispered at last. "I really do."

"You have a funny way of showin' it."

"You've changed. We both have." She continued to massage his scalp, and while he was torn inside, there was peace with her that he'd never found before.

He might be only a shadow of what she wanted, but it was closer than he'd ever come to perfection. He'd be a dolt to give it up on the case of mistaken identity. No matter how much he wanted to be Will. Because from the sound of things, Will had it pretty great before he'd run off and got himself killed.

"Buffy..."

"I know who you are, Spike."

"But this isn't what you want." He paused. "*I'm* not what you want. I'm not Will. I'm just..." He trembled. "I'm drawn to you, love. God knows I am. Always have had a thing for slayers. And it's different with



you. Bleeding hell, it's different. I don't know if it has anything to do with what you've told me—"

"Spike—"

"My life's gone lopsided, you hear? I came here to kill you and now..."

He felt her humorless chuckle. "We're two-for-two."

"Buffy, I'm serious."

"So am I. It's kinda funny when you think about it."

"A laugh riot for those who get the joke, I'm sure." He pulled back and met her eyes, willing her to see inside him. "You might've loved this bloke you think you...you might've loved Will, sweetheart, but I'm not him."

"Yes, you are."

Bloody stubborn chit.

"No, sweet, I'm not. And if you... If we do this, it can't be about *him*. Or what all. It has to be you and me. You and *me*. If you can't love me just because you think I'm him or—"

"But I—"

Spike held up a hand. "If you can't love me for me, not for him, there's nothing to love. Nothin' but a fantasy. And someday you'll realize it."

Buffy stared at him for a long time but said nothing.

He'd never seen joy melt into sorrow so quickly.

He'd never seen anyone look so haunted.

Spike sighed and tugged her down before he could stop himself, folding her small, perfect body into his arms. He didn't know what he was doing anymore and he honestly didn't know if he cared. All he did know was his reality was mucked beyond repair. That the girl he'd meant to destroy was suddenly the one thing worth living for.

He didn't know what it meant, and he was too blasted tired to try to figure it out now.

Right now, he was just content in holding her in the quiet.

If they were lost, they might as well be lost together.

*NEW ENGLAND, 1701*

He was going to absolutely wring her neck when he got a hold of her. That was, of course, after he got his fill of caressing her skin and kissing her lips and feeling the steady beat of her heart beneath his fingers. After he was completely reassured that she was all right.

Then he was going to kill her for making him worry.

William had never felt such panic. Not as much as when he'd awakened that morning and found himself in an empty bed. He didn't know how long she'd been gone, only that she was, and he was trapped by sunlight.

There was no sodding doubt in his mind where she'd gone. For the few, blissful months they'd been together, Elizabeth had lived under a shadow of paralyzing fear that their happiness would eventually meet the business end of a stake. That William would fall in the crossfire of her relationship with her watcher. That Kenneth would take him away from her, as though, in Kenneth's mind, he was a possession—a toy his pseudo-daughter enjoyed but couldn't have for keeps.

Elizabeth hadn't heard the implication in her words when relaying her fears, but William had. And it outraged him. Not for the way she spoke, rather for the way she had been taught to view herself. She

referred to herself as the property of the bloody Council—as though she hadn't the faculties, the free-will or the components of a true human being. As though she was nothing more than a weapon with arms and legs.

It was maddening. It was devastating. She believed herself to be less than human because of her Calling.

William supposed it was a way the Wanker's Council kept their slayers in line. The old gits knew a thing or two about the balance of power. If they let their slayers run their own lives, they might eventually wise up to the fact that they were not only human but in possession of strength beyond strength.

Strength that men feared.

A cold thought paralyzed his insides. God, could it be this was his fault? Had William fed Elizabeth with too much animosity toward Kenneth that she'd decided to go and end it in person? Or had she gone with only William's welfare at heart? Had she truly been so blind as to not realize that Kenneth meant for her to share whatever fate he had in store for her vampire mate?

Kenneth better pray no harm came to Elizabeth, else the world pay with blood.

As it was, the only thing keeping William from completely losing his head was the knowledge that the old man wouldn't be satisfied with Elizabeth's death alone. And Kenneth knew as well as he did that live bait always captured the bigger fish.

Elizabeth *had* to be alive. She *had* to be.

At least until he got his hands on her and shook her gorgeous self for making an immortal man age with anxiety.

She was alive. She was.

William snarled in victory as the last of sunlight dipped under the horizon.

One problem down. Now he just needed to know where to point his feet.

There had been only a handful of instances when he'd been drawn into the heart of the village. Once or twice when he'd needed food and couldn't find any witless stragglers on whom to feed, and a few times before he'd admitted his love for Elizabeth and could do nothing but

watch her from a distance. Most older vampires knew it was wiser, especially when living in solitude in under-populated areas, to live as far from the public eye as possible. The Americas had one or two actual cities, but none with the booming population of London or other choice European destinations. It was difficult in small villages to live as a vampire without drawing unwanted attention.

Most of the older generation knew the rules or had at least devised a system for living that kept their presence unnoticed. It was typically the witless fledglings who ended up dust—at least in places like this.

Now, if they lived in Paris, it'd be entirely different. So many people, so much distraction...so much good eating.

William supposed he should count his blessings. Had Elizabeth lived anywhere else, she likely would have killed him well before they had discovered how desperately they loved each other. He made note to thank the Powers later; right now he was too busy trying to suss out where to go.

He didn't remain indecisive for long. Another perk of small villages—it was always easy to pick out the angry mobs.

Especially when they wielded torches.

*Torches.*

A sharp breath caught in William's throat, and at once he knew.

He *knew*.

"Christ," he breathed. Every inch of him froze in terror. "Buffy..."

He hadn't seen a burning in ages. The only one he'd attended had taken place outside St. Salvator's Chapel. A religious execution of God-fearing men—God-fearing men who didn't fear God enough to keep them from setting so-called heretics on fire. A century and a half had passed since then; it had been so long William had thought the practice very much outdated. However, one didn't forget the signs of a burning after having seen one. It was human savagery at its best.

And they were planning to burn Elizabeth.

The demon in his chest roared in fury. The demon was suddenly blind to logistics and rationality—the demon didn't care that raging into a sea of men with torches would not only ensure his death but Elizabeth's as well. The demon just knew his mate was in danger, and there was no thought behind that. And god, was it tempting. His

nerves were split and his cells screamed—he didn't give a righteous damn about himself, he just needed to get her to safety.

Something he couldn't well do if he was dust.

Thankfully, the demon was overpowered by the man's sense of reason. William's options were minimal at best. He had super-strength on his side but little else. He hadn't a legion of loyal followers ready to take the village by storm, and even if he did get to Elizabeth without managing to get himself killed, the chance of escape for either of them weighed against grim odds. And while he didn't rightly care too much about the safety of his own hide, he knew his girl.

He knew her. She was the same as he was. She was his equal.

If something happened to him, she wouldn't think straight. And then she would die too.

"Balls," William cursed, the screaming components of his brain beating through the walls of reason. "Think, you stupid git. Think."

He needed to think something up *fast*. Something to create a few minutes—just a few minutes. Ninety seconds would do. Whatever could get him to Elizabeth without the eyes of a crowd to witness her escape...

What he needed was a diversion.

The word was enough. A diversion. He could create a diversion. It shouldn't be too difficult. Just get the angry mob to shift their focus from Point A to Point B. Diversions were simple; people in groups were daft by default—if one pointed at something, the masses would look. It was all he'd need.

William drew in a sharp breath, his legs breaking into a run as the clockwork of his mind cranked and churned and formed the outline of what would have to be his plan. There wasn't time for anything else. And by the time he reached the outskirts of the riot, he'd convinced himself it was solid enough to accomplish what he needed accomplished.

It had to—there was nothing else.

"Oi, mate!" he called to the first one he saw. A bloke of about nineteen, maybe twenty. A bloke holding a torch and migrating slowly to the heat of the commotion. The kid turned around, unbridled eager-

ness on his face. William forced his temper down. “What’s the ruckus?”

The kid blinked and pinned him with a plainly incredulous look. “You mean you haven’t ‘eard? Town’s got us a witch. There’s gonna be a burnin’ t’night.”

William arched an eyebrow. “A witch?”

“Ol’ Man Travers confirmed it. His girl, Lizzie. Y’know Lizzie?”

He gritted his teeth and did his best to keep his demon at bay. He just needed that torch. “‘ve heard of her.”

“Pretty lass. It’s a bloomin’ shame, is what it is. I’ve always fancied the thought of gettin’ a peek up her skirt. If she weren’t a damned witch...” The kid broke off and shook his head. Then, belatedly, a frown marred his brow and he glanced up. “Wait a tick. Who the hell are you?”

It was the last thing the kid would have a chance to say. In a blink, he was on the ground, his neck snapped, and his torch in William’s possession.

“Someone oughta teach youngsters not to talk to strangers,” he muttered.

He was truly fortunate people in mobs were so bloody stupid.

It made them so much easier to kill.



#### THE SKY WAS ON FIRE.

Every muscle in her body felt too weak to be her own. Her wrists were bound behind her back and she was propped against a wooden pole. Straw, planks of wood, and a gathering of sticks surrounded her feet. The air was thick with smoke. She ached. She hurt. She thirst.

She was going to die.

Elizabeth’s eyes fought open.

*Oh god.*

The sky was indeed on fire. The silhouette of night was nowhere to be found.

Her throat was a desert. Her eyes were dry. Her skin felt rubbed raw.

A memory, then. She recalled falling to the floor of the Travers cottage. She remembered seeing the broken shards of the poisoned goblet Kenneth had brewed for her. She'd gone to him—gone to Kenneth, but damn all if she remembered why. All she knew was it had seemed important at the time.

At the time, there had been nothing of greater importance.

*I am such a fool.*

Elizabeth closed her eyes again and stretched her arms against her bonds to little avail. Whatever Kenneth had put in her drink had rendered her with the strength of a kitten. Every pull against the ropes left her winded.

She'd never been weak. Never. Not as a child, not as a young woman, and definitely not as the Slayer.

Kenneth had made her weak.

And now he was going to kill her.

*William.*

Elizabeth's face crumpled and her heart collapsed. Oh god. William. William hadn't known where she'd gone. She'd left him without a word, without a note. She'd left the solace of his bedside and walked willingly into a death trap.

She'd left William without knowing it was goodbye

"I'm so sorry, Will," she whispered, tears prickling her eyes. "Forgive me."

"We'll talk about forgiveness later, pet," came a voice she was at once certain she'd dreamed up. "After I've tanned your pretty hide."

A gasp seized her throat and her eyes flew open just as she felt the gentle touch of her lover's hands at her sore wrists. In less than an instant she was free—free and falling until there was nothing but William's arms around her, the firmness of his shoulder against her cheek, his chest pressed hard against hers.

"I mean it," he continued before pressing a fierce kiss against her brow. "You're not gonna be able to sit on your glorious rear for weeks. And not for the fun reason."

"Will...how..."

"Later, darling. Just hold onto me."

Elizabeth immediately complied. She would never again hesitate to do whatever he asked. Never.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered again. “I didn’t mean—”

“Not the time for sorries. Save ‘em for when we’re in the clear.”

He lifted her into his arms the next second, and then they were moving. The flames of hell licked at her heels, but they were moving. They were moving fast through a thicket of trees. She heard screams in the distance but didn’t care.

William had come after her.

“Of course I came after you,” he said shortly, not breaking his furious stride. She supposed it was easy for him to run and admonish her simultaneously—he didn’t need oxygen to maintain speed, and her weight was of little consequence to him. “I love you, no matter how bloody stupid you get.”

“Will...”

“Don’t *ever* think I won’t come for you. Death couldn’t stop me.”

Her heart skipped. “How? How did you get them—”

“Let’s just say torch-wieldin’ villagers don’t seem to like fire so much when their houses are set with it.” William flashed her a grin. “Figured those bloody bastards deserved a—”

She didn’t feel it. That was the amazing thing—she didn’t feel it. She didn’t feel the crack in his pace or the rush of pain the claim should have sent her the second the arrow speared through his shoulder. All she knew was at once her lover was impaled with a thin, lethal bit of wood. It stood through layers of clothing, dampened with his blood and chunks of torn flesh. An arrow. Someone had launched an arrow at her William.

“Oh god!”

“It’s nothing,” William barked, not slowing down.

But it wasn’t nothing. It was Kenneth.

He was behind them. Chasing them. As he always would be. Always. There would never be a moment’s rest.

“Will—”

“It’s *nothing*.”

Tears whipped down her cheeks. Say what he might, she had made him bleed. This was all her fault. All of it. He would heal but there



would always be this. This knowledge that she had nearly cost them everything.

*Everything.*

And if she lived a thousand years, Elizabeth was certain she would never forgive herself.

SUNNYDALE , *California* , 1997

“He confirmed it, then.”

Buffy nodded as she stepped back, lowering her sword. “He even had a reason for everything. For making me forget. For making Will—Spike forget. For listing William as my killer,” she said bitterly, shaking the ache in her arm away. “You know that line in *The Exorcist*...he lies with the truth?”

Giles blinked, looking about three seconds away from falling over. There were times during their training sessions when she forgot to go slow so as to not give him a heart attack, but especially now that she had her memories from her first life back, it was doubly hard to keep her knowledge at bay. She just didn’t have the heart to tell him training was very much of the no-longer-necessary.

“I don’t...remember,” the watcher panted, digging the tip of the sword into the library floor to could lean on the hilt. “Was that...line in the movie?”

She made a face. “Maybe not. But it would’ve been a good line.”

“I’m sure.”

“Point being, Paimon didn’t lie to me. I just...” Buffy broke off

again and shook her head. “It took me all night to admit that, and it still sounds very wrong. He took everything... He did it...”

“For gain, I’d imagine,” Giles agreed, doing his best to look dignified even with sweat dripping down his wrinkled brow.

“Have I mentioned how much I really hate demons?”

A soft, poignant smile crossed his face. “It will therefore make you think twice, I’d imagine, before striking a bargain with one in the future,” he observed, dabbing his forehead with a handkerchief that seemingly materialized from nowhere. “I suspect it wasn’t a coincidence.”

“What?”

“Paimon seeking you out like this. After you’ve discovered the true nature of your history.”

Buffy looked down, a fresh rush of shame spilling through her veins. Giles was being very careful with her—very cautious. Very fatherly in trying to help her disclose as much information as she was comfortable giving. He hadn’t asked again what her debt to Paimon was—not since she’d first confessed the deal the night prior. And though she knew she was running out of time, the idea of admitting her sin made it more tangible. Made the price she had to pay something concrete rather than just an abstract idea.

Funny. It was something she never thought she would miss. Not during her first life—god, especially not during her first life. And not now. She’d bemoaned the duties of being of the Chosen for so long that it felt weird, dreading the loss of her power.

“You’re not wrong,” she confessed. “He...umm... It’s payment time. He says I have a week. Before...you know. Before I have to pay up.”

Giles nodded solemnly and though she could see the words pressing against his lips, he didn’t make a sound.

And that was it. Buffy couldn’t stand it anymore—couldn’t rely only on herself. Especially when he was so supportive. So kind and unwatchery. Not once had he admonished her for her decisions, past or present. Not once had he called her crazy or suggested she needed help of the mental sort. It wasn’t a startling revelation on Buffy’s part, but it was revelation enough. Giles had come through for her in a big way. He

was the anti-Kenneth, and if anything, he'd proven he wouldn't judge her.

No matter how stupid she could be.

"It's...it's the Slayer, Giles."

He blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"That's what I gave him. The Slayer. Me. I gave him my...my strength." Buffy tore her eyes away, her heart racketing hard. "I don't... It sounded harmless. Or maybe it didn't. Maybe it sounded just... He was right. I was prepared to do anything to get Will back. The price didn't matter to me. I would've given him my soul if he'd asked for it."

There was a long, hollow beat. "A-and he...he did not?"

Giles didn't sound like the Giles she knew. He sounded very much like just-saw-a-ghost-Giles. And she'd done that to him.

Buffy glanced up. The least she could do was own up to her *faux pas* and look him in the eye. Hiding wouldn't solve a damn thing. "No," she replied softly. "No...ummm...according to Paimon, slayer souls are no good. As the warriors of the peace, or whatever, we get this nifty little 'no touchy, no torture' pass from the good side of the PTB. Even if he had... You know, taken my soul, I would've been off-limits."

"So he asked for the Slayer instead. The thing guarding your soul... He asked for that, and you gave it to him."

The world froze around her, and Buffy's eyes went wide. Her heart stopped. There was a sudden ringing in her ears. Her fingers were numb and her skin was cold.

"Oh god."

"Buffy—"

"Oh my god."

Giles held up a hand. "I didn't mean to alarm you—"

"Well, you're a bit late for that."

"Demons are bound to their word. As long as you consented to give him only your..." He paused and cleared his throat. "Your strength... As long as the language... As long as you allowed no room for the removal of your soul as an additional or penalty clause—"

"I didn't. This predates fine print, Giles."

"Obviously not."

Buffy swallowed hard. “I meant the literal sort of fine print. The trade was pretty even. Me and Will for my strength.”

He nodded numbly. “And only your strength.”

“Yeah. And don’t get me wrong, because I’m kinda loving the lack of screaming at me, but...why aren’t you more wiggled than this?” Buffy worried a lip between her teeth and shuffled her weight from one leg to the other. “I kinda figured you’d pull a major spaz and go all... Rambo Giles on me.”

A ghost of what could have been a smile crossed his lips. He nodded and glanced down. “I suppose... I think I was prepared for the removal of your soul,” he replied. “Your strength... Don’t get me wrong, Buffy, this is very serious. Very, very serious. It’s unprecedented and it could throw the whole of the cosmos out of balance.”

This was more of what she’d expected. Buffy immediately fell silent.

“However,” Giles continued, clearing his throat. “I think I’m...relieved.”

“Relieved?”

“Torn between losing your strength and losing your soul... Well, yes would be the short answer.” There was a still, sober beat. “I must consult my books. While I’m most certain a demon of Paimon’s notoriety wouldn’t make a mistake, there is the question of the...the possibility of any such removal in the first place.”

Buffy frowned. “What do you mean?”

“The Powers have a Chosen warrior—they always have. It brings balance and order to the world. I’m not sure if there...” Giles trailed off, his brow furrowing. “I suppose the removal of your power would be seen, in essence, as your death. The Slayer line in *you* would be discontinued, and the next girl would be brought forward.”

She was quiet for a long minute. “It was because I was the Slayer that Will was killed, Giles,” she said, knowing explanations weren’t required but feeling she owed him one nonetheless. “If I hadn’t been the Slayer...”

“You and William would have never crossed paths,” the watcher supplied softly.

“No, we would have. It just would’ve been different.”

Of that she was certain. No matter what, Buffy was convinced she and William were meant to be a part of one another's lives in some significant fashion. It was why they were where they were—blood claim or no blood claim, William had found her again. William in the form of Spike. And even if they hadn't the history they did between them, there was no doubt in her mind they would have created new history together. There would have been fighting, laughing, blood, sex, tears, and everything in between. But they would have known each other.

They were meant to know each other.

"It's a romantic notion," Giles confessed.

"It's the truth."

"I know better than to argue with you." He heaved a long, burdened sigh and rested his weight against the check-out counter. "The debt you owe is to forsake your birthright. To no longer be...the Slayer."

"I didn't know you when I made this deal, Giles."

There was no condemnation in his eyes. "I am not accusing you of anything."

"I still feel like I should..." She sighed and looked down once more. "I know I haven't been... I've always talked about wanting a normal life. And how much easier it would be on me if...if I wasn't the Slayer. But I never wanted this. It was all talk, you know? Just talk. Just stupid things you say, like *I wish I'd never been born* or something like that."

Giles smiled faintly. "Believe it or not, Buffy, I know."

"I just wish I'd been better...for you."

"You keep talking as though the world is ending." He paused. "Though I suppose if it was, we'd know how to face it."

"I just never appreciated how good I have it. Compared to Kenneth..." She shuddered. "I haven't been grateful enough."

He held up a hand. "And as much as I would love listening to all the apologies I have coming for the countless times you've shaved years off my life, I don't want you to assume that this...bargain you made with Paimon is the final word in anything."

Buffy's eyes narrowed. "Do the words 'unbreakable stone tablet' mean anything to you?"

“Not really.”

“How about ‘signed in blood.’ Or hey. We can put them all together. I signed an *unbreakable stone tablet in my blood*. There’s no way—”

“There are always loopholes.”

“Giles—”

“I know. I know. Paimon is an exceptionally old, not to mention clever Hell King. He’s... Well, some of the stories I’ve read of his account attribute him with horrors beyond this world’s comprehension. He would have ensured the legitimacy of the deal. He would have made it foolproof.” Giles’s gentle smile grew wider—not with happiness, rather with hope. “But you and I, despite appearances, are not fools. There are always loopholes.”

“I don’t want you getting involved in this,” Buffy protested. “If something happened to you because of this mess I created, I don’t—”

“Don’t worry about me.”

Irritation nagged at her nerves. It was impossible to hear those words without recalling a certain vampire some three hundred years ago who had said the same thing. Only now the enemy wasn’t a human man with human faults—now the enemy was a creature of Hell itself.

Still, she couldn’t deny the warmth that cushioned the loom of the impending fall. There was nothing she could do or say to Giles to keep him from doing something stupid on her behalf, and this was because he loved her. He was her keeper, her father, and her mentor. He was everything she’d needed for three centuries. No matter what it cost him, no matter what was to come, he would not let her face the end alone.

He would be there until the curtain fell, because he loved her. And for some wonderful, unknown reason, he also understood.

“I don’t suppose,” Giles continued a few minutes later, forcing himself back to his feet and raising his sword in a silent indication that she should do the same, “that...Spike has attempted to contact you since Halloween?”

Heat kissed her cheeks and Buffy forced her eyes downward. “Ummm...I must’ve skipped that part.”

“He *has* attempted contact?”

“About three seconds after Paimon vanished, Spike was very much...with the there.” And he’d done things to her body that made her heart sing. For a man who didn’t remember her at all, he certainly knew how she liked to be touched. How she liked him to flick his tongue over her sensitive girly parts. How hard she wiggled when he caressed her clit. Granted, William was the only other man who had ever gotten so close—he had been the one who had introduced Buffy to what she liked. And since Spike was William sans the recollection, it made sense that he would do the exact same.

After all, she thought darkly, he’d had a buttload of time to practice on his skanky ho of a girlfriend.

“Since you neglected to mention this upon arriving, I suspect the visit was not altogether a good one.”

She hadn’t mentioned meeting Spike in the cemetery because she didn’t want to provide her surrogate father with X-Rated images starring herself. The thought alone was simply too wigsome.

“Well, he showed up all grumpy, if that’s what you mean,” Buffy said, still refusing to meet his eyes. “He was mad ’cause Dru had tossed him out. And he thought it was my fault. Or something. But...but...the fight didn’t last long.”

Giles was quiet.

“He doesn’t remember.”

“Right now?”

Buffy shook her head slowly. “I don’t think he will. Paimon mentioned the... He said the claim was what kept our memories guarded. For me, at least... It was what—”

“You were *claimed?*” Giles demanded, his normally quiet voice quite possibly rocking the Richter-Scale. “You and William were *mates?*”

The suddenness of the outburst had her jumping. “I...I didn’t tell you?”

“I think this is something I would’ve been inclined to remember.”

“We were mated, yeah. We did the...the claimy thing.” Buffy worried a lip between her teeth, her heart suddenly thundering. “He was all I had, Giles.”

It seemed a thousand years passed before her watcher relaxed. “I do not begrudge you—”



“Really? ‘Cause the yellage sounded like a helping of *grudge* with a side of *be*.”

“It’s just unprecedented, is all. Of course, it makes perfect sense, how your memories would become unlocked with...with a spell like that. But it’s never done, Buffy. Claiming, that is. It’s never done. Never.” He shook his head. “Not even then. The practice of claiming mates is almost as ancient as the old paradigm of caveman bashing his choice of mate with a club before tossing her over his shoulder. I don’t believe there are *any* modern examples of vampires who have been mated, or even gave the ritual any sort of thought. A vampiric claim is the oldest sort of blood-bond in known history. More powerful than the deepest magicks...more respected than... God, anything I can think of. And unbreakable. Blood is binding, eternal, everlasting. Blood links you. To assume the blood of another is to assert that life as being your own. It places so much power into the hands of another, and since vampires are duplicitous in nature, many would utilize that power to an ugly personal advantage. If William wanted to mate with you like that...”

“It wasn’t to use me, Giles,” Buffy snapped. “It *wasn’t*. And I don’t care how wonderful you’re being, if you even suggest—”

“I wasn’t suggesting anything of the sort,” he replied calmly. “Rather, I was merely going to point out how very much he must have loved you. To place the entirety of his being into your hands, regardless of the fact that he got yours in turn...”

The gate of emotions she’d opened on Halloween kept growing wider. Buffy found herself overwhelmed with another potent wave of tears, her body crippled with a thousand memories of tender, loving smiles. With the ghost of his hand framing her face as his lips explored hers. The way he held her when she wept. The way he caressed her when he thought she was asleep.

In essence, Giles wasn’t telling her anything she hadn’t already known. But to hear it from someone else—to hear it from someone who hadn’t even known them then but understood what they’d had meant the world.

Especially since, even with as magical as her night with Spike had been, it had brought with it ugly truth.

Spike was never going to remember. Never. He knew her well enough because of the claim, but there wasn't hope for them to pick up where they'd left off. His memories were going to remain buried, and she ached that he didn't remember her. He didn't remember loving her as he had. And though she knew it didn't mean he wouldn't love her in the future, the thought of times she knew to be precious carrying no value for him whatsoever couldn't help but hurt.

"A part of him will always remember, even if the rest of him does not," Giles told her, as if reading her thoughts. "The claim won't allow him to forget. Not everything. And it likely explains the reasoning for his... Off-again-on-again violent tendencies."

"Other than him being a vampire?" Buffy offered wryly.

"Well, of course. But I mean... He's at battle with himself and he doesn't know why. And chances are he has been for a long, long while. Perhaps since he was sired. Perhaps even before that." A heavy sigh rolled off Giles's lips. "Blood never changes, ergo claims cannot be eradicated. They are older than all magicks and engrained in nature as well as sorcery."

Buffy scowled. "It didn't stop him from getting all naked with another woman."

Giles flushed and cleared his throat. "Erm, well," he said, coughing into his hand. "It is possible with death, the claim went into remission, as it were. After all, you haven't been alive in this world but seventeen years. Your blood remains connected, of course, but..."

"In remission," she repeated. "Isn't that what we usually call cancer when it goes away?"

"Buffy, please. I'm not trying to downplay the significance—"

She held up a hand, nodding tiredly. "I know. I know. I'm sorry. It's just... imagine dying, selling yourself, getting reborn, and going through the emotional rollercoaster I've been on in the past few days for someone you loved more than anything in this or any other world and he already has a girlfriend."

Giles shrugged. "Chances are the demon was just waiting to be reunited with you and formed, in the meantime, a connection to the next strongest blood-link available."

"I don't want him forming blood-links with anyone but me."

“And since the demon obviously recognizes you as his mate, it’s likely causing a good bit of conflict within Spike. Thus explaining his tendency to react to you with violence before his mood becomes...” Her watcher turned pink again. “Well, amorous. I suspect he’s been waiting for you for a long, long time, Buffy. He just doesn’t know it.”

The thought ended with the clearing of a very familiar throat. Buffy about jumped out of her skin, whirling around. How she hadn’t heard his approach—how her tinglies had remained silent—she would never know. Only now he was there. He was very there.

And he was looking at her as though seeing her for the first time.

“You have no bloody idea,” Spike said, his voice reverent, familiar eyes bathing her in awe. “We...we were *mates*?”

The pink in Giles’s cheeks deepened into bright red. “I, ummm. Spike, I presume?”

The vampire nodded numbly, not moving his gaze from hers. “Buffy...”

Death could not stop the way he rolled her name off his lips.

It was an odd thought, but for the ringing in her ears, she could summon nothing more.

MATED TO A SLAYER. Life sure was funny sometimes.

Strangely enough, Spike wasn't laughing. At the moment, he was following Buffy Summers, the Slayer in question, down an otherwise empty hallway and across the threshold into an equally empty classroom. He didn't know where she was going, only that she couldn't hide from him. Not now—Christ, especially not now.

Mated to a slayer. Not just any slayer—*this* slayer.

This slayer who haunted his dreams.

His night angel.

Was that the reason? Was it truly possible he'd gone through his entire life with the memory of a woman he'd apparently loved so deeply, he'd united their lifelines for an eternity? Spike was no longer certain of the answer. Sometime in the night, after parting with Buffy and that delicious pussy of hers, he'd realized he was more open to the gamble that this *William* she'd dreamed up might not be a fantasy after all. Or rather, more specifically, his role as her *William* might be closer to the truth.

If it were true—if she was a slayer from the pages of history, mated to an incarnation of himself he didn't remember—then this girl belonged to him.

“We were mated?” he demanded hoarsely, staring at that luscious ass of hers. She stood facing the chalkboard of whatever classroom they’d entered, trembling hard and surrounded by the thick scent of tears. “Funny enough, you seemed to leave that part out.”

She was quiet for a long minute. “You didn’t believe any of the rest of it,” she said. “I don’t...I didn’t think it was...”

“You didn’t think it was important?”

“I didn’t think it changed anything.”

Spike stared at her incredulously. For a beautiful chit, she really was a bit thick. “How can you—”

“I’m sorry, okay?”

“Sorry doesn’t quite cover it, pet.” He took a step forward, breath ragged, his nerves dancing dangerously near the end of control. “Claims change everything.”

There was a pregnant pause, then, at last, she turned to face him. And Christ, did she move like poetry. Warm. Vibrant. *Alive*. He felt her pulsing with energy, burning him up even with meters of space between them. Tears glistened in the emerald of her eyes, sending a sharp pang to his heart and making his demon howl. She truly did look like a girl who had lost everything.

This girl loved him. She truly loved him.

He had never known love like this. For too long he’d felt isolated, imprisoned by his own emotions. For too long, he’d been completely alone even when in the company of others. For too long, he’d felt nothing of the love he tried to give.

And now he was practically swimming in it. Swimming in love beyond love.

Swimming in love that transcended time and reason.

*God.*

“I can’t take it back, *Spike*,” Buffy whispered. And for one blind, insane moment, he wished he hadn’t made such a bloody fuss about not calling him Will. While he knew the distinction was important, the lack of hope she had now was crippling.

She didn’t think he could love her if he didn’t remember.

“I can’t take it back,” she repeated, wiping at her eyes. “And even if

I could, I wouldn't. And you wouldn't want me to. Not... Well, if you remembered... God, if you knew..."

"I believe you."

Spike froze and Buffy froze with him. He hadn't realized it was the truth until the words breathed air. But it was, and he wouldn't take it back. There was no fighting the odds anymore. No more trying to decode his confused feelings.

If he'd loved her enough to claim her in some former life, he knew he'd love her again. And for the right reasons. His memories didn't matter. Not that he didn't fancy the idea of knowing how glorious they'd been together, or the wealth of living he'd done before running into her the first time. It gnawed at him, but he didn't mind the ache. Apparently the only thing he'd found worth living for was currently standing before him.

"You do?" she whispered. Then her eyes narrowed and she shook her head, stepping back. "No...no you don't."

"Buffy—"

"Last night—"

"Was a bloody revelation. Not so much as the one I'm havin' now, but high up there as far as revelations go."

"Spike, you don't have to—"

"I don't remember anythin', love. I'm sorry but I don't." He inhaled and braved another step forward. "I wish there was somethin' more tangible that I could give you. All I know is...my life is about as wonky as it's ever been, and that's sayin' something. I look at you and I see the answer. I see the answer for everything, and I don't even know the soddin' question." A pause. "You've been with me for so long..."

Buffy drew in a quick breath. "What?"

"Since I can remember, really. Always at night...little images fightin' to get to me. A woman... Well, she's you. I know that now. The images got stronger as I got older. Then Dru sired me and I thought she was it...but the dreams kept comin', and I knew Dru wasn't her." Spike smiled gently. "My night angel was too pure. Light where there's only darkness, y'know? Warmth where there was cold. Gentle when it was harsh. And love. I felt that, too. All from my night angel."

She swallowed. Hard. "N-night angel?"

Spike's lips drew upward in a tender smile. "It's what I called you. To myself, at least. My night angel."

A trembling breath rolled through her gorgeous mouth. She looked again as though tears might consume her. "Oh Will..."

She caught her mistake immediately and flashed him an apologetic look, but all he could do was smile. Strangely enough, it didn't bother him so much today.

"I don't remember rot."

"I don't think you ever will," she replied.

"Never say never, pet."

"It was a mistake, my remembering. The...the demon I bartered with admitted as much." She hesitated. "He said so."

Spike arched an eyebrow. "When?"

"Last night. He was there. Right before you showed up in the cemetery." Buffy released a trembling sigh, looking down. "He pretty much confirmed—"

"The wanker was *there*?" he demanded. "The demon you—"

"Yeah."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

She inhaled. "I didn't think you'd believe me. O-or you'd just think it was symptomatic of the 'Buffy's lost her mind' theory."

"I don't think you've lost—"

"Yeah, but you thought I'd fallen on something heavy," she interrupted.

Spike released a tempered breath and raised a hand. "Sweetheart, you know me...right?"

Buffy licked her lips and said nothing. The answer wasn't a stumper; she knew him. She could likely tell him painfully accurate truths he'd attempted to bury. Things no one else—not even Dru—would know about him.

"Yeah," he continued. "It's what I thought. So you know, then, if I'm runnin' hard in the other direction, it's usually—"

"To avoid something you know is true."

Even knowing she knew him, those words knocked him off his bloody feet.

She *did* understand him. Christ, she *did*.

“My god,” Spike murmured. “My...Buffy...”

She flushed prettily. He wanted to soak up her warmth; wanted to take her in his arms and hold her close enough so that their memories became one. In an instant, he was consumed with a crushing sense of loss. How had he not seen this before? How had he remained so bloody blind these past few days when the answer was plain as bloody day?

This woman was his. She had crossed time to find him. She had essentially breathed life into his scattered ashes. She'd defied time itself. Out of love.

How could the Powers keep him from such an essential part of himself? Something so monumental? So important? So unprecedented?

How could the Powers keep him from his mate?

How could the Powers keep him from *Buffy*?

“You run from whatever you don't want to face,” Buffy said again, a small smile tickling her mouth. “Or...no, that's not right. You don't run from it—you just have the opposite reaction. You always said you loved me, and that's why you tried to kill me. The night we first... You'd come to kill me.”

Spike nodded and took another step forward. “You told me last night, pet.”

“We ended up making love against a tree.”

He loved the way she phrased it. *Making love*. It was something he never heard. Something he rarely said, himself. It made her look even purer than she was. More innocent than she was. Her language was tame but there was no mistaking the passion in her voice. The passion inspired by a simple memory.

God, they must have set the world on fire.

“Wish I could remember it,” Spike murmured. “Can just imagine how amazin' you were.”

Buffy swallowed. “I wish you could remember, too,” she replied hoarsely. “But neither one of us was meant to remember, Spike.”

“You did.”

“It was a fluke.”

“There could be another fluke.” He was so close to her now. The hard pebbles of her nipples rubbed against his chest, even with



layers of clothing between them. “We can fluke it up real nice, kitten.”

“I don’t know how,” Buffy said, ignoring his innuendo.

“We’ll find out how.” Spike fluttered his eyes shut, brushing his lips against hers as he spoke. He wanted so badly to kiss her. Wanted to lose himself in her endless warmth—wanted to crush her against his chest and revel in the feel of her heart beating against his chest. He wanted to occupy the time between now and the return of his coveted memories by creating new ones.

She was his.

“Buffy...”

“I’m so sorry, Will...”

“Don’t apologize.”

He brushed his lips against hers again, this time with deliberate intent. And then he couldn’t help himself. He was lost and he didn’t give a lick if he was ever found again. With a long moan, he surrendered. And god help him, she was pure radiance—a ray of light spearing through the storm clouds of his existence.

The taste of her was electrifying. And *she* was the one whimpering against him.

“Mmmnahn,” Buffy gasped, cupping his cheeks and anchoring him into her kiss. “I’ve missed you.”

The starved desperation in her voice made him ache. “Buffy...”

“I know,” she replied between kisses, thrusting her hips against him. “I know. You don’t...but I do.”

Spike nipped at her lips, growling into her as his demon started to take over. He didn’t know why but he couldn’t stop it—didn’t care enough to try. “I want to remember, pet,” he murmured. “Those are my memories, too.”

A strangled half-sob, half-gasp tore through her lips. “Spike...”

He couldn’t help but grin. “I love that,” he murmured, nudging her brow with his. At some point, his fangs had descended. He didn’t know when. He hadn’t felt it occur—it just had. Perhaps this was nature’s way of directing his blood home. Buffy was his—his mate and his destiny. And while he wasn’t sure he loved her yet, there was no doubt that he eventually would.

If he'd loved her once, he would again.

"Love what?" she asked.

"You called me Spike."

"Oh." Her cheeks reddened even further, and his heart swelled. "I'll try to keep doing that."

Spike grinned and claimed her lips once more, eager to taste her again. He loved the way her tongue stroked his. The way she whimpered and moved her lips against his mouth—the way she attempted to both swallow and crawl up inside him.

It was the most potent aphrodisiac he'd ever known.

"Buffy..."

The tip of his fangs pricked her tongue by accident. What followed, however, was completely intentional. Spike growled and slammed her against the nearest wall, sucking her tongue desperately between lips and drawing her coppery essence into his mouth. Her legs wound around his waist, the hot center of her sweat pants rubbing against his hard cock in ways that would make the devil blush. She was so hot. God, so hot. So alive. So fucking vibrant.

And *his*. Buffy was his. He had her blood, now. There was no going back. Not after this. Tasting her blood had brought all of him home.

Somewhere in the recesses of his mind, a previously dead-bolted door crashed open.

And there it was. Figments, fragments, fractions—swirling and colliding with a history he already knew. Contradicting scenes with a parallel version of events he'd already lived. It happened in no particular order. The face of Drusilla was shoved aside, his sire replaced with the whiff of a woman's perfume and the painfully sweet sensation of death. He saw flames and heard screams of victims who had died well before this life had taken shape. He was at once sitting in an Elizabethan theatre, watching Hamlet slay Claudius as Fortinbras drew nearer to Denmark. He was in a pub, chatting with a toothy whore who would help him while away the hours between sleeps. He was on a ship bound for the Americas, entertaining himself by gambling with another migrating vamp over which crewman would next drop with smallpox.

He was on land, moving through trees. He saw her. She dusted

three vampires before his eyes and waved at him. Nothing open. Nothing confrontational. Just to let him know he wasn't as sneaky as he thought. That she had been performing for him.

She was shoved against a tree, her molten pussy clamped tight around his cock, her cries muffled in his shoulder as he explored the only paradise a creature such as himself would ever know. Her arms were around him. He fell back.

Fell back onto a bed. She was grinning, tickling his stomach, her infectious laughter coloring the air, her face brought to life in ways no poet could describe.

The underground. She was against him. Trembling and terrified, and he didn't know how to help her.

She was tied to a stake.

Then pain. He watched her sob. He wanted to tell her so badly not to cry—he regretted nothing. It was his fault, really. He had pushed her to an end she hadn't been ready to face. He'd pushed her. He shouldn't have pushed her.

Then blackness.

A gut-consuming cry tore at his throat. Spike seized her arms and shoved her back, crippled with the weight of realization. He hunched over and rested his palms against his knees, harsh, cruel gasps rolling in waves off his shoulders.

He felt her tremble but didn't look up. He couldn't.

The pain of knowledge was too great. He knew everything. He knew *everything*.

He knew everything, and he couldn't look up.

*NEW ENGLAND, 1701*

For the first time since they'd sealed their blood together, he was fighting himself to keep from sharing every wretched feeling tearing through his body with her. He didn't want her to feel this. What he experienced physically was inconsequential—if Elizabeth knew of it, she would spend the rest of her days haunted by his pain. He wouldn't allow that. He couldn't.

Just as he wouldn't allow many things.

The arrow had been tipped with that bloody poison, killer of the dead—there was no other explanation. Not for the slow way his insides melted away or the agony searing his veins. It was a technique popular among vampire hunters. A special blend of poison holding no cure...except one.

Blood. Blood of the Chosen.

He honestly didn't know where that rumor began. The cure to his current affliction was slayer blood. It was simply there—floating around among some of vampiric society's higher circles. Whether or not it had been proven was another matter. In any regard, he wasn't going to risk his girl's life. Not for anything.

His life was nothing. Hers was the only one that mattered.

William did his best to smile as Elizabeth knelt down beside him, pressing a damp cloth to his brow. He hated the look in her eyes. He hated the small breaths she took when he knew she was trying to keep herself composed. The way her hand trembled every time she touched him. The sobs that echoed from the other room where she let herself weep.

His beautiful girl. His slayer.

He hated seeing her cry.

He hated knowing he was the reason.

"Is this good?" she asked gently, her shaking hands pampering his brow. "Not too warm?"

"It's perfect, love."

"I'll get you some more blood."

William shook his head weakly and grasped her wrist. She'd been pouring blood down his throat ever since they'd stopped at the inn. Whatever blood she could get her hands on. Mainly animals', but there had been a few mouthfuls that had tasted suspiciously human. He was certain she hadn't harmed anyone; his girl didn't have it in her.

And he didn't have it in him to tell her that no amount of blood would help. He couldn't.

"Don't go," William murmured. "Stay with me."

Elizabeth's eyes glistened and he felt his heart rip again. "I was going to ask you the same thing," she whispered, pressing a tear-drenched kiss against his lips. "Oh Will..."

"I'm...not...going anywhere."

"I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry for everything." She shook her head hard, large liquid crystals sketching rivers down her cheeks. "I was such a fool. God, I was so blind."

"Hush, sweetheart."

"I thought... I don't even know what I thought." Elizabeth shuddered and kissed his mouth again. Even soaked in tears, she tasted wonderful. "I wanted to...I wanted to..."

William squeezed her hand. "You...you wanted...to cut...ties."

She nodded.

"It's...what I...I wanted, too."

“But I didn’t need to *go* there!” she protested. “God, why did I go there?”

His smile broadened. Perhaps he was a sentimental, lovesick fool. Perhaps he wasn’t thinking clearly. Perhaps a thousand and a half things. But even as he lay there dying, he knew there was nowhere else he’d rather be.

William had long heard that people who knew they were about to die grew peaceful in the last throes. It was something he hadn’t believed, and definitely something he’d never thought to experience. But resting under Elizabeth’s tear-filled eyes, her love for him brimming so brightly the stars would bow out in shame, not even death could make him regret a lick of what he’d experienced.

“You...went there,” he murmured, raising her hand to his mouth so he could feel her skin against his lips, “because you...have faith...”

“My faith got you killed.”

“The bloody arrow’s...what got me...killed, love,” William retorted. “You didn’t shoot me, did you?”

Elizabeth choked a sob, turning her eyes downward. “If I hadn’t gone there—”

“It would’ve happened...eventually. Your watcher...really wanted me dead.” The smile melted off his face. “You...you warned me, love. You...warned me every...bloody day...”

“I brought him to us!”

William shook his head—or rather tried. His body didn’t want to move; it was hard enough doing the little things. Like smile at her. Kiss her hand. Speak. All these things he was determined to do because they were the moments that would follow him into Hell. And if his eternal torment for being the thing he was waited at the end of the road, he wanted memories of soft, healing light to counteract the harshness of flames.

He wasn’t going to sit passively during his last minutes with the only woman he’d ever loved. He wasn’t going to let her watch him die without knowing how important she was to him. These last few months with her had been the only ones in which he’d actually lived. Everything else had been a stagnant walk through time. He’d *felt* so much. Felt a world beyond cold. He’d felt. He’d loved.

No, there was no regret here. Only the pain of what came next. The ache looming in his gut at the thought of her grief and what she would have to face when it was over.

Alone. No watcher. No father. No William.

He wanted to believe in the Christian tradition that some part of him would be able to remain with her—watch over her. Soothe her when she wept and hold her when she couldn't sleep. He wanted to believe demons had that luxury, but William could not fool himself.

And though there was nothing to regret in the choices he'd made for himself, there was a world of remorse for what he'd done to her. He'd been a cruel bastard, demanding so much of her. Demanding *her* at all. Taking her from the world she knew and introducing her to this. Not only that, their blood was forever linked. And she would feel the pain of his death every day. Every day she breathed, she would feel this.

William had done this to her. Selfishly and without hesitation, all because he'd wanted her forever.

He had forever now. This was his forever.

It was the unspoken reason mating never took place. Why claims were so bloody unheard of.

To lose one's mate was to lose oneself.

"Have I told...told you...I love you today?" he murmured before again brushing a soft kiss against her hand.

A sob tore from her lips. "Will..."

"I do, sweetheart. I...I love... love you so much."

"I love you, too," she whispered, her voice cracked with tears. "I love you, Will."

"That's...all I...all I need."

"Let me get you more blood," she said, moving to rise to her feet. "I can't do nothing. Please...aren't you—"

"Blood won't...help, darling. I just...need you." William forced his weakened grip to tighten around her hand. "Stay here. I...don't want to...to miss..."

"I can't do nothing," she repeated.

"You're here. All I... All I need."

Elizabeth inhaled but obeyed, settling on the ground beside him again. “There must be something. Would my blood—”

“No.”

She blinked. “Will...”

Were his heart in a position to beat, he was certain she would have been deafened with its thundering. She couldn’t get that thought in her head. She *couldn’t*. His life wasn’t worth hers. She was pure and innocent—he was a damned creature who had evaded death far too long, already. If she tried to give him her blood, he wouldn’t be able to resist. He wouldn’t have the strength.

“Blood doesn’t help.”

“Perhaps mine would,” she argued, her brow furrowing.

William rocked his head again. “No.”

It was good to see frustration splash across her pale, grief-stricken face. Good to see something other than tears. He wanted to remember her exactly as she was—a sizzling spitfire of a girl whose temper gave her strength.

“Dammit, Will! What do you want me to do?”

“Just...love me.”

“I *do*. I love you and you’re *asking me to let you die!*” She shook her head hard, her anger dissolving quickly into sobs. “You...you’re asking me...to do *nothing*. To just sit here.”

“There’s nothing...that...can be done,” he replied softly. “I just...need you with...me.”

Her free hand immediately took to caressing his hair, making his burning skin tingle. It had been so terribly long since any ill had afflicted him—the one fever he’d caught as a child had nearly scared his mother to death, she’d feared losing another one of her children to illness. He’d overcome it, though. He’d promised her he would.

What an odd thing to remember.

“I’m here. I’m here,” Elizabeth whispered, still brushing hair from his brow. “I’m right here, Will.”

He grinned again. He couldn’t help himself. The anger was gone from her voice, replaced instead with longing he knew well. God, if only he’d known their last time together was truly their last. He would have made it special. Made it as revolutionary as that first night had



been. If Fate was truly something that could not be altered and dying was simply the path he had to take, he would have taken advantage of every second they had.

He felt he'd taken her for granted. No matter how much he loved her, there was always something more he could've done. Something that went a little bit further. Something that explored the extra mile.

God, he hated watching her cry.

"Love...you," William whispered again. "So...much."

"I love you, too," she replied, her face a wet mess. She was silent for a long minute, but the quiet didn't last. "You can't do this. You can't leave me here. God Will, you *can't* leave me here."

The heartbreak in her voice tore him apart. "I'm so...sorry, love."

"You *can't*."

"I should've been...more careful." He slid his thumb across her hand. "Don't cry...sweet girl. Don't cry."

"You can't leave me. I can't do this alone." Elizabeth shook her head, squeezing his hand tight enough to will life into his body, should she possess the power. "I can't do this alone."

"You're not alone."

If he'd had the strength, he would have slapped himself for the empty promise. He wanted badly to tell her he wasn't going anywhere, that the death of his body couldn't keep him away. He wanted to tell her it would be better. He wanted to tell her a thousand things—things he knew he should tell her and things his mouth refused to speak. He was certain he was supposed to say she would love again, but even now he was too bloody selfish to give the thought merit.

It was a failing, but hardly his worst.

"Tell me," William implored, desperate to stray from these troublesome things, "tell me...you don't regret it."

Her reply was immediate. "I don't regret it."

"Me...either." He tried to raise her hand to his mouth again but lacked the strength. He settled for favoring her with another soft squeeze. "For my life...to come...I regret nothing."

Elizabeth's body wracked with a hard sob. "Will, please..."

"I love you."

The words were a mantra in his head. It was important she hear it

—over and over again if necessary. As many times as it took to get her to understand how much he meant it. He meant every word.

“Please, God,” Elizabeth whispered, not looking at him, trembling. “Do not take him...”

*God doesn't take mercy on creatures like me, love.*

He thought for a second the words had actually escaped his lips. The world around him was growing fuzzy. Shapes were blurring, colors blending, and sound began to drone in the long echoes of unintelligible melodies. He felt Elizabeth resting her head against his chest, rocking with sobs, holding onto his hand so tightly he wondered if she meant to keep the glove of Hell from grasping him, even if it meant she had to fight it herself.

“Please...do not leave me alone...”

William blinked, wetness stinging his eyes. He didn't know if they were her tears or his own.

It didn't matter, he supposed. Her tears *were* his, and his were hers.

There was nothing they kept from each other.

“Bu...”

Elizabeth jerked upward, her tear-stained lips finding his. “I love you, Will,” she whispered. “I love you.”

He hoped he could convey the words in a smile. He had not said them enough.

As it was, his voice had abandoned him.

Her eyes were the last thing he saw. He watched her, trying hard to convey everything that remained unsaid. He watched her as his feet dissolved, followed by his legs, his torso, and hands. As pieces of him were fragmented away into nothing but dust. But even as he crumbled, he couldn't look away.

He tried to speak before his mouth faded into dust, but his voice wouldn't come. And even as the world fell to shadows, he could still see emerald crystals. He supposed they would follow him forever.

Elizabeth lit his way through darkness even now.

She always had.

SUNNYDALE, *California*, 1997

Buffy was quite certain she would never forget the look on his face. How his eyes widened, the way his jaw had all but crashed to the floor and the gasp that had seized his throat before he'd ripped himself from her arms. She had no idea what had happened or why—one second she'd been enjoying his mouth and riding high on the knowledge that he believed her. She'd been fighting back another wave of untimely sobs when he'd torn away from her as though she were on fire. When he'd barreled over and anchored his hands against his knees, his dead chest clamoring for air he didn't need.

Then he'd bolted without so much as a word.

There had been a moment where she'd allowed herself to dream the past had been returned to him—that he remembered. That thought had vanished the second he'd run, because she knew William wouldn't have run from her.

And yet there was a ringing in her ears.

*He might hate you. He might hate what you've done. What you've made him relive. He might wish you dead.*

Buffy shivered hard and pushed the library doors open. She knew if

she dwelled upon these unhappy thoughts, she'd just fall into a mental trap.

"Buffy."

She glanced up and stopped. Apparently, while she and Spike had been making out, everyone she knew had shown up. Giles was standing behind the library checkout counter, looking apologetic and helpless. Willow and Xander were seated side-by-side, cross-legged, on one of the research tables. And Angel was, as expected, in the corner, his eyes dark and his expression worried.

"Wow," she said, rubbing her arms. "You're all...with the here."

Giles cleared his throat. "I...urr...is Spike still here?"

She licked her lips and shook her head. "Umm, no. He...umm... something happened."

"Something?" Willow repeated, sitting up. "Like a... 'he remembers everything' something?"

Buffy's eyes narrowed. "When did *this* happen?"

Her friend at least had the decency to look embarrassed. "Umm... Giles...he showed us the book. A-and said he believed you."

"The 'him believing you' thing went a long way," Xander agreed, nodding. "If Mr. Skepticism is on board, then sign us up. Plus the book thing was all with the wigsome. How much history do you think has been gambled away like that?"

Buffy clenched her jaw. "I didn't mean to gamble anything away."

Nothing except her strength, but she decided to omit that bit of information. It seemed Giles had done the same.

Xander's face went blank and his hands came up. "No, no. I'm *so* not with the judgment," he clarified. "Observe the non-judgment that is me."

"No one's judging here," Willow agreed. "We're just...feeling lousy for the...the part where we thought you were... You know, crazy?"

The remorse on her two closest friends' faces was so open and genuine she found it impossible to remain peeved. And Buffy tried—she really did. She'd spent the past couple of days all screaming about this and neither of her bestest buds had given her the benefit of the doubt.

Okay, so that was a little harsh. But there could have been a lot more benefit-doubting and she wouldn't have complained.

"Well," she said, a long sigh rolling off her shoulders, "better late than never, I suppose." She paused. "And for the record, it's not like I couldn't see how it was all with the crazy. It was kinda... ummm...out there."

"But not so out there for the center of all things Hellmouthy and demonic!" Willow argued. She was very obviously determined to compensate for the past few days of being a friend of the not-so-good sense. "I...we shouldn't have been so quick to jump on the wagon-o'-craze."

"So this demon..." Xander set up, a wicked gleam in his eyes. "A baddie of the Big Bad status?"

The simple thought of Paimon put a chill in Buffy's spine and she straightened with a nod. "Oh yeah. I'd say so."

"So what do we do? Gear up?"

She blinked and glanced at Giles, whose eyes were focused on her with an intensity that failed to surprise her. And without a word crossing between him, she knew exactly what he would say. What he was thinking. She knew because she was thinking the same thing. It had taken three hundred years and the selling of herself to get this far, but it seemed she had finally arrived.

She was at a place where she understood. All those little things Giles did to help her—to protect her. To get her to take her calling with the gravity it deserved. She understood now. She understood everything because she had lived it.

The battle they had to fight wasn't for Xander or Willow. It wasn't even for the ever-silent Angel, who was either waiting to say something thoroughly profound or had fallen asleep standing up.

She wouldn't let anyone else shoulder the burden she'd brought on herself. She wouldn't let anyone else die for her sins.

Nope. Been there. Done that. Got the T-shirt. It wasn't the sort of ride she was itching to go on twice.

Buffy shuffled. "The demon," she began slowly, all too aware of everyone's eyes on her. God, this had once been so easy. "The demon is

mine, okay? This is something... This is bigger than anything you're prepared to fight."

There was a long, quiet beat. Both Willow and Xander stood gobsmacked.

"What?" the latter demanded.

"B-but," Willow protested weakly, "we've...we've done this before, Buffy. The Master?"

"Of whose bones you crushed into mastery dust," Xander agreed, nodding. "And this wasn't your ordinary vampire. This was a big nasty of epic proportions."

"W-we fought back the Hellmouth and everything," the redhead added.

A thin smile tugged on Buffy's lips. "Yeah," she said. "You guys were great. But...look, this... This is bigger than the Master was. And way, *way* more powerful. The Master wouldn't have been a blip on this guy's radar."

"Are you sure that isn't something the demon wants you to believe?" Angel asked quietly. "It sounds like something one would say if they wanted to antagonize someone into believing—"

Buffy held up a hand. "No. No. This wasn't a 'my bumpies are bigger than your bumpies' kinda thing. Believe me, I've seen that before." She paused. "Guys...look. This demon is news of the massively bad sort. He has the power to erase history." She gestured to Angel. "As Marcus Aurelius over here has so brilliantly demonstrated. He's erased history.. He took Will's blood and dust and planted him in nineteenth-century England. He made sure *I* was reborn to my mother and father. He was able to rearrange the universe without throwing *anything* out of whack. He—"

"How do you know?" Angel asked.

"What?"

"How do you know the universe wasn't thrown out of whack? The sort of magic you're talking about doesn't come about without serious consequences."

The weight of her debt thickened on her shoulders. "There have been consequences," Buffy replied. "Massive."

"To you, yes...but the world?"

“We’re all still here, Angel, what do you want from me?”

He heaved a sigh. “I’m sorry, I’m still getting used to this,” he said, his tone not sounding very contrite. “For over a hundred years, I’ve known Spike as my idiotic grandson. Now—”

“Grandson?” Xander echoed.

“Whatever.”

Giles cleared his throat. “Vampires...erm...have a formal title for the one who makes them,” he said by way of explanation. “That being sire. And as Angel has told me, sometimes the word *sire* is instead applied to the vampire who, for lack of a better word, adopts a fledgling and teaches him or her the ways of the...of the demonic world, as it is.”

“I’m not seeing where the grandson thing comes in,” Xander said.

“Drusilla sired Spike,” Angel explained shortly. “I sired Drusilla. Spike is a fifth-generation Aurelian.” Everyone stared at him with equally blank expressions. He sighed and held up a hand, counting off fingers. “The Master, Darla, Me, Dru, Spike. That makes five. Fifth-generation.”

A thrill of pride ran down Buffy’s spine. “But Spike’s not yours,” she said. “I mean... I guess a part of him is, but Will was never Aurelian.”

Angel perked a brow. “You knew this much about him in the eighteenth century?”

“My watcher was a Nazi sans the whimsy. I knew a lot about a great many things.” She quirked a grin. There was something about being knowledge-girl which she could definitely get used to. “When Will came to town... When I found out who he was, I did all the research I could.”

Giles perked at that, looking both incredulous and proud. “What year was he born?”

“1502. Sired in 1527.”

Xander’s jaw hit the floor. Willow gaped. Angel just stood frozen.

Buffy frowned and shuffled. “What?”

Willow just shook her head. “Wow... And here I thought it was a little wigsome that you were crushing on a guy who was two-hundred and thirty years older than you.”

“Two-hundred and twenty-six,” Angel corrected, grumbling.

“Well, he wouldn’t have been five hundred years old when we were together,” Buffy retorted. “He would’ve been younger than Angel. And hey!” She turned to Willow, arching a brow. “Wigsome? Who was it that was demanding every little detail that involved smoochies?”

Her friend eeped but didn’t reply.

“I believe we’ve...erm...digressed,” Giles said quickly, already in heavy polish-mode. “As much as I’m going to have to pick your brain about Spike and his first life at a later date, I believe the point you were trying to make was—”

“The demon,” Buffy said with a nod. “Yeah. And how very much none of you are going to get involved.”

“We’re already involved!” Xander protested.

“I’m so involved I’ve made post-its,” Willow said, nodding.

“It’s not fair. You can’t just change the rules like that.”

“And yet, see just how I did.” Buffy offered a small smile. While her chest swelled with gratitude, their protests only furthered her conviction. These were her friends—her very best friends. People she refused to take for granted ever again. If they did something stupid and tried to help, chances were weighing heavily on the side of one or both of them getting killed. And that was something she simply couldn’t allow. “Look, guys, I appreciate it. I really do. But this guy... He’s my problem.”

“Giles gets to help!” Xander argued. “Why does Giles get to help?”

“He doesn’t.”

“Oh, he bloody well does,” the watcher argued, his tone astonished and his eyes almost hurt at her abrupt shut-out.

Buffy sighed, so not in the mood for this argument. “Giles...you know more than anyone what’s coming—”

“Yes, and unlike everyone else in this room, I have a duty to upkeep. You are under my watch, Buffy. Like it or not, I will be a part of this.”

It was the strangest sensation—knowing what she would have said a week ago in contrast to what she wanted to say now. This was the sort of thing that would have once earned a flippant remark. Perhaps she would have agreed to appease him before ignoring him altogether. And while a large part of her wanted to do just that—the part



screaming at her to keep Giles and the others safe—the larger part swam in gratitude.

God, how she'd taken him for granted.

Kenneth had killed her—if not in deed, then certainly in action. Kenneth had killed her, and Giles was willing to die in her place.

“Okay,” she said. “Okay.” She hesitated. “But I swear to god, Giles, I am so gonna kick your ass if you get yourself killed. You hear me?”

A faint smile played across his lips. “Loud and clear.”

Willow *abemed* before the silence could get awkward. For that, Buffy was more than glad. She didn't know how much more awkward silence she could take.

“What about Spike?” she asked softly. “Does he get to help?”

“Absolutely not,” Buffy replied.

“Well, at least we know she isn't playing favorites,” Xander muttered.

A frown marred Angel's brow. “Why not?” he asked, stepping forward. “I thought you'd—”

“You think I'd allow the man I faced Hell to save to step into the crossfire for *me*?” she replied. “I've had to watch him die once. I won't do it again.”

Willow's brow furrowed. “But if he doesn't remember—” But then her eyes caught something behind Buffy and grew unreasonably wide.

And before she could make a sound, Buffy knew.

“He does,” Spike said softly, his voice reaching her ears before she could turn to face him. Before her eyes saw his. “Remember.”

Everything fell still. Even the dust in the air froze. Buffy found herself in mid-turn, her gaze locked with his, her brain ready to collapse and her eyes threatening to drown her in the tears. At once her heart felt like singing, even as the rest of her grew cold with dread. Dread that didn't have a name, but existed nonetheless.

He knew. He *knew*. He remembered.

And yet he'd run from her.

“Will?” she asked softly, her voice cracking. God, she was going to dissolve right here and she didn't give a damn.

Spike didn't say anything. He seemed just as frozen as she. As though he didn't know if he was truly prepared to look at her.

The thought alone made her want to break.

“How do we know?” Angel asked suddenly. “How do we know he remembers?”

“What?” Willow demanded. “Look at him!”

“Giles said—”

“Angel, man,” Xander said. “Just...shut up.”

“I remember,” Spike repeated, and again the library fell utterly still. He hadn’t even blinked at the others; his eyes were focused entirely on her. “I remember everything.”

Tears broke through her barrier and began making silent rivers down her cheeks. “Oh god...”

“Your mates want proof?” he asked, taking a slow, methodical step forward. “Can’t offer much, I guess. There’s this—you painted the sunrise on our bedroom wall. You love dancing in the rain. Your left foot’s ticklish but your right one’s not. You were with me when...” A poignant smile split his face. “When it happened. Your eyes were the last thing I saw.”

“Will...”

Buffy heard a tearful gasp behind her—one she identified as Willow’s. Everyone else was stunned silent.

“I remember everything, sweetheart. Everything.”

“Will—”

Buffy didn’t realize she’d stepped forward until Spike stepped back, holding up a hand, his expression pained.

“I...” He was breathing hard. “I can’t do this right now.”

“Will—”

“Spike,” he corrected. “Still Spike.” He glanced up, and she saw part of him break. “I can’t do this now,” he said again. “I’m so sorry, love. I just can’t. I’ll...I just thought you oughta know...that I know.”

“I don’t—”

“Sorry for runnin’ out on you earlier. Didn’t mean to like that. I just...” He broke off, shaking his head. “I need to think. All right? I’ll... I need to think.”

He turned then and as silently as he’d come, he began to walk away, his stride lacking its usual confidence. He looked, for all the world, like a half-man.

She'd done that to him. Dear god.

And yet, unable to help herself, she knew she couldn't allow him to leave like this. She had to tell him again.

"I love you."

There was a pregnant silence. Spike paused just as he reached the library doors. "I love you, too."

How those words could sound so heartfelt but so distant at the same time she didn't know—only that they did.

Spike met her gaze over his shoulder. He meant it. He really did. He loved her.

But god help her, it wasn't enough.

"I'll find you when I'm ready," he promised.

Then he was gone.

NEW ENGLAND, 1701

*There are always ways.*

Pain gnawed at every corner of her body, dulling the senses so that she eventually felt nothing at all. And that was the worst—a feeling even more horrible than pain. For no matter how horrible her pain was, she knew she was human if she felt it.

She didn't ever want to grow so barren that she forgot love. Not just the memory of her love for William, but she knew well how grief could eat away at one's insides. She never wanted to lose herself like that. She refused to become a shadow of who she had been. She might not feel pain anymore, but Elizabeth hadn't stopped weeping. She cried until she forgot how it felt to not cry. She cried until she had no more tears. She cried so hard they came back.

And it never ended. Never. Sleep only worsened her pain with its barrage of dreams. Whenever she closed her eyes, she saw him dust. In the whispers between wakefulness and sleep, she would feel his lips caressing her brow, his calm, soothing voice promising that he was with her still. She would feel his hands, but when she rolled over and reached for him, her fingers would brush the linens of an empty mattress.

No matter how often she felt him, he wasn't there. He wasn't with her.

William was gone.

*There are always ways.*

Elizabeth remained enclosed with his ashes for two days straight. She couldn't bear the thought of leaving the room without him. The room where he'd last touched her hand. Last caressed her cheek. Last kissed her lips.

The room where he'd given her the last *I love you* she would ever hear.

She was locked within her sorrow, unable to move from the place where he'd last lain. She had his dust collected and placed in a vase stolen from the inn's front parlor if only to ensure no bit of him went lost.

The pain in her body might have numbed, but her heart was screaming. Her heart never stopped screaming, her blood rushing so hot she was sure she would eventually boil and melt.

*There are always ways.*

Intellectually, Elizabeth knew she had to snap out of it. She was strong. She wasn't a wilting flower; she wasn't one to give up just because the one she loved was dead. Even though she couldn't stop weeping, even though her soul would continue screaming, she knew she couldn't give in.

She knew this. Her heart did not.

Her heart was determined to know an end to pain. Her heart wanted rest.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered into her tear-stained pillow. "I'm so sorry. It should've been me, Will. You tried to get me out. You tried so hard to free me of it."

God, he had. Every night, he would lie beside her, running his hands down her arms and through her hair, stroking her cheek with curled fingers and begging her to let this be the night she didn't return to her prison. Begging her to let him hold her for a little while longer. To watch the sun hit the canvas she'd made out of their wall.

He'd asked her every night, and he'd never gotten impatient with her need for time. Her need to prepare herself to leave the only home

she'd ever known. In such a short while he had defied her conventional knowledge of vampires. She'd been raised by a man who thought vampires were nothing more than Satan's messengers, and while that sort of radicalism had never entirely spread to her, the backward mentality was there all the same.

Then William had come along and redefined her.

How was it that it had taken a vampire to show her how to live?

A vampire now gone. The man she loved, ripped away from her by the person supposed to be her father.

Kenneth had taught her to hate.

William had taught her to love.

And here she was. Alone.

*There are always ways.*

Elizabeth sucked in a deep breath, but no amount of wishing could keep away her tears. She couldn't will away the pain consuming her insides. She couldn't bring William back.

She hadn't listened. She hadn't left when she had the chance.

She'd gotten him killed.

He'd saved her life and she'd gotten him killed.

*There are always ways.*

Her voice cracked uselessly against the muted air. "Please," she begged, breaking into tremors. The walls around the numb collapsed and all at once, pain laced through every vein. The skies opened and rain came down upon her. She couldn't do this. God, she couldn't do this. Her body was ripping itself to shreds and nothing save William could ease the pain.

She'd condemned the man she loved.

There could be no living like this. No living. No dying. No in-between.

She'd cost them everything.

*There are always ways.*

The voice would not leave her alone. Elizabeth knew what it meant. What it was asking of her. What it wanted her to do.

She'd been raised by a man who knew dark magicks, even if he'd never shared their trade. She knew what the voice wanted her to do.

She knew because it was her own.

William had sacrificed everything to save her.

Perhaps, then, it was time to sacrifice everything to save him back.



THE TRAVERS' CABIN WAS EMPTY WHEN SHE ARRIVED. IF A PART OF her was surprised, she didn't feel it. She didn't feel *anything* upon moving through the halls that had seen her upbringing. She walked past the room that had housed her through her earliest years, embraced by more of that numb. She didn't shiver. Not even when her eyes fell upon the porcelain doll that sat in a small wooden rocker Kenneth had carved for her fourth birthday. It was the last genuine thing she remembered him doing.

She wasn't here to reminisce. She was here for one reason.

Kenneth's room had always been off-limits to her. Not once had she walked across the threshold; even as a child she'd known enough of her surrogate father's wrath not to test him. She'd been obedient and studious. She'd done everything she was told from *wash the dishes* to *take out the nest by the Black Lake*. She'd done everything. *Everything*.

And here she was, moving through her once-home. Doing her best to ignore the shrill ringing in her ears and the wild palpitations of her heart. Doing her best not to break down at what the cottage's inhabitant had taken from her.

Elizabeth swallowed hard and pushed into Kenneth's room without hesitation. She didn't know what she'd expected, but strangely she wasn't surprised to feel nothing. It wasn't as though she was raiding the Quirinal Palace. It was just a room. A room like any other. A room that was home to a loathsome creature.

She hoped he did not return while she was here. If she saw him, she didn't know what she would do. She didn't know if she could trust herself not to do something horrible.

"Keep a straight mind," she whispered, her eyes immediately landing on the training crossbow Kenneth kept mounted on the wall.

It seemed years had passed since she'd last seen it. And before she could stop herself, she had it in her arms, its pack of arrows slung over her shoulder. Better, she supposed, to be armed in enemy territory.

Elizabeth was rather surprised to find his belongings visible to the naked eye rather than under lock and key. He had a large, hand-carved display-shelf dedicated to his assorted weapons aligning one wall, and a perfect duplicate along the parallel wall.

This one was filled with books.

Books that would potentially unlock the gates of Hell and return William to her side.

The idea of her love being trapped in a world of eternal torment had her dried-eyes dampening all over again. Demon or not, he was not made for Hell.

Elizabeth sucked in a deep breath and paced forward, her eager eyes falling over the dusty covers of Kenneth's collection. There were many titles—many volumes she'd seen before. Books he'd brought into the open for the purpose of study or preparation. Books she knew to overlook because they contained nothing of the dark arts. Books with histories, methodologies, and editorializing from authors who knew no better.

She had to fall her to her knees to inspect the books along the bottom row. Those with the ominous black bindings. And upon feeling the spine of one, she knew she'd found for what she searched.

Of course, the dark chill could have been a delayed warning on part of her singed slayer-senses, for she felt *him* the next second.

And everything in her turned black.

"Ah, sweet Lizzie," Kenneth clucked. "Thou hast thy father much offended."

A cold shudder claimed her shoulders. She did not reply.

"I didn't know which one of you to expect, but I confess myself unsurprised. After your lover's rather inventive diversion, it became most evident he would rather himself end up dust." He sighed. "A truly romantic notion, I suppose, for a creature so foul."

Elizabeth's eyes fell shut. She couldn't allow this. She couldn't be prompted. She couldn't be provoked. She couldn't give in.



“He didn’t tell you then?”

She didn’t answer.

“No,” Kenneth concluded, a satisfied note in his voice. “Of course he didn’t. If he had, he would be here, searching for a way to bring *you* back...rather than this. Granted, he wouldn’t be allowed entrance to my home, but I suspect he would find a way. Not that I knew the fellow personally, but given his creativity—”

“What do you mean, he didn’t tell me?”

“You really don’t know? My dear...if you’d wanted, you could have cured him whenever you wished. Your blood works as a powerful antidote to any potent vampiric poison. Something I’m sure dear William knew and, for the tragic love of you, didn’t disclose.”

For a blind second, she feared losing whatever of herself there was left to lose. The tears she’d kept at bay came surging forward with a vengeance, and for a long minute, she thought she might be sick.

Though on what she didn’t know. It had been days since she’d last eaten.

“How long did the poison take?” Kenneth continued. “I’ve never seen it in action, myself, and I admit I am quite curious.”

It was an instinctive thing, really. She didn’t remember any blank spaces between hearing his voice and leaping to her feet, the crossbow in her arms coming up and firing as if controlled by a will of its own. It was either some moral strain or a last second firing of consciousness that kept her aim from his heart and rather directed at his arm.

The arrow pierced his skin and embedded itself in the wall behind him. It was over before she could blink. Before she even knew what had happened. Thus when her mind returned to her, she found herself holding a crossbow and her so-called surrogate father nailed to the wall, moans ripping through his lips and murder lighting his eyes.

“You little harlot!” he hissed, pulling hard against the affliction to little avail.

Elizabeth swallowed hard. “Words, words, words,” she retorted, reloading an arrow into the crossbow’s cavity and raising it again. The move effectively ceased Kenneth’s struggles and had his eyes widening. And if anything, witnessing his fear only strengthened her hatred. “Give me a reason not to do it, father *dear*. I beg of you.”

“Lizzie—”

She fired another arrow, this one spearing through the wooden frame above his head, showering him in splinters and dust. “Do not speak to me,” she growled. “Do not even look at me, you befouled—”

“I? I am the befouled?”

“You killed him.”

“No, my dear. It is you who did that.” Kenneth’s expression contorted in pain as he twisted under the force of the arrow, resuming his struggles. “I raised you—”

“I do not want to *hear* of how you raised me!” Elizabeth barked, her eyes welling again as her eager hands loaded another arrow. “I don’t want to hear of how I’ve failed your many expectations or how I’ve tainted the damned slayer line by...how did you put it? Rolling in filth every night. I will not—”

“Lizzie—”

“I am *not yours!*”

“You are...the Council’s.”

“The Council ordered this, then?” Elizabeth demanded, the space between them closing rapidly. “The Council contacted you? Demanded you to kill my—”

“Lizzie—”

“Do *not* lie to me!” The crossbow lowered so she could enjoy the feel of her flesh smacking his. She watched gleefully as his head rocked with impact. As his gaze widened in surprise and fear returned with a vengeance. “The Council couldn’t give a damn, could it?”

A few seconds passed. “You know well they care a great deal.”

“Enough to kill him?”

“A villain might speak pretty words to you, my dear, but it doesn’t make him any less a villain.”

“A lesson you have personified, thank you.” Elizabeth drew an arrow out of her pack and shoved its point against the fleshy part below his jaw. “Answer me truthfully,” she all but snarled. “Your actions were your own.”

“The Council trusts nature will take its course. If not him killed by you, then you killed by him. I didn’t have the same faith.”

The screaming in her head threatened to drown out all sound. Her

arm pushed forward without permission and she felt the tip of the arrow tear through his skin. And god, it felt so good she wanted to do it again. Deeper and deeper until the old man's tongue was forked.

"Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord!" Kenneth gasped. Gone was the contemptuous gleam of before; there was only fear now. Fear for something he'd seen in her eyes, perhaps, or fear for something else entirely. She didn't know. She didn't care. "You cannot kill me, Lizzie. Your soul—"

"Is not yours to lose, so I wouldn't worry over it."

"Do you really wish to kill me?"

And that was the question. The ultimate question. The warring of her conscience against the demands of something she couldn't name. Her claim with William, perhaps, drawing primal urges forward. Did she want to kill Kenneth? Yes. By god, she did. She wanted to claim back what was taken, and while the books she'd discovered would lead her wherever she wanted to go, the darkest part of her wouldn't be satisfied until this man was gone.

After all, he was the one who had taught her to hate, how it felt to hate...and what to do to those one hated.

Yes, she wanted to kill Kenneth. She wanted to give him back the pain he'd caused. She wanted to adhere to Old Testament law. She wanted blood for blood.

*An eye for an eye.*

And yet, her human conscience wouldn't allow her. Not in cold blood. Not even out of revenge.

"There are more things," she replied steadily, drawing the arrow out between the flaps of torn flesh, ignoring the pool of blood that ran down the narrow cylinder and spilled onto her fingers, "in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

The relief on his face made her stomach turn.

"Good girl," he said.

Then his free arm was moving, and the next thing she saw was the silver of a blade lunging toward her face. And there was no time to think. Elizabeth stumbled back in shock, the crossbow coming up again. Her finger caressed the trigger before she could help herself, and with a crushing gasp, she felt the arrow discharge.

It seemed the world was born and divided in that instant. Elizabeth's wide eyes took in his. The arrow protruding from his chest, his free-arm outstretched, hands clamped around the handle of the blade he'd produced. The one he always kept on him. The one she'd forgotten.

"You..." Kenneth glanced down in wide-eyed horror at the arrow. "You...you killed...me."

Elizabeth couldn't breathe. Couldn't move. Couldn't look away. The walls of her mind were realigning. Truths were defined and banished. What was canon suddenly became heretical. What she knew was overwhelmed by what she didn't.

"The Lord hath accomplished his wrath," she murmured. "He hath poured out his fierce anger: and he hath kindled a fire in Sion, and it hath devoured the foundations thereof."

"You...quote...scripture...to *me*?" Kenneth's eyes blazed as he swiped at her with the blade with a wide arc. He hit nothing but air. "You...damned little..."

"I am not damned," Elizabeth replied, her voice shaking but certain.

"You..."

"I am not damned for loving." She looked to the blade in his hand, which fell noisily to the floor without further overture. "Nor am I damned for saving myself."

His next words were gurgled rather than spoken. And she was changed at that moment.

Changed, but never more determined.

The books were waiting for her. As was William. Somewhere, he was waiting for her.

She was changed, but not damned.

Rather, she felt she had the strength to save him.

Even if it meant bargaining herself.

SUNNYDALE, *California*, 1997

It was a strange sensation...remembering death.

The act of being dead was something Spike had never thought about. The gap that fell between death and clawing his way out of his coffin was filled with blackness. No telling glance of the afterlife. No puffy white clouds or hellish screams. Nothing but the awareness of falling and rising again.

His mind was all a-tangle. Colors, visions, images. Things he knew. Things he'd always known. Things he couldn't believe his mind had kept from him. He saw her, of course...but then, he'd always seen her. Ever since he was a kid, it seemed his mind was a shrine for Elizabeth. For his Buffy. He'd wanted her before he'd known what wanting meant. He'd spent a century unknowingly turning over every rock in his path in search of her. Every time he caught a whiff of something that smelled like her, he'd whip up his head and look for her, though not knowing it. His breath would always catch when he saw girls of her height and stature; girls with her hair or eyes. He would blink in wonder, then dismiss them just as quickly. He hadn't known what he was looking for, and he hadn't found it.

Not until coming to Sunnydale. Not until he'd seen her. In the Bronze. Dancing.

He hadn't recognized her. Not the way he should have.

She was blonde now, but so was he. And before Halloween, her eyes had been kissed with sunlight, her lips turned upward in a smile he now found so familiar it nearly brought him to his knees.

She was here because *he* was here. And he was here because of a deal she'd made.

It was bloody overwhelming. The past century and a half of his life had only been so because she'd wished it. The lot of it—getting the stuffing kicked out of him at school, watching his mum fall into poor health, crumbling under Cecily's rejection. Then the rest—Angelus shagging Dru sideways, Dru shagging everything else that moved, the splitting panic of losing his sire to an angry mob...

*God. Oh god.*

And slayers. Christ, slayers. His never-ending obsession with slayers. Every time he heard the word, his unbeating heart would skip. And all he'd known was how important it was that he get to the Slayer. That he see her. Touch her. Take in her face. See if she was *something*—if she was the one he wanted.

Even if he'd had bugger-all idea for what he was looking.

He felt stuck in a TS Eliot poem, grasping a peach in one hand and demanding if he dared...if he dared disturb the universe.

Only he hadn't. Buffy had. Buffy had disturbed the universe to rescue him from Hell. From the place he hadn't remembered until his fang sliced her tongue.

Buffy had sacrificed herself to save him. She'd made a trade.

And he hadn't remembered her.

Spike sucked off the last of his cigarette before tossing it to the grassy earth and stamping it out. He'd been in the cemetery for God-knows-how-long now, just waiting. Waiting for her, because he knew she'd be here. After what had happened in the library, she'd need to pour her confusion and her fears into the art she called patrolling.

And he needed her to be here.

He needed her to know he wasn't turning away from her. He might

still need time—he might still need to reconcile the mindfuck that had happened today, but he needed *her* above all else.

Christ knows he always had. For two hundred years until he'd stumbled across her in that shithole of a village, and almost another two hundred before finding her again.

He'd spent nearly half a millennia completely lost for a girl he hadn't known until the end.

Only this time it *wouldn't* be the end. He wasn't going to let history repeat itself. Not now. Not ever.



*HOW ALL OCCASIONS DO INFORM AGAINST ME.*

Buffy laughed—an empty sound.

Son of a bitch, Paimon had been right. She should have been careful in what she'd asked for. He'd warned her, after all, that William could know life again only to hate her, but the idea of William hating her had been laughable. She'd been so cocksure and stupid, both then and now.

And now...

Well, she didn't know. He'd said he loved her, but he couldn't be around her. That he'd needed time.

Time to reflect on all the bad she was responsible for? On the woman he'd spent a century with and might well love more than he'd ever loved her? On the fact that if she'd just done what he asked when he'd asked, they wouldn't be here in the first place?

Or all of it.

"All right," she murmured, kicking at a stone and watching as it bounced across the ground. "Well...let's list the good things. Giles is still totally on your side, not looking to be setting you up to get burned at the stake. Bonus. Ummm, friends no longer think you're crazy. Angel's stopped with the Trivial Pursuit: Buffy Edition. And he remembers." She paused, her feet having carried her to the stone she'd kicked. "Spike remembers."

"He remembers."

For the umpteenth time tonight, Buffy froze, and her mind immediately went into recovery mode. She breathed out slowly, then turned to look at him. “Spike.”

He nodded, his dark eyes a storm. “Lo, Buffy.”

“I thought you needed time.”

“How long’s it been?”

“About ninety minutes.”

“It’s about all I needed, I’d wager.” Spike drew in a deep breath and took a step forward. And another. And another. “You all right, sweetness?”

The question sounded so bizarre against the night air she almost laughed again. “All right?” she repeated. “Oh yeah. I’m fine. Real swell. Peachy with a side of keen is Buffy.”

A pained look flashed across his face. “Buffy—”

“I mean...I’ve just gone and made a royal mess of everything, haven’t I? Can’t save *you* for anything. Can’t make foolproof deals with demons. Can’t please my friends. Can’t get Angel off my case. Can’t tell my mom how glad I am she’s here and not dead without her pulling a massive wig on me. Can’t tell you how sorry I am for making you... come back, ’cause honestly? Not so much with the sorry as I am with the *Buffy’s a moron* thing.” She shrugged and released another high-pitched, slightly maniacal laugh. “I can’t even pass Trig. So yes. The world is one big lemon ready to be made into lemonade. That’s pretty much how I am.”

“I’m sorry, love.”

His word lent her pause, and her heart skipped. “You...*you’re* sorry?” she repeated. “I made you relive—”

“Yeah? My life’s right entertainin’. It was a laugh. Really.”

If the strain in his voice wasn’t enough, the tell in his eyes betrayed him completely. It always had.

“I don’t blame you if you hate me, Spike.”

Thick silence spread between them, his eyes widening. “Hate you?” he repeated hoarsely. “You think I’m... You think I even have the wirin’ for that?”

Buffy blinked. “I...he...he told me...a-and with earlier—”

A growl rumbled through his throat and he tore forward, clamping



his hands around her forearms and walking her backward until her back collided with a tree. Always against trees, they were.

“You daft little twig,” he snarled. “You—”

“Spike—”

“Doubt that the stars are fire, doubt that the sun doth move, doubt truth to be a liar, but never doubt I love.” He shook her hard. “How thick do I have to paint it for you?”

Buffy shook her head. It was all she could do.

“You really think I wouldn’t’ve done the same thing?” he went on. “If I’d known there was a way? *Any* way? You think I’d’ve let that stupid arse *take* you from me? Do you have any idea what I would give up for you?”

“I—I thought...I thought you—”

“I told you I love you, you silly chit,” Spike barked, shaking her again. “I always have. Even when I didn’t know you...” His face fell at that, and he released a hollow, broken sound. “I didn’t know you... God, Buffy, how could I not know you?”

The pain in his voice broke her heart. “The demon—”

“The demon made me forget you?” he demanded. “It shouldn’t’ve been possible. Makin’ me forget anything about you should’ve been *impossible* with one touch of your skin. One kiss...” His gaze dropped to her mouth. “A thousand sodding demons shouldn’t have had the power to make me forget. Not *you*, Buffy, not *you*. Anything else—*everything* else...but not you. God, kill me over and over again, just don’t take the memory of you away.”

She didn’t realize she was crying until he reached up to brush away her tears. “I...I didn’t think...”

“You didn’t think what?”

“That you would ever remember.”

Spike’s eyes flashed and his grip on her arms tightened, his hips moving against hers in a manner she thought to be subconscious. It took all of her not to simply gasp and thrust herself against his denim-clad erection. Hormones battled intellect—she needed to hear this. She needed to hear everything.

“And if I didn’t, what then?” he demanded. “Are you really so dippy that you don’t know I’m gonna be hopeless for you no matter *what* I

do or don't remember? Y'know what I was thinkin' right before we snogged and I got myself a taste of your blood? Before I sodding *remembered?*"

Buffy shook her head, choking back a sob.

"That you're mine. You always have been."

Then his mouth was on her, and there was nothing to do but collapse against him, relief beyond recognition blistering through her worn body. He slipped his hands up her arms, brushing the sides of her neck and finally resting when he had her cheeks cupped in each palm. He moaned when she moaned into him, her lips parting to welcome his tongue. He tasted just as she remembered—like William, but now flavored with something else. Something different but no less delicious. Something uniquely *Spike*. His flavor was mixed with a dangerous rush of nicotine and alcohol. The scent of leather filled her nostrils, combined with the thrilling air that was wholly and distinctively male. That was William—Spike. William as he would have been in this century had they lived.

She wove her fingers through his hair, consuming everything he had to give. Every stroke of his lips sent fiery sparks down her middle. Her panties were drenched. Her heart thundered. Her pulse raced. She was in such need—so terrified the world would blink itself away. "Spike..." she gasped.

He grinned against her mouth, thrusting against her sex. "God, I love that."

Buffy sucked hard on his bottom lip, eliciting a long groan. "Spike," she said, cheekily this time. "You don't mind if I...slip every now and then? I'm gonna try to remember—"

"Sweetness, you knew me as Will for a long time. I'd hope you wouldn't be able to forget that in a sodding blink. Not after what we had."

"Have," she corrected. "What we *have*."

"Yes. God yes," Spike agreed and kissed her again. "What we have."

"But I'll try to remember. I'll try." Buffy grinned, a thrill racing up her spine—a thrill she hadn't felt in a long, long time. "I like Spike, though."

“Yeah?” he murmured, nudging his lips with hers. “Spike likes you, too.”

“It fits you. The hair. The leather.” She narrowed her eyes. “The smoking.”

Spike offered an unrepentant shrug. “It’s not like I’m in danger of coughin’ up a lung, love.”

“There are some of us who are oxygen-dependent.” Buffy found his mouth again, rubbing herself against him. It had been so long since she’d been touched—even with what he’d done to her the previous night, her heart hadn’t quite sung like it was singing now.

“Spike...”

He pulled back only slightly, his eyes burning with need she knew well. “I know,” he agreed, cupping her backside, anchoring her forward into the eager thrusts of his hips. “It’s been forever.”

“Literally.”

A grin tugged at his mouth. “You brought me home, love. I’ll never thank you enough for that.” He stole another kiss. “I’m at your mercy. Do what you will with me.” He paused and pressed himself forward, capturing her well and truly between the hard planes of his body and the tree at her back. “Just do it before I bust a nut.”

Buffy’s nose wrinkled. “You were almost poetic there.”

He chuckled and nipped at her lips. “Story of my life. *Almost* poetic.”

“Not out here.”

“No?”

“We’re in the cemetery.”

“Yeah? And we were last night, too.” The hand at her ass slipped over her hip, traveling upward until his fingers were barely grazing the fabric protecting her center. “Let me have you?”

Buffy gasped and arched. “You have me. I just...” She forced her eyes open—forced herself to focus so that her surroundings solidified again. So she could survey their options.

There was a mausoleum over his shoulder.

“There—”

Spike didn’t even turn around. The next instant he had his arms linked around her waist and was pulling her forward until the ground

beneath her feet vanished and her weight became entirely dependent on his own. "Wrap your legs around me," he murmured. "And hold on."

Were her need not as great as his, she might have laughed at how quickly he carted her through the ornate doors. As it was, she couldn't praise his speed enough. The wind whipped against her face and her stomach fell out at some point, but before she could blink, she found herself seated upon a large stone sarcophagus with Spike between her thighs.

"Need you," he gasped, shedding his duster so fast it might as well have been a mirage. "So much."

Buffy nodded, gulping down air. She lifted her arms shot when he fisted the cotton of her tank-top and dragged the material over her head. She hadn't had the chance to change from her standard training-attire between the impromptu meeting at the library and the night's patrol. Not that Spike seemed to mind, but she took a second to identify the irony.

It would be twice, now, that he'd taken her virginity after cornering her on patrol.

How many girls could say that?

"You're wearin' a bra," Spike said, his wide, taking in the gray fabric concealing her small breasts. "You never wore bras."

Buffy rolled her eyes. "They didn't have sports-bras in the eighteenth century. It's not exactly easy to fight baddies while wearing a corset."

"Yeah, but those buggers were sexy as hell."

"Not to mention guaranteed anti-breathing or your money back."

Spike smirked, skimming his hands up her belly to cup her breasts. "Well, I like it," he purred, his thumbs caressing her hardened nipples. "It's so...soft."

"Helps with the...fighting." Buffy drew her arms up again as he dragged the sports-bra over her head. "Keeps me from...bouncing." She paused and glanced down sheepishly. "What little I have to bounce, anyway."

"Bite your tongue. These here are perfect."

"You have to think so or I'll kick your ass."

Spike glanced up, an impish gleam in his eyes. "Kinky," he purred,

taking her bare breasts in his hands, the mischief fading. “God... Buffy...” He came forward as though magnetized, sucking a nipple between his teeth. He released her just as quickly and licked his lips. “Your taste...”

Buffy whimpered and arched her hips. “Will...”

He glanced up, a soft smile tugging at his mouth. “I do like that,” he murmured. “Can’t really explain it, love. It’s like I knew...all along. Just a part of me was fightin’ to get out so the rest of me would stop bein’ such a dolt.” He flicked her nipples with his thumbs and stole another kiss. Then he was dragging a hand down her bare abdomen, his touch feather-light but unmistakable in intent. “Gotta get you outta these.”

Buffy snapped upward at the same time, seizing fistfuls of his tee. “No fair,” she whined, lifting her hips to help him drag her sweats down her legs. “You got a...head start.”

“You’re just outta practice.”

Spike froze the second the words escaped his lips, his eyes immediately going wide, searching her face for forgiveness. And while his reaction aided in calming the hysterical screaming that seemed determined to turn her deaf, Buffy couldn’t help the cold shudder. Now that he remembered—god, now more than ever—the thought of him with anyone else made her want to do very violent things. Things that would give Quentin Tarantino nightmares.

A long sigh rolled through his lips as he dropped to his knees. He’d managed to rid her of her sweats and her sneakers—though the latter, she didn’t know when—leaving her clad only in her thoroughly unremarkable white cotton panties—a twin to the pair he’d seen the night before. She was slick with desire but suddenly cold with jealousy. And while she knew Spike now would never look at anyone else, the idea that he *had* made her violently ill.

She wasn’t angry; she was hurt. And she was irritated with herself for feeling something she shouldn’t over something neither of them could have known to control.

“She wasn’t you,” Spike murmured, hooking his thumbs under the elastic of her panties and slowly slipping them down her legs. “Not one piece of her was you.”

“I don’t want to hear this.”

“You need to. I don’t want you thinkin’...” He sighed again, tenderly running his fingers over her shaven mound. “Christ, you’re so pretty.”

There was a pregnant pause. Spike glanced up again.

“I won’t pretend she didn’t mean anythin’ to me,” he said finally. “But bugger if I know how I was able to touch anyone after you. Even if I didn’t remember. You were always with me, love. I told you that. My night angel.”

“It’s okay—”

“No, it’s not. I don’t want you developing some silly complex or some other rot.” He slipped his index finger between her pussy lips, rubbing a lap up and down, the pad of his finger striking her clit with every stroke. It was subtle but the slightest touch had her melting. “I told you a long time ago...I didn’t know love until I knew you.”

Buffy’s vision fogged and she nodded. “I remember,” she gasped, thrusting herself against his touch. “Will, please.”

“This first.”

“I believe you.”

“I haven’t said anythin’ yet.”

“Really, I—”

“It’s true. All of it. I’ve *never* known love until I knew you. Not the first time. Not this time.” Spike broke off and shook his head hard, slipping his fingers inside her wet channel and wringing a gasp from her throat. “I’ll always be grateful to her...for findin’ me. For knowin’ me well enough to understand I wasn’t hers and never would be, though blast it all if I know why she sired me in the first bloody place if she knew that much. But Buffy...trust me. Will you trust me?”

Buffy met his eyes reluctantly. It was a very odd sensation—her nerves were on fire, her cells splitting in two, his fingers inside her, and she was burning with such envy she felt liable to scream. And not from pleasure.

“I was always lost, see. Always. I thought I was complacent—or I tried to be. But every night...*every* sodding night...I dreamed of you. Didn’t know it was you, of course, till I got here. Didn’t know what the bugger it meant till tonight.” Spike dipped his head toward her center,

hesitated, then took a long lick of her clit, curling his fingers inside her. “It’s always been you, Buffy. Always. Even when I didn’t know you, it was you. You think this is easy for me? Knowin’ I’ve... I was for you. I always was. Before I knew you back in the day and now. But it shouldn’t’ve been like this. I shouldn’t’ve been able to be with anyone else... The demon...”

Without warning, pieces came flying together. God, how could she be so stupid?

Whatever she felt didn’t matter. It was in the past. It was gone. They hadn’t known each other. There was no reason for apologies. He didn’t need to tell her he hated Drusilla; what reason did he have for hating her aside from the fact that she wasn’t Buffy?

Given how icky she felt over the few boys she’d dated at Hemery, to the stolen kisses she’d shared with Angel, imagining what Spike was going through wasn’t something she wanted to entertain.

“Will...”

He licked her clit again and glanced up.

“I don’t want our future to be based on the past,” she said, her hand finding his cheek. “You didn’t know me.”

“I still loved you. All my life. You’ve always been what I want.”

“I’m not going to be all Psycho Buffy because there was this time when you didn’t remember me and were with someone else.” She smiled and coaxed him to his feet, her eager hands immediately going to his belt. “You still love me.”

“Always,” Spike said again, and if his voice wasn’t enough to sell her, the glaze of tears in his eyes did the trick. “I’ve never loved anyone else.”

The clang of the belt’s buckle hitting the stone floor reverberated through the still walls, but not as much as the definitive sound of his zipper being lowered. Buffy kept her eyes on him, even when his cock sprang into her grip. He whimpered, fluttering his eyes closed.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about the first time we did this,” Buffy murmured. “You took me by such surprise...”

“You had no bloody idea what I was doing,” Spike agreed. “I had to walk you through it. Best night of my life.”

She grinned, her thumb caressing his swollen head as her other

hand skimmed up the inside of his thighs until his balls rested against her palm. “Which one?” she asked.

“Both. Either. Though this one’s gainin’ speed.” Suddenly, he had her head captured between his hands and directed her southward until his cock was caressing the pursed line of her mouth. “Please, just for a minute...”

She parted her lips without a fight and she sucked him eagerly into her mouth, moaning around him when he whimpered. It was funny the way so much time could seem to have passed, yet all of this remained so fresh in her mind. If she closed her eyes, she could easily see herself back at their cottage on the outskirts of the village, laughing and battling each other for dominance. She almost always won, but she’d long assumed it was because he liked seeing her on top.

He tasted the same. Everything was the same—the little noises he made, the way he purred when she squeezed his testicles, how he whimpered when she sucked at the head. The way her name poured through his lips. How love shone through his every move, his every needless breath. It was all the same. It was as though not a day had passed.

And yet here they were.

“So hot,” he moaned. “Buffy...”

He pushed her away too soon, and she blinked in confusion until he gently guided her up his body and proceeded to kiss her breathless. Then his cock was slipping across her slick flesh, moving between her spread pussy lips and driving her out of what little mind she had left.

“I need to be inside you,” he whispered against her lips.

“I’m not stopping you.”

“Might pinch a bit.”

Buffy grinned. “Didn’t the first time.”

Something dangerous flashed across his face. “You haven’t touched any blighter here, have you?” he demanded. “You’re mine. All of you. I—”

“Aren’t we the hypocrite?”

“Buffy...”

“I meant *our* first time,” she assured him. “It didn’t hurt then.”

“But this time—”



She pressed her finger to his lips, slipping her other hand between them. “You’ve always been my only,” she whispered, wrapping her fingers around his cock and nudging him down to her entrance. “Love me, Spike.”

She expected him to whisper something in her ear or against her lips. She expected him to hold her to his chest. She expected a thousand things.

Spike surprised her. Instead, he buried his head in her shoulder and wrapped his arms around her middle, and she was the one holding him. Holding him as he began pushing his cock inside her, as her body tightened, her muscles clenching in a bizarre tug of war to both reject his invasion and draw him in deeper. It was strange and wonderful: feeling something she already knew for the first time. She relaxed with a long sigh, her eyes burning again, keeping her arms tight around his neck until the slight sting abated and her body welcomed him completely. She was remade at that moment—split between something so new yet so familiar. She knew him. Every ragged breath he stole. Every inch of his skin. Every tremble of his body.

She knew him.

“I do,” Spike whispered, “love you.”

“I know.”

“You all right?” he asked softly, hugging her tighter. “Any pain?”

She shook her head. “No pain.”

Spike’s chest rumbled against her when he chuckled. “High kicks and horseback?”

A rush of warmth filled her veins. In a blink, the gap of her experience sealed, and she was made whole. “Must be it.”

“Buffy...” He pulled back just slightly—just so he could see her eyes. So he could watch her as he pulled back and slipped out of her pussy before sinking in again. He watched her watch him, and what she saw there spoke for everything he could not.

“I want to tell you things,” Spike murmured, his movements slow and tempered. “I wanna tell you how hot you are.”

“So tell me.”

“There aren’t words. Not for this.”

“Spike...faster...”

He blinked in surprise. “You’re not hurtin’?”

Buffy shook her head. “No. No. Please. Not hurt.”

He claimed her lips again as he conceded. This was a dance they’d performed well, performed often, yet she couldn’t seem to remember her moves. She wanted to please him—wanted to rid his mind of every wayward thought of the moments they hadn’t spent together. She wanted to mark him as he’d never before been marked. Not by her or anyone. A mark that wouldn’t fade if time and death forced them apart again. A mark that would tattoo more than just her face in his memory. She wanted him so desperately, and even though she had him, it never seemed to be enough.

“I missed you,” Spike panted against her, his voice rising as his thrusts grew quicker. He was giving her the time to ask him to stop. To tell him if she hurt. If it was too fast. Need strained every corner—she felt it because it was a need shared—but he fought it. He fought it while giving in. He was the only man who could. “I missed you so bloody much. Even when I didn’t know you, I missed you.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Never. Never be sorry for it.” A kiss burned her lips. “Never be sorry...”

“Look at us, baby,” Spike moaned, directing her attention downward, his hips crashing harder against hers. “Watch us dance.”

She did as she was told, taking in the sight of his cock, slick with her juices, pushing in and out of her pussy. Watching as her flesh molded around him, welcoming him inside her and fighting him whenever he tried to leave. It was the most erotic thing she’d ever seen, and she didn’t want to look away; she didn’t think she could.

In all the times they’d been together before, she’d never watched. Only felt. Now she was watching and feeling, and every time his length disappeared inside her pussy, a new, previously undiscovered bundle of nerves erupted and she felt herself break into tremors.

“Buffy,” Spike moaned into her hair. “My Buffy.”

She nodded hard. “Your Buffy.”

“Faster. Need...”

“Yes.”

“Don’t wanna hurt...”

“Don’t care. Just need.”

His pace intensified so rapidly it took a few seconds to reconcile the bolts of ecstasy shooting through her veins with the glances of his cock plunging into her soaked sex. Ecstasy laced with pain. Pain she grasped. Pain she didn’t mind. And without warning, it became too fast to watch. Too fast to merge together the bliss of sensation with what her eyes were telling her. Buffy blinked hard and glanced up, and found herself absorbed in his gaze.

“You feel it?” he asked thickly, somehow managing to slide a hand between their battling bodies and finding her clit with ease that nearly seemed unfair. The smack of their flesh stung the air around them, melting into the foreground of his voice until she nearly heard naught but a distant ringing. It took a few endless seconds to work her way back to herself. “You feel it buildin’ inside you?”

Buffy mewled and nodded before her brain could even process the question.

“Tell me,” he gasped, rubbing her clit with a tenderness that offset the sudden fury of his body’s assault. How they had gone from slow to fast so quickly, she didn’t know, nor did she care. This was what she needed—what she knew, despite this body’s inexperience. “Tell me... how I feel.”

“Hot.”

“That’s you, sweetness.”

“*You* make me feel hot.” She paused for emphasis—or possibly for air. It didn’t matter.

“Buffy, Buffy, Buffy...”

Then suddenly, the proverbial light switch flicked upwards and she remembered something. And without warning, she began contracting her slayer muscles with every plunge of his cock, squeezing around him so tightly that something closely resembling a howl tore through his throat and he bucked his hips against her with maddened desperation.

“Oh fuck. Oh yes. Oh *yes* oh *yes yes yes*. Buffy. *Buffy Buffy Buffy...*”

He was rubbing her clit and striking into her pussy so hard the line separating pleasure and pain dissolved. Somehow it had ceased to matter. All she knew was she was crying and whispering a thousand things into his skin as he pounded into her. When they kissed, it was

all teeth and tongue. She tasted blood but she didn't know whose. At some point, the crystal blue of his eyes melted into the burning yellow of a demon's, and just when the pressure mounting her insides became too much to bear, his fangs split into her neck and the world around her exploded.

She fell but he caught her, thrusting hard as she spasmed and trembled into orgasm. The name she screamed was *William*. Not Spike. Not Will. *William*. The embodiment of the two clear memories merged into one man.

"Mine!" he growled against her bloodied flesh, and somewhere deep inside her, a raging pain at last fell to peace.

This. This was what she needed. What she'd always needed.

To belong.

"Yours," she sobbed eagerly, clinging to him.

"Take me," he demanded.

And she did. Her blunt teeth bit hard into his neck and she felt him spill inside her, cooling the fire but starting a new one in the same stroke. "Mine," she whispered.

Something within her locked and held.

"Yours. Oh god, Buffy, *always*."

The inner screaming stopped and every inch of her burned with light. And the last thought before consciousness left her completely was a reminder to herself.

He'd asked her what he felt like. She hadn't had the words then. Not to articulate what she really wanted to say. What she felt he truly needed to hear.

She'd have to remember when she awoke. He needed to know.

He needed to know that he felt like home.

He always had.

HE LOVED the way she felt against him. Curled at his chest, her right leg hooked over his hip, the drum of her heartbeat thumping against him, the hard perfection of her rosy nipple pressing into his skin. If he closed his eyes, he could almost believe they were a thousand miles and a couple of centuries away. He could see them lying together in the cottage they'd once shared. The place he last remembered being truly happy.

Except now. This topped everything.

It was odd, knowing he'd once been truly happy. After a hundred and fifty years of feigning bliss, he truly had it. And he'd had all along. In some closed-off corner of his mind were memories of absolute perfection.

"Mmm..." Buffy murmured drawing soft, tantalizing patterns across his chest. "I never knew the floors of tombs could be so comfy."

Spike grinned and brushed his lips across her brow. "You're not lyin' on the floor, love."

"I kinda am," she argued, wiggling against him. "The frozen cheek of my ass will testify as much."

"I could warm it up for you if you like," he purred, trailing his

fingers down her spine until he had her perfect flesh cradled against his palm.

“Bad,” she scolded.

“The baddest.”

Her fingers danced around his chest. “You have the most perfect man-nipples,” she said, leaning up to tease one with her tongue. “I don’t think I ever told you that before.”

Spike tried to listen to her, he really did. But at the first caress of her mouth, his head slammed into the floor so hard he was sure he was going to be seeing stars for a week. “Fuck,” he gasped, digging his fingers into her skin. “Buffy...”

“Just saying. They’re all with the...nummy.” She emphasized her point with another lick.

He grinned and kissed her brow again, the hand at her ass making a steady trek up her perfectly firm body until he was holding her breast. “I don’t remember you bein’ so forward.”

“I was all virginal before. And it *was* a different century.” She grinned, resting her chin on his chest. “Don’t tell me you don’t like forward-Buffy.”

“I love all incarnations of Buffy.”

“Yeah, you better.”

Spike smiled and raised his head, suddenly starved for her lips. As though he hadn’t spent the past few hours kissing her as much and as often as possible. “Guess I’ll just have to double my efforts when I wanna see you blush, then,” he said. “Used to be I could just comment on how much I enjoy nibblin’ on your pussy an’—”

While the thwap of her hand against his chest was oddly comforting, it was the pink in her cheeks that had him grinning like an idiot. No matter how bloody hot it was to be on the receiving end of a slightly more adventurous Buffy, he absolutely adored her innocence. How she would blush and look away whenever he said something even mildly lewd. How the slightest innuendo could get her wiggling.

God, he loved her. He’d known he belonged.

“It’s weird,” Buffy mused. “I feel like I’ve missed this all my life.”

“I know what you mean, kitten.”

“But I’ve only known...” She drew in a deep breath and shook her

head before resting against him again. He loved the weight of her head upon his chest, the warmth of her pressed into his side. He waited for her to complete her thought but silence settled instead. It was for the best, he supposed. If they started musing over lost time, it would eventually drive them crazy.

He much preferred to focus on the future they had now.

"I don't know what I would've done," Buffy murmured at last.

Spike frowned and squeezed her shoulder. "What is it?"

"If you hadn't remembered." There was a long silence. "I mean, I prepared myself for it. I did. I'd... Up until it happened, I told myself you were likely never gonna... But a part of me was clinging. I needed you to remember."

He arched an eyebrow. "I thought we covered this already, kitten."

"We did."

"Yeah, and you still don't get it. You really think I couldn't've loved you without my memories?"

"That's not it."

"Good, 'cause that's bollocks." He smiled when she glanced up at him, clutched her ass again and gently tugged until she was lying on top of him. And god, the way she looked astride him. A shy visage of a wanton goddess. She was sheer perfection and she didn't know it. Even after all this time, she didn't know it. "How could I not love you?" he whispered, pinching her nipples, loving the way she gasped and moved against him. "I don't give a rot what I do or don't remember... Well, no, that's not true, but even if I hadn't—"

She nodded, her eyes heavy with arousal. "I know, Will."

It was hard to imagine why the name had inspired such anger a short twenty-four hours ago. Then again, forever had passed in a matter of a day. He was older now than he ever had been. He had more experience under his belt than he'd ever imagined having. While Spike had never entertained thoughts of his own mortality, especially as an immortal being, a part of him had never expected to get this far in life. To see all he'd seen. To have done all he'd done.

But now the future seemed limitless.

Buffy drew in a gentle breath. "I just... I guess the idea of being the only one who knew. Who remembered... That was hard for me."

And then he understood, understood all too well. Had it been the other way around, had he known Buffy before she knew him, he would have been devastated at the history lost between them. And even if lightning struck twice and he managed to win her love a second time, he doubted he would ever completely recover from having lost such an essential part of who they were.

Now he felt whole.

“You know how it happened, right?” he asked her, abandoning one of her breasts to explore the fresh claim mark on her throat. “This...”

“I know. You bit my tongue.”

“Sorry ‘bout that.”

“I’m not.”

Spike grinned. “Neither am I. I just fancy warnin’ you before I’m about to bite.”

Buffy arched an eyebrow. “I don’t seem to remember that.”

“Sometimes my warnings are the nonverbal sort. I figure if you see fangs, you know what’s comin’.”

She ran her nails over one of his nipples. “And if I don’t wanna be bitten?”

“Tough.”

She pinched and he yelped, his hips bucking upward, his cock rigid and demanding attention. “Christ, Buffy...” He didn’t realize his eyes were closed until he felt her lean forward. Until her breasts were against his chest and she was licking at the mark she’d given him.

There was definitely something to be said for Forward Buffy. He could easily learn to love this.

He thought for a minute she might raise herself above him and slide onto his cock again, and he honestly didn’t know whether or not to be disappointed when she instead rested against him.

Well, the demon knew what it wanted. It wanted its mate over and over and over again. Wanted her screaming and drenching his cock. Wanted to drown in her eyes as she vibrated around him in pleasure. And while a good part of that was sentiment Spike more than shared, there was sweet comfort in simply lying with her. Comfort that sex couldn’t provide, no matter how he hungered for it.



Furthermore, there were too many things in the air they needed to discuss.

“We think your slayer-killer history was claim-linked,” Buffy said. “I... Well, it was something I was kicking around for a while. Giles pretty much confirmed it.”

Her conclusion was one Spike had already reached, but there was some measure of gratitude in hearing it from someone else. In hearing it from *Buffy*. “Yeah?” he murmured, brushing her hair over her shoulder.

“Your...your inner vamp... The demon knew it was supposed...ummm...”

“The demon’s linked to you, pet. No shame in sayin’ it.”

“Same here,” she said. “Well, with the vampire thing.”

Spike froze. “What vampire thing?”

“Well, with Angel.”

The idea alone of them doing anything remotely intimate together had his chest roaring with fury and his will hardening with the sudden need to find the vamp in question and rip his limbs off. How his voice remained tempered, he would never know. The contrast to the screaming in his head had him nearly deafened. “You...and *Angel!*?”

A truly bewildered look fell over her face. “I...I thought you knew?”

“You said no one’d touched you.”

“There has been no touching!” she insisted. In seconds, she winced and clarified. “Okay, so there was some kissage, but that was *way* before you even got to town.”

It was amazing his head didn’t pop with how hard the demon screamed. Not just that she’d snogged someone else, but that it had been *him*. The berk who had done all he could to break him. Who *had* broken Dru. The bloke Spike had never been able to live up to, and his Buffy had kissed the bastard?

“Spike?”

“The wanker’s not comin’ near you again.”

She had the audacity to roll her eyes. “Oh, come on...”

“I mean it. I so much as sniff him near us, and he’s gone.”

“Don’t you think you’re overreacting?”

“No, I’m *reactin’*. And he doesn’t—”

“Hello! I gave you a pass about the whole *Dru* thing.” Her eyes darkened in a way that had him both twitching in remorse and dancing in delight. While he hated having caused her pain, there was a certain sense of satisfaction at being someone to inspire jealousy in the first place. It was an ugly part of him, one he didn’t want her seeing, but a part of him nonetheless.

“I gave you a pass,” she said again, shivering in disgust. “And you guys did a lot more than make with the smoochies.”

“I didn’t remember you!”

The argument was weak, but it was the only one he had.

This wasn’t lost on Buffy. “Uh huh,” she said.

“I’ve already used up that excuse, pet,” Spike insisted feebly. “It’s off the table.”

“I don’t think so.”

“I can’t believe you snogged that git.”

“It was only the...twice.” Buffy squeaked when he glared and wisely buried her face in his shoulder. “But...point. Giles said it was because my inner moppet wanted you. Angel was the only vampire who didn’t lunge for my jugular, so said inner moppet kinda set sights on him.”

He was clutching her shoulder so tightly he was afraid he’d leave a bruise. “And what is your inner moppet sayin’ now?”

“Spike is good. Buffy loves Spike. Buffy stupid for kissing Angel.”

“I like the sound of that.”

“Yeah, well, from now on, the inner moppet only lusts for you.”

“Everythin’ of yours better only lust for me.”

“Hey! Same goes.”

“Don’t need to tell you that which goes unsaid, pet.” Spike kissed her brow again. He wanted to kiss every inch of her golden skin, but he was satisfied with her brow for now. “Your watcher helped you figure all this out?”

“I know. Weird, huh?”

“It’s a nice, bloody change.” He paused, a dark thought shuddering through him. “Don’t suppose you know what happened to Travers, do you? I’d fancy an ending full of pain and suffering but I guess it’s too much to hope.”

There was a long pause, and his breath caught.

“Buffy?”

Spike waited. Still nothing.

And then, seconds later, he felt it.

Trembling. She was trembling.

Hard.

“Sweetheart...”

“I killed him.”

The world stopped moving with his shock. Buffy had *killed* a man? It was something he’d never thought her capable of, even a monster like Kenneth. Even if Kenneth had gotten him killed. And though, after the astonishment faded, he first settled on pride, that fell just as quickly. Because killing Kenneth would have destroyed her.

“Oh god,” he murmured, tightening his arms around her. “Buffy...”

“It’s okay.”

“The claim’s what did it. Fuck—”

“No. It wasn’t like that.” Buffy shifted, resting her chin against his chest. “I didn’t go after him or anything. It was an accident. After you...” There was a long pause, and when he felt her tremble some part of his heart broke. “After you were gone, I stayed in the room a long time. I couldn’t leave.”

“Bloody hell.”

“But I did. There was this... My mind kept with the... I had to get you back. And Kenneth was the only connection I had.” A beat. “Well, the immediate connection. I know I could’ve found something else—someone else—but I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t wait. I knew he had access. I knew he had books. So I went back and I found them...and he came in.”

She paused again, and Spike just waited. There was nothing to do or say. He wanted to reassure her, but he didn’t know of what. His death. What she’d gone through. What her life had been like when he left her.

These were things he remembered thinking as he watched her weep for him, his heart so full of love for her, he couldn’t feel fear. He couldn’t feel anything but her pain and sorrow, and his regret for being the cause of it.

“There were...words,” she said at last. “Words in which he...well...”

let's just say he pissed me off, and considering I was a slayer on the edge, it was a stupid move on his part." Buffy sighed and inched upward. "Oh, and by the way, he told me what you did."

Spike frowned. "Huss'at?"

"Kenneth. He told me."

"What I did?"

"Yeah. The whole dying thing. You know, when the cure was sobbing her eyes out and begging you not to leave her?"

He winced and his guilt compiled. "Oh right. That."

"Jerk."

It was a tempered insult compared to what he felt was coming—so tempered it made him nervous. There wasn't even any malice in her tone. There was nothing but a slight pout one might hear from a child. Somehow, this was worse than if she'd yelled at him. "Buffy, I couldn't let you die for me."

"But dying for me was all with the cool?"

"Kitten, I—"

She pressed her index finger to his lips, a sad smile tugging across hers. "No. It's okay. I understand."

"I'm sorry—"

"No, you're not. And I wouldn't be, either. If it'd been me, I would've done the same thing." Buffy kissed him again before returning her cheek to his chest. "So you're off the hook. I did most of the cursing of your name between burying Kenneth and finding the right book to use. It didn't make me love you any less. If anything, I think it ultimately had the reverse effect."

"You love me more for makin' you suffer?"

A short, humorless laugh bubbled off her lips. "In a weird way, yeah."

"But I—"

"You devastated me? Kinda, yeah. But hey. I bounced back. I bounced all the way to Kenneth's, where I wanted to kill him, but I didn't. Not at first, at least." She swallowed hard. "I had him at my mercy, and then I got with the mercy...and he tried to kill me, but he wasn't fast enough."

Raw fury shot through him. "That wanker tried to *kill*—"

“I know. And twice. But he’s dead. He’s dead as in way and he doesn’t need to be killed again.”

“I think I’ll be the judge.”

“Will—”

“He—”

Buffy silenced him with her lips. “Is dead,” she whispered again. “Very. And we’re here.”

It was amazing what she could do to him with that mouth of hers. He was ready to spill blood one second, and melting fast the next. “We’re here...”

“And despite whatever tricks Paimon tried to pull—”

“Paimon?”

“The demon. The one I made a deal with.” She dropped her eyes again and wiggled against him in a way he knew she didn’t mean to be interpreted as sensual. His cock didn’t get the message. “Heard of him?”

At that moment, he really wished he had. “Sorry, love.”

“He’s an ass.”

“Demons tend to be.”

“He tried to keep us apart. I gave him...well...I gave him something of the huge, and he tried to keep us apart.”

Spike shrugged. “Didn’t take. I’ve loved you all my life.”

She arched an eyebrow. “You only remembered that you loved me four hours ago.”

“Semantics,” he argued. “I still loved you. My night angel. You got me through it. The disaster that was this life. I was bloody miserable for most of it, but at night I was loved. You were always with me...and you loved me.”

He loved the way her eyes brightened when she smiled. “I’ve always loved you,” Buffy whispered.

“Loved you first.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Nuh uh.”

A wide grin split his lips. “Yeah huh,” he argued, coaxing her upward so he could tease her breasts.

A move that proved to be disadvantageous. The second her hands were free to roam, they began exploring him in ways no other woman

had. Ways that made him squirm as no woman ever made him squirm.

“Need I remind you how ticklish you are?” she asked.

“It’s a chance I’m willing to—”

Wrong choice of words. The tomb split with the piercing ring of his giggle. And if he remembered anything, once the tickle onslaught began, it didn’t stop. In seconds he was bucking hard beneath her merciless fingers, his hands having abandoned her breasts and fighting now to find her wrists.

It didn’t work. It never did.

Not with the Slayer on top.

“You”—giggle—“little”—squirm—“wench.”

“Oooh! You taunt me with your words.”

“I’ll do...somethin’...to...you, all right.”

“I can’t wait.”

And with the way she was moving over him, waiting wasn’t an issue. With a triumphant growl, he seized her wrists and utilized his grip to tug her to his chest, shutting up that gorgeous mouth of hers with a kiss that would put the stars to shame. He didn’t know how he’d survived this long without her tongue caressing his or her moans ringing in his ears. How he’d lived without her warmth, without her devouring him as though he was the antidote to every ill she’d ever suffered, as though he were the answer to life itself.

He didn’t know how he’d made it this far without piecing it together. The love exploding in his heart that he’d always known didn’t belong to Drusilla. How he’d never known before this.

Buffy had risked everything to save him, and she had.

He only hoped he could save her in return.

“What was it?” he asked between hungry kisses.

She whimpered and made a sound which he decoded as, “Huh?”

“What you bargained.”

Spike didn’t know what he expected; an evasion, a fight, a pun. He didn’t expect her to fork over the answer so quickly.

Just as he didn’t expect the answer to chill his veins or the blissful world he’d rediscovered tonight to spin so quickly out of control.

It seemed the night was full of surprises.

ALL BUFFY KNEW WAS she'd been lying in his arms one minute, enjoying the melty goodness of his kisses, and the next Spike had tossed her to her feet and started screaming things that made no sense.

It wasn't the reaction she'd expected. No, this was more what she'd thought she'd get from Giles. The screaming. The yelling. The fear-stricken eyes and the demands of how *bloody stupid* she could be, no matter how heartbroken. He even demanded once or twice how she had it to do this to him, or something of the like. It made sense in the sense that it did not.

Strange how such not-sense-making could make her feel like an idiot.

Stranger still was how Spike was running a direct path to Giles's place without having ever been there before.

"Spike—"

The hand gripped around her wrist tightened and as he pulled her into a faster jog. "Quiet," he said.

"I—"

"I'll throw you over my shoulder if I need to."

"I'm—"

Okay, so it wasn't an empty threat. The next thing she knew, she

was in the air, bouncing against his shoulder with every speedy stride his legs made against the ground.

“Well,” she huffed, “this was uncalled for.”

Spike didn't *respond*, he *ran*. He ran until the shapes around her materialized into the familiar courtyard outside Giles's apartment. He ran until they were standing on the watcher's porch, and even then, it was likely only the presence of a door that convinced his feet to stop.

“When your watcher hears about this...” Spike growled, bouncing impatiently. “I swear, love, this time, I'm not gonna risk life and limb to stop a campfire.”

“He already knows,” Buffy said, wiggling to no avail. She didn't want to acknowledge the rising panic seizing her insides. She didn't want to admit how hard she was shaking. It was better to remain irritated, if not slightly put off. “Spike, he already—”

Either she was invisible, or Spike was too wound up to think logically when she spoke. He ignored her completely, instead tightening his hold on her leg with one hand and pounding on Giles's door with the other.

“Watcher!” he screamed. “Open up!”

Her heart skipped and her pulse raced. “Yeah,” she said, her voice somewhat strained. “Cause this isn't gonna make him panic...”

“Buffy, sweetheart, I love you but if you don't shut your trap, I might do somethin' I'll regret.”

“What did I do?”

Spike scoffed as though she knew perfectly well what she'd done and didn't answer. Instead, he again pounded on the door. “Watcher!”

Buffy wished she could see Giles's face when he opened the door; it was certain to be one for the books. She'd seen them all, but she was certain this would take the cake. However, from her vantage point, all she could see was her boyfriend's jean-clad ass. Not that she was complaining, but...

“What the devil?” Giles demanded. “Buffy?”

“Invite me in,” Spike snarled.

There was a long, uncertain pause. “Buffy?” he asked again.

“I'm fine,” she told him, swinging a leg to ease his concerns. Not that he was truly worried; if Giles thought she was in trouble, he would



have sucker-punched Spike—or tried. “Sorry about the randomness. Will’s pulled a massive wig and he needs to talk to you.”

“Invite me in!” Spike growled, pressing against the barrier. “You stupid—”

“All right, all right! I invite you in!”

Buffy released an *oof* when they started moving again and quickly found herself tossed onto the familiar settee in her watcher’s living room. Her surroundings barely had time to stop spinning before she focused on the pacing form of her vampire as he made laps across the floor.

She glanced to Giles, who was watching her boyfriend warily. He looked torn between reaching for the nearest weapon and comforting the poor guy. At the moment, Buffy could really sympathize.

Though if Giles chose the *weapon* venue, he’d have his ass handed to him. And something told her he knew that.

“D’you know?” Spike asked finally, startling them both when he broke his pace. “D’you know what she did?”

Giles frowned. “I beg your pardon?”

“Buffy—”

“The bargain,” she explained quickly. She would be lying if she said her heart didn’t slow with relief when Giles relaxed and tension rolled off his shoulders. He’d obviously expected something new and dangerous and worse than what they already knew. At least she wasn’t insane; Spike was the one who was wiggling over the information they already had. “The powers-go-bye-bye bargain.”

Giles nodded, turning his eyes to Spike and favored him with a patented *and-you-got-me-worried-for-this* glare, which Buffy very much appreciated. “Yes,” he said calmly. “Buffy told me everything. Earlier tonight, actually. Before you...urrr...arrived at the library.”

Spike blinked. “And?”

“And?”

“I’m sorry, but are we talkin’ about the same thing?”

“I thought we covered that with the powers-go-bye-bye thing,” Buffy muttered, looking down at her shirt. Or, rather, Spike’s shirt.

She frowned. Since when did she wear Spike’s clothes? He must

have dressed her in it during the blur between her confession and the getting-here.

“Am I really the only one here who knows what that means?” Spike demanded, the shrill in his voice jerking her head upward again. Yeah, she was definitely wearing his tee. He was dressed in jeans and his duster. Nothing more.

God, how they must look to the man who was practically her father.

Giles cleared his throat. “I... Well, your concern being what it is, the removal of Buffy’s powers will—”

“Kill her.”

In that instant, Buffy’s ears began ringing. Her throat swelled. Her skin burned. Every nerve in her body pricked with life. She could almost hear her blood rushing through her veins.

She remembered what it had felt like the first time. Not dying, rather being told she would die. Walking in on Giles and Angel debating a prophecy that literally had her name all over it. She remembered it. How terrified she’d been. How lonely. How unsure. How *young*.

God, had she really *ever* been that young? Compared to the amount of life her memories had restored, it all seemed so long ago.

And now she was sitting in her watcher’s home, surrounded by sound but deafened to everything but the noise her own body made. The thunder. The ocean. The emptiness.

The *nothing*.

Buffy must have passed out, for the next thing she knew, she was blinking her eyes open and her head was in Spike’s lap.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered, caressing her cheeks, his face a worried, anguished mess. “I just lost my head.”

“What happened?”

Then she remembered.

*Oh god.*

“It won’t happen, kitten,” Spike promised, gently stroking her temple. “I won’t let it happen.”

“I...I don’t...”

A very familiar throat cleared. Buffy pressed her eyes shut. She

knew what the sound meant. A year and a half under Giles's guidance, she knew how to read the signs.

"I can't believe I didn't realize it sooner," her watcher said softly. "I'm so sorry, Buffy."

"Will you guys please stop apologizing to me?" she muttered, wincing as she sat up. She didn't get far—Spike's grip on her was iron-clad. She settled under his arm and sighed, trying hard to conceal how hard she trembled. "I just need—"

"Spike is right," Giles confirmed. God, she'd never heard him sound so haunted. It was as though life itself had been stripped from him. "He's right." There was a long pause; she felt she should say something, but she didn't know what so she didn't try. Giles exhaled slowly, then finally looked up. "Vampires and slayers are intimately linked. More so than any other demons. They are of the same mold. The same fabric, if you will. As the laws of life govern vampires, there are some shared traits with slayers."

Buffy swallowed hard. Her skin was cold and clammy, and sweat lined her brow. Still, she didn't speak.

"I suppose the best way to explain it would be to understand where your power comes from." Giles rose to his feet, a handkerchief in hand even though his glasses remained on his nose. It was as though he felt better simply holding it. "Buffy, you are, and you always have been...part demon."

Her head started ringing again. "What?"

"It is simply the way—"

"*What?*"

Spike kissed her temple. "It's not so bad, kitten."

"How...I don't..." She went numb. "I...I don't...I can't...I..."

"This doesn't change anything," Giles said quickly. "You are *still* completely human. Only...with this added. It doesn't change *anything*. Nothing about your birthright or your heritage or—or anything, really. As it is, the Latin derivative of *demon* is the word *daimon*...which, coincidentally, is a derivative of the Greek. And by tradition, *daimons* are neither evil nor good. There are some who are good—some whose role is to balance the scales between good and evil. Plato describes daimons as being 'supernatural beings between mortals

and gods, such as inferior divinities and ghosts of dead heroes.’ There are a number of non-human creatures who pose no threat to humanity and, by in large, live *normal* lives. The confusion comes in the Judeo-Christian interpretation of the word...which characterizes all demons as something inherently wicked.”

Buffy swallowed hard. She felt only marginally better. “Okay...”

“And for every great power, there exists its equal and opposite counterpart,” Giles continued. “This is true in every living thing, from human souls—the good versus the corrupt—to demons. Vampires represent the evil of the demon which lurks inside them. Slayers represent the good.” He paused. “Slayers are also given immeasurable advantages in strength and authority, at least in the form of the Council and spirit guides, which is why many have speculated there can only be one. Really, though, I have no answer for that. There has... There are many questions in this universe that remain unanswered.”

“Imagine my surprise,” Spike drawled.

Feeling returned her to veins, but too slowly. She feared she might pass out again if he didn’t hurry to the point. “Okay...so...demon is me,” she said. “I is demon.”

“But you are also human,” Giles argued. “As are vampires. That’s what makes you unique. You are living; they are dead. Your human side is dominant, your demon recessive. Their demon side is dominant, their human recessive. It’s what makes them half-breeds in the eyes of the demon community. You tap your power from your demon side, and some vampires, such as Spike...”

The vampire at her side squeezed her shoulder and kissed her brow. She barely felt it.

“...have special access to their residual humanity. Arguably, some have more...access than others. Just as some slayers go drunk with the power of their inner demon, some vampires feel more than others. Some feel nothing at all.” Giles cleared his throat again. “It depends on the vampire or the slayer in question, I suppose. However, point being—”

Buffy nodded numbly. “I’m getting it.”

“You cannot simply *remove* the demon from a vampire. To do so would render the vampire nothing more than a...”

“A corpse,” Spike supplied, shuddering. “The demon’s the only thing keepin’ us alive after we’re killed.”

“But I’m not dead,” Buffy argued.

“Without your demon counterpart to sustain your human self, you will wither into nothing,” Giles explained solemnly. “Slayers are predestined for their fate. Vampires are not. And since slayers are predestined, they are immediately molded to be dependent on the inner demon. Or daimon. Or whatever you wish to call it. Without the daimon, the human part of the Slayer cannot survive. They are two halves, you see. They need each other. And with the passing of the Slayer, the inner daimon taps the next in succession. Every girl with potential has a daimon inside her. It merely rests until it’s tapped, if it’s tapped at all. If the girl grows too old to be called, the daimon remains dormant all her life, but it remains.” There was a long, pregnant pause. “Buffy, Paimon could not touch your soul, but he has access to your power. And...and unless we have the means to stop him, you will—”

“I’ll die.”

Giles swallowed hard and nodded again. “I’m afraid so.”

This was it. The catch. The golden catch she’d always known lurked in Paimon’s words. Beyond his attempt to keep her and Spike apart, beyond denying her the memories that belonged to her, this was it.

“I didn’t want my power,” Buffy whispered, her throat dry. “I didn’t want it.”

“I know,” Giles replied softly. “I’m so sorry, Buffy. I...”

“How did you know?” she asked, but her question was directed to the vampire at her side. “Giles... I told him and... I told you and you knew immediately. I don’t understand. The Council...they don’t—”

He offered a pained smile. “I’ve done my homework, love.”

Spike sounded even farther away than her watcher’s.

“What?”

“Slayer obsession, right? I buried my nose in every bloody book I could find. The sort of stuff the higher-ups eventually put under lock and key.” He favored Giles with a scathing glare. “Your watcher must’ve skipped that day in class. It’s just one of those things, huh Rupert?”

“My studies on slayers and their origin are nearly twenty years old. It was never something we were supposed to memorize.” Giles frowned. “It was simply there. An explanation. The purpose. It made sense and I accepted it. But I’ve never viewed any slayer... I’ve never viewed Buffy as...” He sighed heavily. “I’m so sorry. I’m sorry I didn’t see it sooner. It just... It wasn’t a part of my training. I was meant to work in the field.”

Spike snorted. “Yeah. Knowin’ where your girl’s power comes from—”

Buffy elbowed him. “Will, shut up.”

A ghost of a smile tugged on her watcher’s lips. It was humorless and sad, but there nonetheless. “The demonology behind the Slayer is the concern of the Council’s more prestigious members. There isn’t anything about the Slayer, her power, or the truth of her nature that the Council doesn’t know. But there is quite a bit the Council don’t share with watchers, simply because we are so close to them. We develop attachments.” He grew silent again. “I’m so sorry, Buffy.”

“There’s nothing to—”

“I should’ve known.”

“So...what? So we would’ve known a few hours earlier that I’ve essentially...” She swallowed hard, her eyes finally misting. “I did it willingly, Giles. I think I would’ve done it even if I’d known.”

Spike tightened his grip on her. “Don’t say that.”

“Why not? It’s the truth.”

“I’m not worth it—”

“And yet, see how much that wouldn’t have changed my mind.” She offered a watery smile and kissed his lips. “I would’ve given Paimon anything. You would’ve, too.” She blew out a breath, something within her cementing. “So I die. It’s only fair. You got to die last time.”

A shadow crossed Spike’s face. “You’re *not* goin’ anywhere.”

“I think Paimon would beg to differ.”

“I’ll kill him if he tries—”

“No.”

Spike’s eyes widened, desperation leaking through. “Buffy, you can’t do this. You *can’t* do this to me. You can’t give me back everything and then—”

“Will—”

“You *can't*. I won't let you. Christ, lemme die first. I'll—”

“No.”

“I won't lose you. I *won't*. Not like—”

“Not like I lost you, you mean?” Buffy demanded. “Not like I had to watch you die for me? Because hey...that was good enough for you. If it's not good enough for me, then I—”

“So you'll just let this happen to get back at me, is that it?”

“Will, please!”

He tore himself from her side the next minute and fell to his knees in front of her, seizing her shoulders. “You listen to me,” he growled, his eyes wide and swimming with tears. “You can't do this. I don't care what you bloody signed. I don't care if you dotted every *i* and crossed every sodding *t*. I don't give a flying fuck if God himself couldn't smash this stone of yours. You're *not* leaving me. You're *not*. Even if I have to follow you through Hell itself, I'm *not* givin' you up.”

Buffy's vision was such a blurry mess. She couldn't see him. She just felt him—felt his pain. His sorrow. His worry. Over her. All over her. But there was nothing she could do or say. There was nothing because it was already done. It was over.

She would fight. She would lose. She would die.

They truly were even now.

THERE WAS a good reason why Paimon was the demon Buffy had summoned. His name colored page after page, listing accomplishments and powers believed attributed to him that, had Giles not been the educated man he was, he would have guessed to be the demonic equivalent of padding one's résumé. There were chapters detailing the plagues, famine, wars...even people for whom Paimon was allegedly responsible. He had power beyond his means—there was no doubting that.

And now he had Buffy's life in his hands. In less than a week, her power would be his and she would be gone.

Giles sighed and removed his glasses, resting his back against the wall. He was on the floor of his flat, as he had been since Buffy and Spike retired upstairs after Buffy had made a few phone calls. He didn't know why he'd insisted on her staying with him...perhaps with the idle hope that he would find the coveted loophole in the night and wouldn't risk waking her mother. As it was, Buffy and Spike were sleeping, and Joyce believed her to be at Willow's house. As though it were an everyday research party.

There had never been a time where he would have thought



it *safer* to have a vampire around. Giles knew the second he'd asked her to stay put that the invitation was extended to her mate. They were bound now—it bewildered him to think of a time when they hadn't been. More than the obvious affection between them, there was something about the auras that seemed to complete one another's. Of course, Giles wasn't an aura reader and he never had been, but there was no better way to explain what he'd witnessed. The special bond that went beyond the laws of science or even the philosophy of love. Perhaps it was the claim he was seeing; he didn't know. All he knew was that it was powerful. And it made him very glad for Buffy.

It made him glad that Spike was here and not elsewhere. Giles was certain she was only being brave to keep them both from shattering.

No matter how comforting the vampire's presence was, however, it didn't make the truth any prettier. For the past three hours, Giles had been poring over his books, searching his own personal library for any and all information on the demon Paimon. Each passage was grimmer than the last.

Most people didn't realize that evil was created by man. Demons just had a way of pointing and guiding the willing in the right direction.

Giles couldn't save Buffy.

The knowledge was crippling. Beyond anything he'd ever faced or ever dreamed of facing. The prophecy last year had nearly killed him, but he'd pushed onward because, as most in his field knew, it was impossible to pinpoint exactly how any given foretelling was set to play out. There hadn't been much hope, but there had been some.

And some was infinitely better than none.

It always was.

Just because his options were at an all-time low didn't mean Giles was throwing in the towel. He wasn't going to sit by idly and watch his slayer wither into nothing.

No. This time, the battle wasn't hers. Buffy had already died twice. He wasn't going to let her die again. Not for this demon, not for the world; not even for her precious William.

"We are all fools in love," he murmured, climbing to his feet.

If he couldn't find a loophole in her bargain, he would simply create one.

No matter what it cost.



SPIKE COULDN'T SLEEP. HIS MIND WAS STUCK ON REPEAT—ON THE night he'd last looked at her before he'd first set eyes on her in his new body. Before he'd seen her at the Bronze. If he focused, he could almost taste the salt of her tears on his lips. He could hear her sweet voice pleading in his ear. He could reach out and touch her. Reassure her. Tell her everything would be all right.

Beg her to let him die and remain dead, so he didn't have to know the pain she knew all too well.

He just got her back. A century and a half not knowing her, not remembering her, he'd just gotten her back. She couldn't do this to him.

She couldn't make him watch her die.

A trembling breath pressed through his lips. Buffy was asleep. He didn't know how she could sleep, but sleep she did, pressed against him, her leg draped over his thigh, her hand resting on his bare chest. Just like she had been just a few short hours ago. The way he'd held her after making love to her in the crypt. The way everything had seemed so perfect then.

He'd known there was an evil to fight, of course. He'd known Buffy had made a bargain and the price was heavier than she'd anticipated.

He just hadn't thought it would be this.

Bloody stupid. Of course it would be like this. With them, it always was.

Spike sighed again, curling his fingers around Buffy's wrist. He lifted her arm and inched away from her, mindful to keep his movements to a minimum lest he wake her. Though he loathed leaving her side, he knew he was going to drive himself out of his skull if he did nothing as time ticked by.

He had to do *something*.

And he wasn't the only one.

“Evenin’, Rupes,” he said as he stepped onto the ground floor.

Giles made a sound that would’ve been right funny under different circumstances, the matchbox he’d been holding shooting into the air. He whirled around, eyes wide. “Bloody hell,” he gasped, slapping a hand over his heart. “What...are...you...”

“Couldn’t sleep.” Spike arched an eyebrow, fighting off a grin as the old man was assaulted by a rainstorm of matches. “Neither could you, I’d wager.”

“Sleep is a luxury I can’t afford,” Giles replied and cleared his throat. “Something the matter?”

“Other than the fact that the woman I love is demon fodder in less than a week?” he replied. “No, nothin’ I can recall.”

“You didn’t know you loved her before tonight,” Giles said weakly.

Spike did his best to suppress a growl at that. Rubbish, was what it was. Buffy might not have been at his side every minute, but he’d always loved her. It was just a matter of rediscovering her—rediscovering her and himself. Of remembering who she was. Remembering who *he* was, and everything in between.

He might have fought the knowledge that he loved her, but he’d still loved her. He always had.

*Always.*

“She’s always been mine, Watcher,” Spike replied, his voice low and dangerous. “She’s been mine longer than—”

“I know.”

“You know and yet—”

“I don’t... I thought it might help if...” Giles inhaled, looking down. “I don’t know what I thought.”

Spike didn’t say anything—there was nothing *to* say. Instead, he nodded, taking in the watcher’s disheveled appearance before looking to the design on the ground. The one made of salt. A protective circle. He’d read once or twice about how those who summon demons needed salt to ensure their safety. And insantly, he knew what the bloke was going to do.

It must have been on his face, for the next thing Giles was talking. “If there is something I can do to negate Buffy’s bargain, I will do it.”

Spike inclined his head, at once humbled. “She won’t like it—”

“Don’t try to talk me out of it.”

“I’m not. If it comes down to you or her, old man, and you know which way I’m swingin’ my ax, yeah?”

Giles furrowed his brow and pursed his lips, but nodded. “And you know if it comes down to you or her...”

“You better aim for the heart. I had to die a long painful death once. Don’t particularly fancy doin’ it again.”

A ghost of a smile crossed the watcher’s face. “I believe we understand each other.”

“Yeah. So is this a one-man-only summonin’ or can I—”

The air chilled and cut his words in half, a gale of icy wind whispering through his skin and making his bones rattle. He’d always thought it was an expression—the bones rattling bit, but this sensation was very real. And without warning, he was visited by an image of Hell. The Hell he’d known between dying and being rescued. There was fire, but it was cold. Christ, it was so cold. So much so, flames froze in mid-roar, screams shattered like glass, and shadows hardened into statues. It wasn’t always cold in Hell; sometimes it burned so fiercely he felt he might dust all over again. It kept him there on the boundary between existence and death—that horrible second before a vampire’s body dissipated into nothing, when there was nothing but pain and the sensation of falling.

The cold in Giles’s flat was one no witch could replicate. This was the cold of Hell.

They were no longer alone.

He was there, standing a full seven feet, dressed immaculately in the finest Armani money could buy. His skin—if one could call it skin—was as colorless and pale as a slab of stone. A jeweled crown rested atop his head, buried in a nest of what one might call hair. The demon was the picture of elegance—he looked almost human but anyone who saw him would know better than to mistake him for one. The planes of his body were composed of shadows. He moved and the air around him rippled.

“While I appreciate the attention, I assure you, there is no need for

theatrics.” He raised his hand, glancing at the circle of salt on the ground. “Or old wives’ tales.”

Spike had thought himself beyond fear. Beyond fear for himself, especially at the expense of other demons. He’d thought himself above many things.

One glance at Paimon and he remembered Hell. He remembered despair. He remembered pain. He remembered everything.

And beyond that, he *felt* everything.

“Paimon,” Giles said, his voice strained but strangely lacking in fear. Perhaps he didn’t feel it. Perhaps he didn’t feel *Hell*. Perhaps Spike was the only one who could.

“I prefer *King* Paimon, if you don’t mind,” the demon replied, straightening his tie. “After all, if you had performed the ritual, I would have made you say my name several times just to make sure you dialed the right number.” He tossed Spike a smirk. “You’d be surprised at how similar my summoning spell is to others.”

“Paimon, King of Hell,” Giles said calmly, nodding. “I am—”

“Rupert Giles, watcher to Buffy Summers. Please don’t insult me.” He nodded at Spike. “And this would be our girl’s William. I must admit, for someone who inspired such passion, I thought you’d be taller.”

A rush of outrage split Spike’s veins. He longed to scream. Longed to yell. He wanted to rush forward, wanted to tackle the bastard to the ground and beat him within an inch of his existence. He wanted to empty his grief, his anxiety, and every strain against the fabric of his being into making Paimon beg for mercy. Until there was nothing left but the two threads of their individual lifelines. He wanted to make Paimon suffer as he’d suffered in the last few hours—he wanted to give him the eternity of agony he was owed for even thinking about ripping Buffy away from him. He wanted so many bloody things.

But he couldn’t move. It wasn’t about fear anymore. He didn’t know what it was.

“You’d amuse me if I didn’t know you were serious,” the demon mused. “For a creature of poetry, love, and all earthly things, you do have a passion for bloodshed that I can’t help but admire.”

Spike’s throat ran dry.

Paimon arched what could have been a brow. “You really don’t know? Come now, William, I thought you had more wits about you than that.”

Giles blinked in surprise. So did Spike.

“Of course I can hear you, you small little thing.” Paimon waved a dismissive hand. “You are a thing of Hell. I am a *king* of Hell. Whatever thoughts you have, you cannot conceal from me. Nor can you move if I do not wish it. You are a thing of Hell, and you are looking at your monarch. Show some respect.”

“Spike is not why you are here,” Giles said quickly. “I’m the one—”

“Oh isn’t he?” Paimon retorted. “Were it not for him, dear Elizabeth never would have made her bargain. No, she would have died at the hand of some demon, and the Power would have passed from her to the next. You, Mr. Giles, would be the watcher of another, and none of us would be here having this conversation. I think it’s safe to conclude that *Spike* is very much the reason why I am here.”

“But I summoned you.”

“Again you are mistaken. I arrived of my own inclination. But I do appreciate the thought.” Paimon at last drew his gaze away from Spike, turning instead to fully face the watcher. “This close to payday, I don’t like to be too far from my bounty. After acquiring what they want, people tend to get the idea that they don’t owe what they promised me. Your Slayer has fallen victim in the same sad line of thinking.”

“You can’t have her,” Spike barked, nearly as surprised as Paimon when the words breathed life. Apparently, Paimon didn’t have the control he wanted him to think he did.

The Hell King held up a hand, his eyes flickering with flames Spike well remembered. “Oh can’t I?” he replied. “She signed herself over to me.”

“She didn’t know what she was doing,” Giles replied. “And I believe you know that.”

“I suppose I do, but I’m quite *sure* I don’t care.”

“You can’t have her,” Spike snarled again, pushing against the invisible restraints on his muscles, determined to tackle the fiend to the ground.

"I don't see why you're so upset with me," Paimon replied with a shrug. "I went to great lengths to make sure you wouldn't give a damn when I came to collect. It's not my fault you had to get the Hellmouth fever this time of year."

"You would've kept us from each other?" he demanded. "Just because—"

"Yes. And wouldn't that have been better? You would have your life back without being any the wiser to poor Elizabeth's foolish gamble."

The monster was implying that not knowing Buffy, not knowing he loved her, not knowing what they'd had was preferable this suffering. He spoke as though he wasn't perfectly aware that not knowing her was where pain hardened into torture.

Paimon must have seen his fury, for he gave a short laugh. "*Amore*. It makes fools of us all, doesn't it?"

"I want a trade," Giles said abruptly.

There was a long, incredulous pause. "A trade?" Paimon repeated. "For what?"

"Buffy. I...I don't know what, but I'll do anything. Just...release her from the pact, and I'll do anything." Giles drew in a deep breath and took a brave step forward. "Whatever you want. Whatever you feel is an adequate replacement for her debt. I—"

He didn't get any further. Paimon was laughing.

Paimon was laughing *hard*, the sound like thunder. His body shook and the walls seemed to shake with him. In an instant, the world blackened and Spike couldn't see—couldn't see or feel anything.

This wasn't something they could defeat—this simply *was*.

"You fool," the Hell King rasped. "Do you really think I deceived her just for the joy of claiming her life? For the thrill of holding the Slayer's strength in my hand? Her strength is *nothing* compared to the legions I have at my command. I could crush her, you, this town...hell, the whole miserable state with a blink if I wished. And honestly, Mr. Giles, for all the knowledge you possess, all the otherworldly smarts you have lying at your feet, I confess myself...disappointed."

Giles didn't move. Neither did Spike.

"You are, after all, a watcher, are you not? You know as well as I do that the Slayer's power...or *daimons*, if you prefer..." Paimon snickered

at the word. “The daimon’s power is connected through the generations. The death of one activates the next. And the next. And the next. It’s something that is *passed* on. Not kept. If the Slayer willingly sacrifices that power before death, it removes not only her daimon but the line as a whole. A slayer’s power cannot be confiscated before death—not without her consent. Sweet Buffy consented. And in doing so, she damned the world.”

It was as though life itself was sucked from the room. If Giles’s heart had a beat to it, Spike couldn’t hear it. He couldn’t hear anything beyond the shrieking in his head.

“The...” Giles swallowed very hard, and suddenly the silence around them shattered with the thundering of his chest and the heady rush of his pulse. Spike was at once swimming in human sensation. “The... Powers...wouldn’t allow...”

“Oh, the Powers have certainly given me a run,” Paimon agreed. “Even arranged to have the poor girl die last year so that her Calling would be passed on before I could collect. It didn’t take, I’m afraid. As long as little Buffy lives—as long as she pumps her human blood and beats her human heart and lives her little human life, our agreement holds a higher value than the line of potentials waiting after her. The girl they tried to Call... Well, she’ll die. As will every other girl with an inner daimon. The line will cease to exist. I’m sorry to say...” A smile stretched his lipless mouth. “To think, had her little friend not revived her, he might have saved the world.”

“Good god...”

“I suppose if one of you really wanted to, you could kill the girl to stop me,” Paimon said with a shrug. “The permanent sort of death. Not the kind she wakes up from with nothing more than a headache and a fear of drowning to show for it. But somehow, I don’t think either of you has the nerve. Not her precious father...” He nodded to Giles. “Which was why I chose you. You were perfect for her. The antithesis to Kenneth Travers, who would be cutting off her head right about now. And William...” He turned to Spike. “Well...I suppose you might have it in you. Not that I wish it by any means, but the betrayal on her face would almost be worth losing the world.” The Hell King fell silent for a few long, pensive seconds. “So there you have it, gentle-



men. Dear Buffy's strength is not for sale." He paused, even as his body began to melt into the shadows playing against the wall. "You know, I believe the world will be the devil's playground by this time next week." He winked. "Should be fun. Hope to see you there."

And then, without fanfare, he was gone.

“DON’T BOGART THE WHISKEY.”

Giles arched a brow. “It’s my whiskey. I believe I’ll drink as much as I please.”

“I want to get so bloody sloshed I can’t feel feelings anymore.” Spike pressed his palm hard against his brow. “Til all of this becomes nothin’ more than a fuzzy memory.” He sighed, trying, to little avail, to hide how hard he was trembling. “Think they make anythin’ that strong?”

The watcher smiled, poured a moderate amount of auburn-colored liquid into a tumbler and slid the serving down the length of his kitchen counter. “If they have, I haven’t found it yet,” he replied and took a liberal swig directly from the bottle. A quiet minute passed between them. “Are you going to tell her?”

“Tell her?”

There was no question of what Giles referred, but neither wanted to say it.

Neither wanted to say *anything*.

Spike tossed back his shot. Giles refilled it. They drank.

“It seems too bloody impossible that I was relieved when she told me,” the watcher mused. “I was afraid it would be her soul.”

“Her soul?”

“The price. I thought her soul was the price. Apparently, though, slayer souls hold little to no value in hell dimensions.” Giles sighed and ran a hand through his graying hair. “I was so relieved when she told me that. When she told me the price was her strength. I thought...”

“You thought the demon would smile and blink an’ be okay with somethin’...simple?” Spike drew in a breath. “This isn’t reincarnation, Rupes. This isn’t just...stickin’ my essence in a new body. He took us right from where we were an’ plopped us here. He just shot us into the future.”

“I understand. And I knew there would be repercussions beyond the obvious. Of course there would be. But...” Giles sighed again and shook his head. “I don’t know what I thought. Perhaps her powers would be passed on. Perhaps... I don’t know. God, I don’t know. But I should have. I should have known the second she said it. The instant she told me, I should’ve known.”

There was nothing to say to that—nothing which would provide comfort, anyway. Truly, Spike didn’t understand how the watcher had missed it, either. He didn’t know how anyone so close to the Slayer could be so oblivious.

If there was no cure—if Paimon wouldn’t release Buffy from her debt or accept a different payment in her stead—then their options stood at a dismal two. Either the world turned into hell and Buffy died, or Buffy died so the world could live.

Spike scoffed. Bigger the world. He didn’t care. If Buffy died, he died. It was as simple as that.

“Will the Council try to off her?” Spike asked solemnly.

Giles blinked and glanced up. “What?”

“The Council. They won’t see her as a bloody person, will they? They’ll find out and send a little army of slayer-assassins to kill her. Kill her so they can *save the world*.” His demon roared at the very thought. “I tell you now, they try to touch her, and—”

“The Council doesn’t know, nor will they.” Giles swallowed hard. “Whatever is decided will be decided by us. Not Quentin Travers.”

Spike choked on his third shot. “*Travers?*” he rasped. “There’s a *Travers* in—”

“Kenneth Travers’ great-great-great-great-nephew, if my sources are correct.” Giles’s brow furrowed. “Give or take a great. I don’t particularly care to do the math right now. Yes, Quentin is a very senior member of the Watchers Council. And while the stories Buffy told me of his ancestor aren’t entirely reassuring, I don’t think Quentin has the same ruthlessness as—”

“His name is Travers. That’s all I need—”

“He will not be informed.”

Spike shot his eyebrows upward. “You mean he won’t already know?”

“Your and Buffy’s history was erased from books, Spike. The history didn’t reappear until her memories were restored. And even so, the passages allude to nothing of an unnatural trade.” Giles snorted, dropping his glasses into the waiting hem of his dress-shirt. “Paimon undoubtedly wanted the Watchers Council left completely unaware of what had taken place.”

Spike swallowed. Hard. “Our history...it’s there now?”

“It lists you as Buffy’s killer.” Giles held up a hand. “Kenneth Travers had nothing to do with that, though from what Buffy has told me, I wouldn’t have been surprised if he had. As it was, he was—”

“Dead,” Spike agreed softly. “She...”

“It was self-defense.”

“She told you?”

A sad, gentle smile stretched Giles’s mouth, his eyes filling with a sort of fatherly love which had Spike’s admiration for the watcher increasing tenfold. This was the sort of bloke she should have had all along. The kind of man who viewed Buffy as a human first; a human with human thoughts, human feelings, and above all, human value. To him, she wasn’t a disposable weapon with arms and legs. She was his child. She was his daughter.

Perhaps it wouldn’t have been a cakewalk in the eighteenth century, but Spike had the hunch that, had Rupert Giles been alive, things would have turned out differently.

“She’s told me many things,” he said. “When she couldn’t talk to you, she talked to me.”

The reminder of his earlier behavior had him shuddering. “I wasted

so much time,” he murmured, his eyes falling shut. “I should’ve known her immediately.”

“Paimon decreed it otherwise. You broke through. That much is a victory.”

“I just found her again. This can’t...” He swallowed hard. “This can’t be it. I can’t lose her. I *can’t*.”

“I was determined to find a loophole,” Giles murmured before taking another swig of whiskey. “I was so bloody certain there was one. Otherwise... God, why go to the trouble?”

“Huss’at?”

“There’s something we’re missing. There has to be.”

“How you figure?”

“Paimon had nothing to personally gain from keeping you and Buffy apart,” Giles explained. “And yet, he went to such lengths. He put you in the arms of another woman. He ensured Buffy had a healthy, happy upbringing...best to his ability without bending freewill. He couldn’t keep her father from leaving her mother, of course, but he could keep them *alive*. And he ensured I was the one who was here to be her watcher.”

Spike nodded slowly, his brain hurting to piece together fact with knowledge, which proved difficult as his thoughts were muddled. It probably didn’t help that he was planning on drinking Rupert under the table, either. “Doesn’t rightly make sense,” he agreed.

“We are all fools in love,” Giles said bitterly.

Spike glanced up. “What?”

“That’s what I said,” Giles continued, meeting Spike’s eyes. “Earlier tonight...before I tried summoning Paimon. Before you came down stairs. The wanker threw it back at me.”

The implication settled. “He’s been lurkin’?”

“No. No, he’s not. He’s not of this world, Paimon. There’s a reason he has to be summoned. He needs human blood to ground him.”

“Then how’d he manage to drop in without the fancy words an’ all?”

Giles frowned. “To make us believe he doesn’t need it. I think he wants us to *think* he’s lurking, to keep us from trying to find an answer. If we think he’s listening, we’ll be discouraged from trying to find an

alternative solution. He said he likes to keep close before collecting what he is owed...but he can't keep close. He's a thing of Hell. If he had the sort of power to keep constant vigilance on human dealings, the world would be lost in never-ending chaos."

"More so than it already is, you mean."

"Yes, more than anything we could ever imagine."

Thunder echoed in the corners of Spike's mind. "Feature this, Watcher," he said slowly. "The price is in the bag, yeah?"

Giles nodded.

"Why even pretend to lurk? What's this bloke figure he has to gain from popping in? He's learned I can't lose her... That I..." Spike's voice crackled and his eyes misted again. He couldn't let his thoughts take that path. He couldn't. If he started thinking about the weight of everything in the balance—the girl he loved who would be ripped in half in less than a week—he would be too shattered to proceed. And he couldn't stop. He couldn't concede the battle just yet.

He couldn't give up when the next few days meant *everything*.

"He wants us to choose," Giles said slowly. "He put out an impossible solution. Kill Buffy or the world dies."

"I don't get that."

"If Paimon collects Buffy's power—"

"She and all the little potentials kick it. I get *that*. I just don't understand *why*." Spike shook his head hard. "If she learns that, you know what she's gonna ask me to do, don't you?"

Giles's face drained of color. "It's something we should...consider."

"Don't."

"Spike, I—"

"*Don't!*" he roared, his glass plummeting to the floor. "You don't get to do that. You don't get to talk about *killing her* as though it's an option."

The watcher drew in a sharp breath. "If Paimon collects her power—"

"Yeah. I got the memo, Rupes. Like a string of Christmas lights, yeah? Take Buffy out and the whole line bites the dust. Can you imagine how little I care?"

“Without the Slayer as the Earth’s protector, everything will fall to chaos.”

“If Buffy dies, I die, and I don’t give a flying fuck about the rest of you.”

“You would give up so easily?”

Spike scoffed again. “Easily?” he demanded. “I’ve already died once for her. I died so she *wouldn’t*. Now we’re here, and you’re tellin’ me that once she’s gone, Earth becomes a demonic romp room and the ones who don’t die will suffer. Sounds a lot like Hell. But I gotta tell you, if I’m gonna be in Hell, I want the real thing. Not some pansy-arse knock-off.” He shrugged. “Nothin’ to keep me here, near as I can figure it.”

There was a long pause. “Spike,” Giles said, “she wouldn’t want to be the reason the world ends.”

“And she’s not gonna be.”

“Spike—”

“You’re really doin’ it, aren’t you? You’re tellin’ me I should *kill* the woman I love—”

“For the betterment of the world, perhaps, yes.”

The fuzzy feelings Spike had entertained for the watcher just minutes before evaporated, and the demon tore forward with fury. He felt his fangs descend, a monster’s growl ripping through the air. “You gormless, yellow-bellied git,” he roared. “If you come near her, I’ll rip you apart, limb by sodding limb.”

And then something amazing happened.

Giles burst into tears.

Spike didn’t know why it took him by such surprise. It wasn’t as though he knew the plonker well enough to peg his every emotion, but hard, bone-crushing sobs were possibly the last thing he would have expected. And yet here he was; standing awkwardly with his fangs itching for something to chew on, and his target had melted without a fight.

“I—I—I can’t...” Giles sputtered, shaking his head, yanking out a handkerchief to mop up his tears. “I can’t...”

Spike exhaled slowly, his anger subsiding. “Rupert...”

“I can’t... But she...”

“I can’t, either.”

“If we don’t, the world ends.”

“My world’s ending anyway. I don’t rightly give a toss about what’s left over.” A meaningful beat passed. “Do you?”

A heartbreaking laugh wracked the watcher’s shoulders. “Honestly?” he repeated, speaking into his handkerchief. “No.”

Spike offered a half-smile. “Your secret’s safe with me.”

“There has to be a way. The world is not based on absolutes. There are *always* loopholes. *Always*.” Giles blew his nose, his red-rimmed eyes slowly trailing upward. “There’s something we’re missing.”

“You said that already.”

“Well, it’s as true now as it was five minutes ago. Paimon went to so much trouble to keep you apart.” The worry lines in his face deepened with thought. “There’s something about your proximity to each other that has him concerned.”

Spike swallowed hard but forced himself not to jump. “How d’you figure?”

“He came to her only after she remembered. He told her the timing wasn’t what he wanted, but he was left without option.” A beat. “Because of you.”

The watcher met his eyes again and logic faded. The room fell silent again, the air growing so thick Spike nearly choked. Giles was talking without words and the message was deafening. And in that fraction of a second, they understood each other.

“It’s never worked,” Spike said. “Never.”

“I know.”

“A slayer has never survived—”

“I know.”

“It’ll kill her.”

“I know.” Giles sighed and wiped his eyes. “I just wanted to...to put it out there.”

Spike offered a numb nod but didn’t say anything. His mind was with his own words.

*It’ll kill her.*

It was true. It *would* kill her. And even though Buffy’s death lurked



around every corner as it was, it wasn't a risk he was willing to take—that just because Paimon had gone to such lengths to keep them apart, this was the answer to saving her. The gamble wasn't worth her life. Not unless there were no other options.

Death was coming for Buffy no matter what, it seemed.

All they had left to do was decide how it arrived.



SHE'D BEEN AWAKE A LONG WHILE WHEN HE FINALLY RETURNED. And while she hadn't heard everything, she knew he and Giles had been fighting. And crying. Over her. Because of what she'd done. The choices she made.

It amazed her that Spike could still love her when all she did was cause him misery. The first time with Kenneth and now *this*. This granting him his memories when she should have let him live without them.

It was a lie she'd believed as well. A lie that grief had led her to believe.

*It was a long time ago*, she told herself.

The knowledge provided little solace. Yes, it was a long time ago. Nearly three centuries ago.

It might as well have been yesterday.

Buffy didn't move when she felt him lingering, watching her. She feared if she moved, all she would do was sob. And Spike didn't need that.

It seemed forever passed before he exhaled and moved forward. Before she felt the dip in the bed and the comfort of his arms wrapping around her body. He pressed his lips against her shoulder, his chest at her back. She felt his breath tickle her hair as he drew in oxygen he didn't need.

For long seconds, she thought he would speak. He did not.

He just held her in his arms.

Though for the way he trembled, she knew it was she who was holding him.

MORNING CAME ALL TOO QUICKLY. Another day down between now and the end of Buffy. Of his world—the only world that mattered.

Spike sighed and brushed his lips across her cotton-clad shoulder. She was still wearing his tee—the one he'd dressed her in before taking off for the watcher's flat. It was wrapped around her like a blanket or a shield. As though the outside world couldn't touch her so long as she had it.

If bloody only.

Spike sighed and dropped a kiss against her shoulder, then until his lips were brushing the bite mark he'd left on her throat. The one that made her his.

"Mmm," she murmured, stretching. "That tickles."

He swallowed hard. He wanted to bury himself in her arms and will reality away. He wanted to coerce her into promises she couldn't keep. He wanted to dissolve and have all dissolve with him.

"Sleep well?" he replied, skimming a hand down the length of her stomach. The question was ridiculous but he didn't care. Right now they needed as much *ridiculous* as the world could afford. If these were the last days with her, he was going to make them count.

The first time, he hadn't known death was coming. This time he did.

"Like a baby," she retorted, and her tone told him full well that she knew he could hear the lie in her words. She was pretending, too, and she was doing it for him. "Giles has a surprisingly comfy bed. I thought it'd be like the rest of him—stiff as a board, and all that."

Spike smiled, slipping his fingers between her thighs, which parted easily for him. "Least you slept. Wish I could say the same."

"Yeah, well, you skipped out and went downstairs to get all chummy with your fellow Brit."

God, were it only that. "Sorry sweetness," he murmured and dragged his blunt teeth across the claim mark as his fingers explored the wet flesh of her pussy. "Should've known better than to have left you up here all by your lonesome."

"Yeah..."

He loved the breathy little sounds she made. The way her pulse quickened and the tempo of her heartbeat steadily increased. Spike released a muffled moan into her throat, pushing his middle and index fingers into her as his thumb found her clit. "You're so warm," he murmured. "So bloody hot."

A purely feminine whimper tickled the air. "Mmm. I try."

"I love the way you feel around me," he whispered as he began pumping in a steady rhythm. He wanted to go slowly—wanted to savor every second of this. He wanted to fill the next five days with all the memories the past three centuries had denied them.

"Are you sore, kitten?" he asked, rubbing her clit a bit harder now.

"Not sore," she replied, thrusting her hips to capture him every time his hand made to pull away.

"We were... I was rough with you last night."

"I liked it."

He grinned. "I should hope so. But...you were..."

"Virgin-but-not." Buffy hissed as he pressed down on her clit. "I know. God...feels so good."

"Yeah?"

"Spike...please."

"Please what?"

She batted her eyes. “Ummm...your fingers feel...wonderful.” Pink deepened every inch of her skin, and his heart about exploded with love. “But I want...I want *you*.”

Spike blinked hard, willing himself not to cry. Christ, if the girl could be brave about this, so could he. He could pretend they were enjoying the morning after they’d never had. Not the first time they made love so long ago, and not this time. He could pretend he wasn’t breaking at the thought of how his life would look in a week. And how he would make the world suffer before he joined her.

“You have me,” he replied, driving his fingers deeper. “You always have.”

“I want your...thing inside me.”

Her innocence, it seemed, was in absolutely no danger at all. She was still his ray of purity. His sex goddess who could be sucking his cock like it held the antidote and blushing at his crudity. Spike chuckled. “My thing?”

“Don’t make me say it!”

“What happened to Forward Buffy?”

He felt rather than saw her pout. “You love all incarnations, remember?”

“I remember.”

“*Spike*, please...” She twisted slightly in his arms so that his eyes were suddenly lost in hers. Then her hand was at his cheek, and her soft lips were caressing his. “Need you. And don’t pretend you don’t know what I mean or I’ll get cranky.”

A shiver raced down his spine. He loved the way she murmured his name. “You sure you’re not sore?” he whispered, his wet fingers abandoning her pussy to free his cock.

“I swear. Now get inside me.”

Somewhere in the deep recesses of his mind, Spike knew they should be talking. He knew he should tell her how much he loved her again and again if only to negate all the time he wasted. He should have told her the first time he’d seen her. He should have known then.

There were other things, too. The weight of the bargain loomed above them, shadowing every caress, every kiss, every stolen glance. But as he sank inside her, there was a piece of Heaven the Hell King

couldn't hope to sully. And for now, Spike didn't want to face the reality waiting for them downstairs. He didn't want to meet the watcher's eyes and see nothing but despair. He didn't want to think about anything except the way her flesh molded around his cock. The way her body hummed. The way she mewled and thrust back against him every time he withdrew. The way her pussy clenched around him, determined, it seemed, to keep him locked within her forever.

"I love you," he whispered into her hair, slipping a hand between her legs again to tease her clit. "I love you, Buffy."

"I love you," she replied breathlessly, thrusting back against him with a need she couldn't hide. "Oh Will..."

"It'll be all right. We'll make it all right."

She whimpered and wrapped a hand around his wrist. "I'm so sorry," she whispered, squeezing him. "So—"

"Don't—"

"Oh god, I'm so sorry."

Spike nipped at the claim mark, a ragged breath hissing through his lips as he pushed his cock deeper inside her. "Don't be sorry," he murmured. "Just don't leave me."

Buffy gasped and squeezed his wrist again, but didn't reply. It was a promise she couldn't make, he knew, and despite everything, she wouldn't lie to him.

Even when he needed it.



THE PHONE CALL WOULD HAVE BEEN LATE BY NORMAL STANDARDS. As it was, it came just as Angel was preparing for bed. He arrived at Giles's home around five in the morning and left less than an hour later. Strange how one little hour could change so much—he'd learned he'd lost Buffy to another man...which was of no surprise, but it still stung. What *was* surprising was that she was mated to the other man.

Oh, and that she was going to die.

Anger could wait. Frustration was on hold. His feelings didn't matter right now. All that mattered was Buffy.

There was no time to rest. No time to wait. Upon leaving the

watcher's home, Angel immediately set about picking up Spike's scent and focused where it mingled with Dru's. If there was an answer, he knew his unruly offspring would have it.

The most extensive library on the Slayer, her origin, and her power belonged to Spike. Angel knew it for a fact; he remembered taunting his disruptive somewhat-spawn for weeks after planting the Slayer seed. Remembered the way Spike had snagged the line in a way no vampire before him ever had. Angel had name-dropped the *Slayer* in the hope of scaring the boy into submission.

He never thought it would have the reverse effect.

Angel supposed, looking back, that as twisted as the last few days' revelations had been, there was an undeniable logic to it all. At least the sort of logic he was finished arguing with.

All that mattered now was Buffy. Buffy and this idiotic bargain she'd made.

This thing that would kill her and plausibly end the world.

It was strange, feeling his heart clench after so many years of sitting dormant. It had happened just last year when he'd she was going to die and he hadn't been prepared for it to happen again. Not now. Buffy couldn't die. She couldn't. He had all eternity to feel sorry for himself—to piss and moan over the fact that his destiny had dialed a wrong number. That in fact, Spike had been her intended all along. It hurt but he would get over it. He would.

Some day.

He wouldn't, however, ever forgive himself if he allowed his anger at Spike and his irritation with Buffy to blind him so much it got her killed.

No matter how frazzled Giles was, his original theory had to be right. If this demon Buffy had bartered with—this *Paimon*—was suddenly showing an interest in collecting his payment, they must be close to discovering a loophole. Perhaps the loophole would be found in Spike's personal slayer-library. Perhaps there was a book there that Giles didn't have or hadn't read.

It was a stretch, but Angel had to hope.

He arrived at the factory three minutes before sunrise when most of the minions Spike had either recruited or adopted had retired for

the day. Better off that way. Dusting his way to the books would only slow him down.

There was one face, though, he couldn't avoid. She'd likely known he was coming here before he had.

Angel stepped onto the ground floor. "Drusilla?"

There was no response. He knew she was here. The air was thick with her scent.

"Dru...it's me. It's Angel." A pause. "I need to borrow some books."

It had been nearly a hundred years since he'd seen his creation, and when she finally approached the threshold of the bedroom she'd once shared with Spike, his heart nearly skipped. Her skin was paler than he remembered, her hair in a mess and her nightgown torn by what looked to be her own fingernails. It was her eyes, however, that lent him pause. Crazy as she was, her eyes had always exploded with life. With the genius of her own wickedness. The evil of her nature conflicting with the good of her human soul. The remnants of who she'd once been and who she was now.

There was no life to her at all. Her eyes were large and vacant. She looked abandoned by her own insanity.

"Angel," she breathed, her voice soft and melodic. As though she walked through a dream. "Did you bring me daisies?"

He swallowed hard. "I'm here for Spike's books," he said.

"My water-lilies have rotted. I was so hoping for some daisies." A pause. "You need my dearheart's books?"

Angel pursed his lips and took a cautious step forward. "I think we both know he's not yours."

"He was supposed to make me well again."

"You kicked him out."

Not that logic worked with the insane, but it was worth a shot. Angel grew still, working to reconcile what he was seeing. Spike had told him, ultimately, what had become of Drusilla. He'd never imagined it being so real. All this from a mob. His favorite child weakened by the limitations that had so often served as her greatest strength.

Dru was a vampire. She would heal. Eventually she would return to full strength.

Just not now. Not with the speed Spike had promised her. Not

without the miracle cure they had come to Sunnydale to find. It would be a long, grueling process, but she would make it.

And then she would be the most dangerous thing the world had ever known. A woman twice scorned with Ophelia's insanity but Hamlet's intellect. Angel shuddered at the thought.

Drusilla blinked as though fighting for a memory. "He's lost to me," she murmured. "My William wants to dance in the sunlight."

"Your William is someone else entirely."

For some reason, it helped to admit that much aloud. It made the truth easier to accept.

"Oh. I remember now. He's not mine. He's hers. He always has been. And now he mourns for her." An insane cackle bubbled off her lips, her eyes flashing. "It's so funny."

Angel raced down his spine but he refused to show it. "I need the books, Dru."

"To save her, Daddy?" Drusilla cocked her head. "Oh. That's right. You're not my daddy. You're just a mask. Another mask."

"Dru—"

"Both lost to sunlight. My William. My daddy." Another giggle. "It's so funny."

"Yeah...that's the second time you've said that and I'm still not getting the joke." He took another step forward. "Really, I'm just here for the books."

"Books won't save her, my sweet."

Angel froze. "What?"

"Your sunlight. She's about to go out, isn't she? The stars were whispering all sorts of wicked things." At that, Dru broke out into a slow, sly grin. "My knight will come back to me."

"Again, you kicked him out."

"Freed birds always fly home. He doesn't know. The only thing that makes the sun rise again is the fall of night."

Angel inhaled and waited.

"He won't do it," Dru continued, pulling at her tangled hair and twisting it around her fingers. "He can't."

"Do what?"

She blinked as though the answer was obvious. "What he must do."



And when he cannot, mummy will be here. Waiting. Mummy will make everything better.”

Angel was very still. “Why not?” he asked. Experience had taught him to be cautious with Drusilla. The mood of an insane woman was never easy to peg—throw in a poisoned heart and there were no safe gambles.

She blinked. “Why, why, why...”

“Why can’t he save her?”

“Because, my sweet. For the Slayer to live, she has to die.”

SPIKE SLEPT ALL DAY, and she was glad. He needed sleep. He'd spent the night pacing her watcher's floor and debating their options, shaving centuries off his eternal lifeline over worry for her. Not a peaceful sleep, but it was sleep. And it was what he needed.

Buffy had lain with him a long time, convinced Giles would call for her if her presence was required. It eventually occurred to her that she'd just had sex in her surrogate father's bed and had been rather unapologetically loud about it. Flushing with shame—which was a nice distraction from fear—she double-checked her hair for adequate fluffiness and a hopeful dose of why-no-I-wasn't-sinning-rampantly-in-your-bed-why-do-you-ask and headed downstairs.

She still only had on Spike's T-shirt as far as clothing went. If Giles insisted she stay the night again, she might need to schedule a clothing-run.

"Just a warning," she called as she turned to make her way downstairs. "I haven't showered, my hair's a mess, and I'm overall a cranky slayer, so, even this is your house, if..." Her foot met the floor just as her eyes found Angel's. "Ummm...hi."

The vampire did nothing. Said nothing. He just looked at her, somewhat stricken.

“Ahem,” Giles coughed pointedly into his tea, offering her a tired, however sincere smile. “There you are.”

“What time is it?”

“Just past sunset. Angel...ahh...” He inhaled and glanced down. “He just arrived.”

Buffy blinked in surprise. Past sunset? That didn’t sound right.

As though reading her mind, Giles placed his teacup aside and took a step forward. “Don’t worry,” he said, his voice kind and reassuring. “It was likely better that you rest.”

Okay. When her watcher advocated sleep over research, he was either overly confident or he was throwing in the towel.

“Angel just arrived,” he said again, motioning to the sofa with a quick nod. “I believe he has some information for us.”

Buffy frowned, her legs carrying her to the indicated sofa and sitting her down without her permission. “Info?” she repeated, confused. “I didn’t know he was in the place to collect info.”

“Giles called me this morning,” Angel explained. “He told me everything.”

She pursed her lips. “Okay. Is this a scolding party or—”

“No. No scolding.”

“I strictly forbade scolding under my roof,” Giles added with a slight smile. “It feels so bloody awkward coming from someone who isn’t me.”

Buffy’s lips tugged upward in a grin. There was no arguing with that.

“So what’s the what?” she asked, resituating herself so she was sitting on her legs, careful to not reveal her lack of underwear. Damn Spike for having destroyed them earlier. “You have info? I’m in a learning mood. Wanna share?”

Angel paused. “Where’s Spike?”

“Sleeping. And I’m not bothering him unless it’s something important.”

It seemed natural that the next thing she heard was the vampire-in-question’s voice. Her life was a walking pun like that.

“Consider him bothered,” Spike said, emerging from Giles’s bedroom. He was dressed only in his jeans. “What’s Granddad doin’

here?” he asked, making his way to the ground floor.

“I had him run some errands for me today,” Giles explained. “About...what we discussed last night.”

“Might wanna be a bit less vague on the details, Rupes,” Spike retorted. “We talked about loads last night.”

“This is about the loophole.”

A pause. “Didn’t know we’d found one, unless you’re talkin’ about what you better *not* be talkin’ about.”

Buffy frowned. “Did I miss something?”

“Look,” Angel interjected with a weary sigh, “I don’t like it any more than you, but I’ve been doing my homework today.”

Spike perked his brows and tossed Giles an accusatory glare. “Did you invite this git—”

“Yes,” Giles replied unapologetically. “I rather think, given the circumstances, that the two of you might be able to put aside any lingering hostilities you hold for each other and focus on the problem at hand.”

Buffy waved. “Hi. I’m the problem.”

Spike looked wounded at that. “You’re not the problem, kitten. You’re—”

“The reason we’re all here. The reason the world’s in jeopardy. In my book, this spells problem.” She held up a hand. “Yes, I know. It’s hard not to hear the entire ‘the world’s gonna end’ thing when tempers are high.”

“Sweetheart—”

She shook her head and waved again. “No. I don’t...*we* don’t need to get into that right now.” She paused and expelled a deep breath and met Angel’s eyes, shifting to make room for Spike. He was at her side in an instant, his arm around her waist. “So...with the news.”

Angel swallowed hard and nodded. “I went...I went to the factory.”

That meant nothing to her. “Ummm...good for you?”

“It’s where I was staying, love,” Spike whispered, tensing almost imperceptibly. “Where I went when Dru and I first came to town.” He fell silent. Then, quietly, he asked, “You went for the books, didn’t you?”

Angel nodded.

“Books?” Buffy demanded. “What books?”

“Books on the Slayer,” Angel replied, not taking his eyes off Spike. “He’s been collecting them since I first mentioned the Slayer to him back...oh, god, however many years ago that was. It’s...well, probably the most extensive library on the Slayer not in the possession of the Council.”

Spike shifted almost uncomfortably. Buffy grinned and reached for his hand, giving him a reassuring squeeze. The words didn’t need to be said; she heard them loud and clear. He had books because he’d been looking for her, whether he’d known it or not.

“You find ‘em, then?” Spike asked, keeping his gaze on Angel. “Dru jus’ hand them over?”

“It took some persuading. She’s...” A shadow crossed Angel’s face. “She told me something. I don’t think she meant to. She’s convinced she just let you go for a while.”

Buffy’s brow furrowed and something within her growled. “Dru’s got a bitch fight coming.”

Spike chuckled like there was something worth laughing about, then kissed her temple.

“Dru doesn’t understand,” Angel agreed, nodding. “She thinks it’s a game. She thinks...she thinks it’ll be over and Spike’ll—”

“What?” her vampire barked. “Crawl back to her? Beg her forgiveness? The loony bint actually thinks—”

Angel’s hands came up. “Don’t stake the messenger.”

“But it would make me feel *so* much better.”

Giles cleared his throat loudly. “Please,” he said. “Angel, continue.”

There was a short pause; the elder vampire nodded. “She referred to Buffy as...as sunshine. And how the sunshine was going out...how night was coming.”

“That’s what Dru does,” Spike all but growled. “She talks in bloody riddles. She—”

“She said night has to fall before the sun rises again.” Angel quirked an eyebrow. “That sounds a bit less like a riddle and more like a vision, don’t you think?”

Spike offered a pouty scoff. “Vision wrapped in riddle, maybe.”

Angel’s eyes fell shut and his face hardened. It was the look he

always wore when he was fighting for patience. “She said the only way for the Slayer to live was if she died.”

Buffy frowned, a cold wind blowing through her skin. “I see,” she said, her voice strained. “And in the category of ‘things we already knew’...”

“I don’t think she meant it like that,” he replied. “I don’t think she meant the Slayer line. I think she meant *you*.”

The room fell silent. Giles and Spike traded furtive glances.

“I...” Buffy didn’t realize how hard she was trembling until her mate again brushed his lips across her temple. The touch was brief but it gave her strength. “I don’t follow,” she said.

Angel sighed. “Look...I don’t like this, but I’ve been looking at it all day. I got the... I got what books I could from Dru before she started... Well, before she had one of her infamous mood swings.”

Spike snickered but didn’t say anything.

“I think she means...Buffy, I think Dru means in order for you to live, you have to be turned.”

Her ears filled with a loud, piercing hum and her eyes lost focus. “T-turned?” she asked, her voice barely a whisper. Suddenly she found herself propelled into a parallel universe in which a little boy in a coma could bring a person’s worst fear to life. She remembered the way her face had felt under her hands, ridges and all. How her stomach had gargled and growled, the alien sensation of fangs in her mouth and the nauseating need for blood. She remembered it all.

She was going to be sick.

“No,” Spike growled, glaring at Angel. “You can’t—”

“Look—”

“Turned?” Buffy repeated, her voice pitched higher than usual.

Giles did the throat-clearing thing again. “Buffy—”

“Tell him I’m not gonna be turned,” she demanded.

“You’re not gonna be,” Spike whispered. “I wouldn’t do that to you.”

“You might not have a choice,” Angel snapped. “You’d rather sacrifice her than give *anything* a try?”

Spike snarled, his eyes blazing yellow. “What you’re talking about isn’t a sodding try. It’s *murder*; you bloody pillock!” He tore himself

from her side and leaped to his feet. “You’d really risk her life over somethin’ that might bloody well *kill* her?”

“Her life is going to *end* if we don’t do something!” Angel shot back. “Nothing can stop that, Spike. Believe me. I’ve looked.”

“You spent a *day* porin’ over those books—”

“I could spend the rest of this century and most of the next searching for a different way but there’s not one. What’s more, you *know* it.” It was a rare day when Angel got so worked up that his chest actually heaved. “You know there’s no other way.”

There was a long pause. “This could kill her,” Spike repeated, anger evaporating. “If I do this, it could kill her.”

“If you don’t, you’ll kill her anyway.”

Buffy licked her lips, fighting to keep her mind straight, which proved more than difficult with all the yelling. “This really is the only... the only way?” she asked. “Turning me into a vampire—”

“You wouldn’t be a vampire,” Giles said. “Slayers cannot be turned into vampires.”

The fire eating her insides washed away. Buffy exhaled, thanking her lucky stars that she wasn’t on her feet, else she knew she would’ve fallen over. “You might’ve mentioned that to me to begin with,” she said, flattening her palms against her knees as her thundering heart fought for normalcy. “Beginning after my nightmares last year. Jeez. You guys nearly gave me an aneurism.”

But no one laughed. No one rushed to reassure her.

“You wouldn’t be a vampire,” Giles repeated, “but there is...there is something that would happen. It’s never been successful, attempting what Angel is suggesting.”

She swallowed. Hard. “Do what?”

“No one can have two demons inside them,” Spike said shortly. “When you get turned, your soul leaves your body and a demon takes over.”

“But because of your daimon, your soul cannot be removed...at least, this is what Paimon has led us to conclude,” Giles continued. “And your daimon cannot be removed because it is a part of who you are.”

Oh right. The demon thing. She’d nearly forgotten.

Giles drew in a deep breath. “Your dominant trait is human, as I told you last night. Essentially, when we speak of ‘turning’ a slayer, what we mean is reversing nature’s process and making her human side recessive and her demon dominant. If successful, nothing much would change. You would, understandably, be stronger. Much, *much* stronger. You would also be tapped into the vampiric lifeline.”

“Meaning...”

“As a demon, and the Yin to the vampire’s Yang, you would no longer age.”

Buffy worried her bottom lip between her teeth. “I’d be immortal.”

“And damn hard to kill. Pure slayer concentrate, and all that,” Spike agreed softly. “But it’s not gonna happen, love. It can’t. No slayer has ever survived the change.”

“You’d rather her die at the hands of the Hell King, then?” Angel snapped.

“I’d rather find an answer that won’t only *maybe* work.”

“There isn’t time for that! There’s—”

“Why has it never worked?” Buffy asked, amazed that her soft voice was able to slice through the screaming.

“As Spike said,” Giles said, “no person...no *vampire*, even...can host two demons at once. When a move is made to turn a person into a vampire, it involves a demon invading the host. You already have a daimon. What would ensue would essentially be a war over your body, and since you are human, there is no way you would be able to withstand it.”

Buffy frowned. Her ears were beginning to ring again. “But I thought...with the strong and the immortal and—”

“You can’t possibly be thinkin’ about doing this,” Spike barked.

“I’m thinking about it.”

Spike crashed to his knees beside her in a blink. “Buffy...this’ll kill you.”

“I’m gonna die anyway.”

“We’ll find another way, baby. We’ll find—”

“This is the way,” Angel said softly. “Spike, I don’t like it any more than you do—”



“I think I can safely say I like it a whole bloody lot less,” Spike snarled.

“I don’t think that’s possible,” the other vampire retorted.

Buffy sighed. This was getting out of hand, and fast. The anguished fear burning through the claim was enough to make mountains bow. Spike was out of his mind with worry, and no answer would appease him. No half-and-half. No in-between. He wanted something concrete. He wanted something that didn’t exist.

“Will,” she whispered, shivering slightly when his eyes found hers again. “Whatever happens, it’s my choice.”

He shook his head, bright gaze blazing with tears. “Buffy, please...”

“It’s my choice. Whatever I decide... If I want to do this, it’s my choice. This is mine.” She trembled, raised a hand to his cheek. “I’m telling you because I love you. But whatever happens, the choice is mine.”

This wasn’t the time to bring up the past, but she knew well the memories her words evoked.

She also knew, feeling his sigh, that he knew she was right.

It was her choice, just as dying for her had been his. Nothing could have changed his mind, and nothing would change hers.

“I can’t lose you,” he whispered against her lips, voice barely audible. “Not again.”

“Then we should listen to them. Angel wouldn’t suggest something guaranteed to kill me if he didn’t think there was a way.” She looked to the vampire in the corner, whose expression had closed off even more at their display. “Neither would Giles. Please, let’s just hear what they have to say. Okay?”

Spike didn’t look so convinced, but he seemed to know there was no talking her out of it. With a nod, he lifted himself upon the sofa again and curled his arm around her waist.

When she felt it was safe to speak again, Buffy turned back to Giles. “You said I wouldn’t survive the turning because of the battle between inner daimon me and outward vampire...whatever. But if I’m all with the strong, then why wouldn’t I be able to kick the vampire-demon’s ass?”

A soft, sad smile drew across her watcher’s face. “The demon would

attempt to possess your body when you're still human. The struggle that would ensue would be your inner daimon battling the demon out and asserting her claim on your body. This is where slayer turnings fail, you see. The inner daimon isn't strong enough because it's buried beneath your humanity. The daimon is killed, and the demon takes over the Slayer's body." He paused. "But a body cannot withstand the inhabitation of another."

Buffy frowned, squeezing Spike's knee when he trembled. "Okay," she said slowly. "Meaning...?"

"It's like a soul, really. Souls cannot exist in a form that is not their host body or the Ether. They can for a time, but not indefinitely. Eventually, the body will reject the soul and shove it out. The same thing can be said for demons." He nodded to Spike. "Paimon modeled William to be the same flesh, the same body, the same soul when he adhered to your bargain. Therein, the same demon was the only acceptable candidate when he was sired by Drusilla. Any other demon would have killed him. When slayers are, for lack of a better word, *sired*, they either die during their battle for their body or they die after the invading presence has won. The body rejects the demon and they cease to be."

"So...in a perfect world..."

"Your daimon would prevail over the invading presence and become dominant," Giles concluded. "It has simply never happened."

"And nothing would change?"

"Nothing," Angel agreed. "Beyond what Giles has told you. You would become immortal and much, much stronger than you are now, but you would still be able to walk in sunlight. You...would still be *human*, Buffy, because the daimon depends on your humanity for survival."

Buffy arched an eyebrow. "Is everyone suddenly an expert on me and the daimonness that is me?"

Angel frowned and shuffled. "I told you I did a lot of reading today," he replied.

"But it's never happened!" Spike erupted. "It's never worked!"

Slayers have tried and they've died for their bloody efforts. We have no sodding reason to think it would work—”

“Yes, we do,” Angel said. “Buffy has something no other slayer has ever had. And that’s why I think this is our best chance.”

“Oh really? Some secret weapon, is it?” Spike snapped. “Well, your holiness, by all means...enlighten us.”

There was a long, pregnant silence. No one moved. No one blinked. No one breathed.

Then Angel was speaking again, and the air vibrated.

“She has you.”

SHE WAS TREMBLING SO HARD she was certain the bed would rattle when she sat. It did not. The room didn't spin, the ground didn't shake, the lights in the room didn't blink. She didn't feel like she was being watched...well, by unwelcome eyes, anyway. She hoped it meant Giles was right—that Paimon's power in this dimension was finite. After what he'd told her of their conversation, she kept expecting the Hell King to bound around the corner and seize her debt before she and Spike could proceed.

Perhaps Paimon was planning on intervening during a crucial moment. Perhaps he would collect the daimon during the change. He'd certainly indicated he was in the know—that he was eavesdropping on every conversation so trying to out-manuever him was a wasted effort.

According to Giles, it was a lie. Paimon had to be summoned for a reason. Demons of his caliber couldn't sustain life in this realm without rites. If Paimon and others like him truly could exist in this realm, there would never be any rest.

"It's very likely he has enough power to manifest whenever he chooses," Giles had explained. "Indeed, he must. But it's very limited, I believe. He came to both you and me. He wasn't with us very long, and it seems reasonable that the point of his visit was to enforce the idea

that not only is he omnipotent, but to dissuade us from seeking loopholes.”

Buffy had perked an eyebrow. “So he James Bonded-himself on purpose?”

Giles had frowned. “Urrr. Yes. Precisely.”

Her watcher’s reassurance notwithstanding, she couldn’t simply switch off her rattling her nerves. The facts remained that these were her last minutes as a normal, earthbound human. If she lived, she would live on as something other than what she was. If Angel was wrong—if the turning didn’t take—then she would die.

She would die.

“Buffy?”

She blinked and glanced up. Spike shadowed the doorway, dressed only in jeans, his eyes heavy. He didn’t want to do this—not when nothing was certain. Not when they were gambling everything on the hope that Paimon’s true reason for keeping them apart was to prevent what was going to happen from happening.

Giles and Angel had concluded as much, that Paimon’s real reason for separating Spike and Buffy was to make his bargain bulletproof. He’d attempted to eradicate Spike’s memories by giving him another woman. He’d reconfigured Buffy’s upbringing so that she’d had a happy childhood rather than a miserable one. He’d done everything he could without bending freewill, and the truly frightening thing was he might have been successful were it not for the claim.

But he *hadn’t* been successful. It was important to remember that. Paimon had failed. He’d taken their memories, but he hadn’t been able to keep them apart, and it was the reason he had to collect her debt now.

“Why wait at all?” Buffy had asked. “He gave me a week, Giles. Why give me that week?”

Giles hadn’t had an answer. He had, however, provided vague suggestions. The New Moon was set to appear on Buffy’s last day. Perhaps there was some constellation moving into alignment. Perhaps a certain number of days had to pass before her powers were up for grabs. It was anyone’s guess.

He did, however, agree that Paimon wouldn’t have waited if it

wasn't needed. There was something keeping him from just taking the debt and getting out of Dodge.

And here they were. She was about to become a daimon.

Or die trying.

"We don't have to do this, sweetheart," Spike murmured. He was on his knees in front of her the next second, running his hands up her thighs. "Not tonight, at least. We can try and find another way."

Buffy swallowed hard and tried to put on a brave face. "Do you really think there is another way?"

His eyes answered her immediately, though his mouth was a little more reluctant. "No," he said after a long minute.

She nodded, glancing down. "I die either way, you know," she whispered. "If not today, then tomorrow. If not tomorrow, then next week."

Spike raised a trembling hand to her bare arm and nodded. "We can wait," he said. "If you need..."

"I think the wait alone would kill me." She forced a smile and shook her head. "There isn't another choice, Will. We both know there's not. This is it." A pause. "And if I'm going to die, I want to die on my terms. Not his."

He nodded, shaking, and brushing a kiss across her brow. "That's my girl."

"I do this and the world doesn't end. It's a win/win."

"It'll only be a win for me, pet, if you wake up. If you're still..." Spike shook his head, his jaw clenching.

"I'll be okay," she replied, attempting a smile that quickly faded. "You're with me."

Spike nodded fiercely, curling his fingers around her wrist and bringing her hand to his mouth. "Always."

The way his voice shook stretched to the ground itself. "Do you wanna go over the pros again?" Buffy asked. Then, without waiting, she continued, "You're my anchor. I'm human-girl with daimon-recessiveness."

Almost indiscernibly, he nodded again. "I'm a big, bad vamp," he replied, reaching for the hem of her shirt. It was gone the next second, leaving her in nothing but her panties. "Human-recessive."

"My human side completes your human side."

“My demon...yours.” Spike leaned forward and skimmed his blunt teeth across the claim mark. “We’ll defeat it together.”

She gasped, seizing him by the upper arms. “Together,” she agreed, sighing when his mouth began a cool, steady descent. She felt him kiss the hollow of her throat. Felt his lips murmur small blessings down her skin, between the valley of her breasts until he had one of her fleshy globes consumed in his mouth.

“Spike,” she whispered, her hands wandering upward until they were wound in his hair. It was natural—the way his name rolled off her lips now. It didn’t feel strained or forced. It didn’t feel like something she said to appease him, to confirm that she knew he was as much the incarnation of this life as he was the last. His names were interchangeable because the same man lurked beneath them.

They were linked. They always had been. The claim had only turned something already known, already understood, into something concrete. It had given their connection a name and an unspoken vow in blood. A vow, like their bond, that had been there all along.

The reason Paimon wanted to keep them apart was this. And strangely, by keeping them apart, he’d led them right to the answer.

If it worked.

“You taste so sweet,” Spike murmured around her breast before sucking hard on her nipple as his fingers trailed down her stomach. “You always have.”

Buffy inhaled sharply. “Have I?”

He nodded, a harsh breath whispering through his lips. “I remember the first time I tasted you,” he replied. “You were so different. No powder. No perfume. You smelled like soap...and the woods. Like the night.”

She chuckled, massaging his scalp. “Translation: I was sweaty and gross and covered in demon-guts.”

Spike released her breast with a wet plop, glaring up at her. “Putting words in my mouth?”

“I just think if you really think I smelled all nice back in the days before body-wash, you’re either repressing a horrible memory of Buffystink or really blinded by the love whammy I put on you.”

“Love whammy, eh?”

“Men should fear the powers of the Slayer love whammy.”

“Mhmm...” Spike licked the underside of her breast, then turned to give her other equal attention. “And how many blokes do you feature you’ve whammied?”

“Oh, dozens.”

He snorted around a mouthful of her flesh, the hand at her stomach easing her back against the mattress. Her legs fell apart as if by accident, and before she could prepare herself, she felt his fingers dancing over the thin strip of cotton guarding her pussy. “Dozens?” he asked, biting her nipple playfully. “I’ll need names and numbers.”

“I’ve only whammied back with you, dummy.”

“Doesn’t mean these blokes don’ need to get dismantled for thinkin’ about you in the whammy sense.”

“One word: Drusilla.”

Spike snickered again. “You’re never gonna let that go, are you?” he asked, abandoning her breasts to drop hot, wet kisses down her stomach. “I don’t want her, kitten. I don’t think I ever did.”

She released her grip on his hair. “Yeah-huh.”

His tongue dipped into her belly-button, and he grinned when she squealed and wiggled beneath him. “I thought she was the best I could do.”

“You thought she was your *everything*.”

“No. I knew I wouldn’t be dreamin’ of you if she was.”

“You didn’t know it was me,” Buffy countered, arching her hips when his fingers finally slipped under the elastic of her panties and slid the soaked material down her legs. It was slightly embarrassing how wet she became at his slightest touch, but for the desire clouding his eyes, she could tell he didn’t mind. “Y-you thought I-I was...some...”

“You’ve always been my night angel, Buffy,” Spike said, his voice gentle but firm, his hands slipping upward again until he was gripping her thighs. “Accept it.”

“Mmm...”

“Always.” He dove for her center without warning, plunging his tongue into her pussy and assaulting her with lick after lick. He slurped at her, drinking her as though parched and she was the only thing that could quench his thirst. Sensation exploded, blazing through her veins



and making her skin so hot it was a wonder when it didn't melt right off.

"I can't lose this, you hear?" Spike growled between licks. "You *can't* die on me."

"I'll...uhhhnnn...keep that in—*oh Spike*—mind."

He growled again, abandoning her opening to tease her swollen clit. At the first flick of his tongue, she knew she wasn't going to last.

"Spike, please..."

"Buffy..."

"Stop."

He glanced up at her, and how he managed to pout with his lips wrapped around her clit, she didn't know. Only that he did and it made her insides quiver.

"You don't want me to...?"

"I just...I just want *you*." She smiled when he took a defiant lick of her wet flesh, running her fingers through his hair again. "Please..."

"I want to commit every inch of you to memory," he replied. "Your smell. Your taste." Spike expelled a long breath and slowly untangled himself from her grip, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and rising to his feet. He paused to look at her, his gaze both softening with love and blazing with desire.

"Every inch of you," he repeated, turning his hands to his jeans. In seconds he was as naked as she, his thick cock bobbing eagerly against his stomach. "I know it's only been days...but..." Spike shuddered and looked away, blinking. "I can't imagine livin' in this world without you in it."

"Spike—"

"Without your hands. Your arms. Your sweet little smile. Your shampoo-commercial hair." He shook his head. "I can't imagine..."

"It'll be okay."

"We don't know that," Spike countered. "We don't know that this isn't just a load of wishful thinking. If I do this...Christ, if I kill you, and it... We still have four days, love. We don't—"

"You already said you don't think there's anything else."

"I don't, but that doesn't mean—"

Buffy sat up, tucking her legs beneath her so she could rise up on

her knees. “Look at me,” she said softly. When he didn’t, she seized him by the chin and made him. “If we don’t do this now, we’ll just be doing it in four days. I don’t want to wait. I don’t want to risk the chance that Giles is wrong about Paimon not having the power he says he has. If not now, then—”

“Slayer—”

“Spike...make love to me.” She lifted herself so she could reach his lips with her own. “I want you.”

A dark shudder rode through him. “I want you, too,” he all but gasped. “Always. Every minute. All the time.”

“Then take me. I’m right here.”

There were no other words. Spike moaned in defeat and swallowed her with a kiss, following her as she fell again against the mattress, welcoming him between her legs. She thrust herself up against him, rotating her hips to tease him with the wet flesh of her pussy—to tease herself. She wanted this to be about nothing but them. Nothing but *him*.

If she thought about everything else, she might not make it.

“Love me,” she whispered against his lips, her own hand reaching between them. She wrapped her fingers around his cock and grinned when he gasped, stroking him and rubbing his silky head against herself. “Feel me.”

“Oh Buffy...”

Her smile grew wider and she lifted her head to kiss him, at last positioning him at her opening. A little thrill raced through her when she felt her flesh draw him in, and as her muscles relaxed to welcome him home, she privately swore that the demon who tried to take this away from her would face a hell of a fight.

She wasn’t going quietly. She never did.

Long, trembling breaths rolled off her lips as he sank inside her. As her flesh molded and gripped him. He looked at her and she touched the sky. There was nothing that could take her away.

It was a bittersweet lovemaking, but she hadn’t expected any less. She held him as he rocked against her, pressing his lips to every inch of her he could reach. His hands explored without direction. One second they would be at her breasts, the next slipping up the underside of her

arms, the next framing her cheeks to angle her into his kisses, the next rubbing her clit as he drove into her. They didn't speak, and the tempered sounds of their whimpers and gasps struck her as so unspeakably intimate that she wondered if she could reach orgasm simply by listening to him moan.

Knowing she did that to him was empowering in ways she'd never known she could be empowered.

Then Spike pressed his brow to hers and their eyes locked. The walls could have fallen down and she wouldn't have noticed. She knew nothing else. Nothing but the ocean, and the flecks of gold which reminded her of sunset. Nothing but the feel of him inside her as his thrusts gained momentum. Nothing but his flesh smacking hers. Nothing but the whines of an old bed's springs as they pushed each other toward a mutual edge.

The silence broke the second before she burst.

"I love you."

His bite always came with a flash of pain before euphoria. It wasn't different this time. He locked his fangs inside her, thrusting hard as she spasmed around his cock, triggering his own release. She thought she heard herself say something but she couldn't be sure. She wanted to tell him she loved him, too—even if the words weren't needed, even if he already knew. She needed him to know now. Now more than ever.

The familiar second where he would normally pull away and lick her wound went by without ceremony, and she spiraled into an instinctive panic. She fought the need to push him away, fought the rising anxiety and welcomed the blanket of darkness. Her ears rang. Her head felt light. Her skin was so slick with it might as well have dissolved. Consciousness danced further and further away until she was hanging on by a proverbial thread.

There was a voice, but god, it was far away.

"Buffy, open up for me..."

Her mouth fell slack and she tasted liquid copper.

It was the last thing she knew before the world went black.

HE WASN'T USED to having so many bloody houseguests, and not for the first time, Giles contemplated the wisdom of hosting Buffy's transition. Logic argued there had been nowhere else, and as her watcher, it was his duty to oversee any sort of rituals. Especially rituals designed to render his slayer an immortal embodiment of her Calling.

Assuming it didn't kill her first.

Giles sighed and tried to ignore how hard his hands were trembling, which proved problematic as he was attempting to lift a coffee cup to his lips. His efforts earned him a scalding hand and a series of blank looks when he yelped.

"Bloody hell," he cursed, dropping the mug, which shattered against his floor. The whole flat was a disaster—what was the purpose of worrying over spilled coffee?

"You should run that under cold water," Willow observed, frowning at the steam rolling off his skin.

"Yes. Thank you."

"I'll get paper-towels," Xander volunteered. He leaped to his feet and pushed his way into the small kitchen. "I assume you have paper-towels."

"Under the sink."

It was hard to be the uptight adult when the children were being so helpful. Not that he particularly cared for his reputation among Buffy's friends, but there was an unspoken responsibility in his charge. He knew if he lost his head, they would lose theirs. If he broke down as he had last night, they would realize how very much Buffy's odds were riding on chance.

He wished they would be a little less helpful, do the decent thing and annoy him a little.

"It's been a while," Angel observed, looking to the second floor from where he sat on a lonely stool in the corner. He had practically put himself in timeout, which Giles would have found funny if he were in a position to care.

"H-how long does it usually take?" Willow asked, fidgeting.

"It depends on the person and the vampire who does the siring." Angel sighed. "But this isn't a siring, is it? This is unprecedented. It's... it's a metamorphosis."

Giles bit down on the inside of his cheek to keep his snide remark in check. He didn't need to create trouble just for the sake of it—everyone was as tense as he was.

Well, maybe not, but they were tense. Willow and Xander had predictably rushed over within ten minutes of their last class period, completely unmade by Buffy's absence and approaching hysteria Giles's. Buffy often skipped class for missions and assignments—for Giles not to be there, though, meant trouble.

Explanations had been brief. He hadn't the strength nor the motivation to delve into the mythology behind the Slayer's power, what exactly was taking place upstairs, or why Buffy might not survive.

Every time he thought about the odds, he wanted to hang himself for agreeing to this.

*There weren't other options.*

Giles sighed and switched off the faucet, reached for a dishrag and dried off his hands. The sting had abated but he figured his skin would be tender for a few days.

There weren't other options, but there might have been.

Their source was a madwoman. A madwoman scorned, no less.

*Bugger.*

Giles pinched the bridge of his nose and exhaled. What was done was done. There was no going back now. There was only this. The wait. The lull between life and death.

“Man,” Xander said, his voice oddly strained. He held up coffee-drenched paper-towels, his nose wrinkled in disgust. “I will never understand the unnatural attraction of adults to coffee. Eww with a side of yuck.”

Giles smirked in spite of himself, rearranging his glasses on his nose. “One of many adult concerns I’m sure will elude you completely,” he retorted, nodding at the rubbish bin.

Either the slight went over Xander’s head or he was too worried to care. He merely disposed of the paper towels, washed his hands, and returned to Willow’s side. Somehow, they’d all ended up in the front room of the flat, sitting in silence. The sort of silence where *every* noise was thunderous. The ticks of the clock. The drips of the kitchen faucet. The creaks of the floorboards. The hum of cars down the street.

Nothing from upstairs.

“Hey look, guys,” Xander said suddenly, making everyone jump. “Willow’s actually twiddling her thumbs. She is a thumb twiddler.”

“I twiddle,” Willow agreed, holding up her hands. “I’ll have you know there’s nothing wrong with a good twiddle. A good twiddle can kill buckets full of time.”

Giles glanced up. “Yes. We have now time-jumped ten seconds. Well done, the both of you.”

Willow pouted and lowered her hands. “Sorry.”

“Sorry,” Xander echoed.

The silence resumed, louder than ever.

“Why didn’t she wait?” Willow asked suddenly. “She didn’t even say goodbye to us.”

“Or her mother,” Xander added, nodding. “What are we gonna tell Joyce?”

A long sigh rolled off Giles’s lips. He’d actually been relieved when Buffy hadn’t mentioned goodbyes. He’d worried she would talk herself out of the ritual if she had a few minutes with her loved ones. Now he was cursing himself for his thoughtlessness. For being so bloody selfish.

What would he tell Joyce if she died? How would he even begin to explain this?

Thankfully, it wasn't left to him to answer. Angel cleared his throat. "That was my fault," he lied. "She wanted to say goodbye, but we honestly have no way of knowing if Paimon is listening in on every conversation, as he's boasted... If he is, he could have intervened or orchestrated an accident or done some other horrible thing, and we couldn't risk it." A pause. "Besides...it's not goodbye."

"Right," Giles agreed. "It's not goodbye. Buffy will wake up, I'll burn my sheets, and life will go on."

Xander made a face. "Yeah. Right there with you on the burning. I can't believe you sacrificed your bed for sexcapades starring the Buffster. There is no limit to the wrong."

Angel grunted but didn't say anything.

Giles's face went hot. "It's...all for a good cause."

"Sex for a good cause," Xander mused, nodding. "Say, do you think I could have a pivotal, world-saving role in the next apocalypse?"

"Hey," Willow objected, wagging her finger at him. "It's not all fun and games, Mister."

"I know, Will. That's why they call it *sex*." Xander tossed a glance to the silent upper level of Giles's flat, his face falling with a long sigh. "Have I mentioned how very wiggled I am over Buffy and the having-of-the-sex?"

"You're just wiggled it's not with you," Willow retorted.

"She's sixteen!"

"And still not having sex with you."

Giles moaned and sank back into his seat. Perhaps silence, even strained silence, was golden.

"Still, I think underage romping is a wrong. I'm taking a stand."

"She wasn't a virgin," Angel chimed in, his voice not nearly as dark as it had been a minute ago. Rather, his mood seemed to have lightened at the prospect of throwing something in Xander's face. "Not really. If I'm to understand her previous relationship with Spike, they knew each other rather well."

Willow's eyes went glassy. "Wow," she said. "That's intense. Losing your virginity twice. You'd know everything but it'd be all different and

no awkwardness. Just leaping in with the...” She trailed off when she realized everyone was looking at her. “I...uhhh...not that I’ve any experience losing my virginity twice. O-o-or once, for that matter. I am the Virgin Willow.”

“Wow, do we need to find a new topic, and fast,” Xander muttered.

“So says the Sex Boy,” the redhead grumbled, crossing her arms.

The air around them fell silent again. The only thing that dared to defy the quiet was the clock. The infernal contraption in the corner, reminding them with every thunderous tick that they were running out of time.

Another second to worry.

Another second to doubt.

The clock wouldn’t let him forget. Even with the occasional blurb of conversation, Giles heard its ticks above all else.

He supposed he would for the rest of his life.



SHE DIDN’T MOAN OR SCREAM. HER EYES DIDN’T FLUTTER AND HER lips didn’t part. She didn’t call for him. She just lay there, pale as the moon and cold as death itself.

She didn’t moan, but she moved.

The convulsions were becoming easier to time. Every three minutes or so, she would jerk violently against the mattress, her neck craning back so far he was convinced the demon was trying to snap it clean. Her arms would flail and her legs would kick; she’d contort in ways that would make a gymnast flinch. Each fit lasted longer than the last, and they were coming quickly now. He felt them approach and suffered through them along with her, knowing simply by the way her body bent how much pain she was in. Pain he’d caused.

Spike did his bloody damndest to remain detached, but Christ, it was hard. Every time he felt the approach of another seizure, he had to fight the urge to scream and pound on his chest and rip the walls down with his bare hands. He wanted to piss off the Powers so bloody much they had no choice but to march their righteous arses down and deal with him face-to-face.



How they could sit aside and allow this to happen...

He didn't know if he was helping. If his demon was doing anything to battle for the girl he loved. He sure as hell didn't feel tormented beyond the sort of pain he'd expected; he didn't feel like his demon was fighting.

Spike's eyes flooded with tears.

*God. I'm losing her.*

These were the sort of thoughts he'd forced aside because unconscious—*dead*—as she was, he wanted to believe she could feel him.

That being strong for her was helping.

He needed to believe it.

"Use me," Spike whispered, collapsing to his knees beside her. "For Chrissake, Buffy, *use me!*"

She twitched.

"Slayer—"

The walls spun. The floor shook. And then all was gone. *Gone*. Spike's body caved without a fight. A thousand hands grappled for gray matter and tugged in various directions. There was joining. He felt himself depart from his body, projected into the heart of a nameless struggle. A roar tore off his lips even if the air around him remained silent. He was so dizzy he could barely remember his name.

He always, however, remembered hers. And as he collapsed on the bed beside her, it was the only thing he knew to say.



WHEN HE AWOKE, HIS BODY WAS INFUSED IN BLISS.

"There you are," a sweet voice singsonged right before the tip of a very familiar tongue flicked a sensual path along the underside of his cock. "I seem to recall this is your favorite way to be woken up."

Spike blinked rapidly, pleasure battling confusion and fatigue. "B-Buffy?"

"The one and very only." Her hot, heavenly mouth closed around his silky tip. "And don't you forget it, buster."

"Where...where are we?"

“Giles’s room.” One of her hands suddenly made itself known, cupping his balls. “Look at me?”

It came back the second their eyes met. He glanced down the length of his body and found himself lost in green. Her moonlit skin was marked with angry, purple bruises, her eyes blackened but dancing. And he remembered, then. He remembered. He knew.

The battle. The fight. The turning.

She was awake. Buffy was awake.

She was awake and very alive.

“Is this real?” he asked, the words riding out on a gasp as she nipped playfully at his cock. “Tell—*ohhh* yeah—tell me this is real.”

“It’s real.”

“You’re hurt.”

The tip of her tongue traced the sensitive dip of his head. “You are, too.”

“I’m not. I—”

Buffy released him without warning and rose up on all fours, her mouth moving up to caress a prominent bruise gracing his pale stomach. Spike frowned in confusion, his mind slowly moving to catch up. It wasn’t the only mark. Like her, his body was covered with them. Completely ravaged with swollen sores he didn’t remember receiving. He became aware of a knot on his head and a foreign heat at his cheek. And more than that, he was completely knackered. There wasn’t a part of him that didn’t ache.

And sore as he was, pain was secondary to his blood’s burning need for her. Need that went beyond the physical—need that was purely primal. Something inside him howled and clawed and reached for her, and it wouldn’t be satisfied with mere touching.

He needed to feel her.

“Buffy, I...”

A watery, tender smile spread across her lips. “I’m here. It’s okay. I’m all...daimon girl.”

“It worked?”

Buffy nodded. “I’ll let you be the judge,” she said, offering her neck to his mouth.

Her intent could not be any clearer, and he was in a position to deny her nothing.

Spike licked her skin tenderly, then bit down. And the second her blood hit his tongue, a gate opened in his mind and he saw. He saw her waking. Saw her panic. Saw her rolling over and seizing him by the shoulders, shaking him hard and demanding that he wake up. Saw her anxious eyes taking in the sight of his battered body, then realizing she was also bruised all over. Bruised, but she'd survived.

He felt her—warm, alive, and real.

They had fought together, and they had won.

Spike's eyes fell shut. There was nothing he could say. He wanted to cry but he was too tired. He wanted to tell her how much he loved her, but after everything, the words didn't seem adequate. Instead, he cupped her breasts when she straddled him, her pussy licking the underside of his erection as she moved to take him inside. And immediately, the fire within sizzled.

The demon purred and strained. He needed to feel her.

"There's so much," he whispered.

"I know." Buffy pressed a kiss to his lips as she sank down, swallowing his moan. "But now..."

"I need—"

"Me too."

He was only half alive when he wasn't with her.

And eventually, when he knew finally that the nightmare was finally over—he was sure he would break down. That relief would crash and send him to his knees. But that moment wasn't now.

Now was for them.



IF HE WEREN'T BURSTING WITH GLEE-RIDDLED RELIEF, HE MIGHT HAVE been more disturbed. As it was, the eruption of his mattress rocking against achy springs was perhaps the most welcome sound he'd ever heard.

For the first few seconds, anyway. Then he just felt dirty.

Dirty, and very aware that he was sitting in the living room of his

own flat as his surrogate daughter engaged in explicit adult activities in his bed.

With a vampire.

And they didn't seem prone to stop anytime soon. If anything, the thumping just grew louder.

"Burn the sheets, eh?"

Giles favored Xander with a long, dry glance. He didn't feature the boy would talk about sex again anytime soon.

"At this point," Giles mused, "I think it might be easier to move."

“OH FOR PETE’S SAKE, will you stop? It’s fine.”

“I just don’t understand why it hasn’t faded yet.” Spike frowned and pulled her to a stop beside him for the third time since they’d left her home, fixing his eyes on the last of her bruises. “Your other marks—”

“This one’s healing fine, silly.”

“I can still see it!”

“You’re the only one,” Buffy countered, poking out her tongue. “You had my mother wiggling over my nonexistent—”

“It’s not sodding nonexistent. I can still see it. That makes it *existent*.”

“You can only see it because you’re a freak-of-nature with freak-of-nature eyes.”

He snickered. “Never tell anyone you don’ know how to romance a fella.”

Buffy grinned and snuggled happily into his side, wrapping an arm around his waist. She’d never understood how people could actually walk like this, but between two super-beings, almost anything was possible.

“All things considered,” she mused, “I think that went pretty well.”

“She didn’t try to ax my head off this time. I’m satisfied.”

“It’ll take some time for her, but I think we’ll be okay.” Buffy sighed, out of exhaustion more than anything else. The past few days had been fun of the *not so* kind. Giles confirming the legitimacy of her new super-slayer status while fending off nonstop calls from the Council, demanding to know how the Slayer had died and why, and then asking repeatedly if he wanted to come home to England. Now that the Slayer was dead, after all, there was no need to stay in Sunnydale.

Giles was in the free-and-clear for the time being. He’d convinced the Council that, dead as Buffy might be, the Hellmouth still needed protection, and he still knew the ins and the outs of the demon community, he was the perfect choice. He also had a souled vampire fighting on his side, which, again, wasn’t the sort of news many of the Watchers Council were prone to celebrate, but it was a slab of cold comfort.

The fact that the Watchers Council had confirmed the Calling of the next slayer, verifying Buffy’s death once and for all, was the last in a long line of tests she’d needed to pass before they knew whether or not the turning had worked. It took the death of the human—or the dominant human trait—to summon the next potential to the Calling. Effectively in one night, Buffy had vanished from the Council’s radar and managed to slip through the fingers of what was sure-to-be one irate Hell God.

It had taken three hundred years, but she could finally breathe freely.

Little more than a week had passed since Halloween, and for everything she’d been through in the interim, it was hard to fathom that the jaws of death no longer snapped at her heels.

Tonight was the night she’d been slated to die. Instead, she was going to the Bronze.

She was going to dance until her feet fell off.

“Don’t wager your mum’s gonna want you to pack up and leave the house any time soon,” Spike said and brushed a kiss across her brow.

He knew as well as she did that for as far as they had come, it would still be a little while before they could well and truly spend every morning in each other’s arms. At least when she sneaked back home

this time, she wouldn't be fearful of discovering a vindictive weapon-wielding watcher in her bedroom.

And while Buffy appreciated her mother's understanding and her unexpected calm in the sea of everything they had disclosed, there was a part of her that resented the idea that she *still* had to wait. It would be another year, at least, before she and Spike could actually live together. No matter how immortal Buffy was in the eyes of the world, and no matter the fact that she was technically a legal adult if she took in the sum total number of years she'd lived, she was still her mother's sixteen-year-old baby. It was too soon to be abandoning the nest.

"Once I go off to college, I'll be free-as-a-bird Buffy," she replied finally, though she couldn't keep from pouting. "Still...that's a year-and-a-half away."

"Bloody Americans," Spike scoffed. "Y'know, if we were on the other side of the pond, people wouldn't bat an eye."

"Which, while I see the benefits, don't get me wrong, is kinda wigsome." She made a face, but couldn't conceal her giggle at the way his brows perked in turn. "It's...it's better than we could've hoped for, though, with my mom. And the surprising lack-of-screaming that went along with the revelation that, why yes, I am a vampire slayer and this is my second take at the gig." Buffy frowned. "I wonder if Giles said something to her before we got there."

"Considerin' the state of my head and how it's still attached to m'neck, I'd have to say yes."

"You're never gonna stop with the decapitation jokes, are you?"

"Let's see you recover well after bein' knocked on the head by a menopausal—"

She jabbed his side with her elbow. Hard. "Watch it. You're talking about my mother."

"Just saying...the lady's frightening."

"Spike, you're a vampire."

"I really hope you're not just making this discovery now, sweet. It's too late in our relationship to be havin' this conversation." He grinned when she tossed him a pout, and hugged her closer to him in a way that managed to be both possessive and loving at the same time. This, of course, had nothing to do with the fact that they were approaching

the bouncer at the Bronze and a sea of horny male adolescents. "It'll fly by," Spike murmured as he slipped the bouncer a few bills and steered her inside. "These next couple years."

"You think we'll actually be able to live together without killing each other?" Buffy asked, mostly teasing. "We do well when we're outrunning death and discovery, but now our lives will be all slow and boring and—"

She didn't get to finish the sentence due to Spike's uproarious laughter.

"What?" she demanded, pout firmly in place.

He tried to answer but couldn't.

"I gotta tell you, Fang Face, no girl likes to be laughed at. No matter how much said girl loves you."

Spike had doubled over, resting his palms on his knees as he tried to get a hold of himself. He held up a hand in a wordless request for patience, but every time his chuckles seemed to dwindle, he would remember what had made him laugh in the first place and dissolve all over again.

It was his good fortune that Willow had spotted them. She rushed over to Buffy only to pause in bewilderment at the sight of the giggling vampire.

"Hey, what's...so funny?"

"Mr. Chuckles won't share," Buffy grunted, crossing her arms.

"It's nothin'," Spike said through high-pitched titters. "It's...just...the Slayer...Buffy..."

"That's me," the Slayer, Buffy, retorted, unimpressed.

"She thinks...she actually thinks our lives'll be boring here on the Hellmouth."

Buffy made a face and thwapped his shoulder. "That's what turned you into Cackles the Clown?" she demanded. "My serious wiggins that after all the excitement is over that you'll get all bored—"

She made the mistake of using the b-word and lost him again.

"Well," Buffy said, turning to throw her arm over Willow's shoulder. "Seeing as I don't like you very much right now, I think I'm going to leave you to death-by-laughter and go sit with *my friends*."

Spike didn't even bother looking apologetic. "Sweetheart," he said,



reaching for her with one hand and wiping his eyes with the other. “You are so self-righteous I wanna throttle your neck sometimes. Plus that stake up your arse that—”

“This is getting uncomfortable,” Willow murmured. “I’ll return to the show that is Xander attempting to eat Cordelia’s face.”

“—it’s buried so far it’s likely turned into a diamond...”

“She has a coal stake up her butt?” Willow intervened, her eyes widening. “Okay, yeah. Table.”

Spike ignored the redhead, taking a step forward, his eyes never leaving Buffy’s. “You are bossy, bitchy, beautiful, funny, intelligent, caring, independent...you think of everyone but yourself when the chips are down, and you’re so full of life it’s practically glowing from you. Not to mention, you’re a demon in the sack.”

Buffy didn’t know if it was more appropriate to slap him, kiss him, or melt on the spot. She decided to withhold her judgment until he arrived at the point.

“You’re a thousand things. A thousand, thousand things. But the one thing you could *never* be is boring.” He smiled and leaned to steal a kiss from her lips before she decided whether or not he’d earned it. “I love *you*. I always have. And if you don’t know that by now, you seriously oughta get that noggin’ of yours under some shiny machine so we can figure out which circuit is shorted, ‘cause I tell you, pet, I—”

Apparently, her body had decided that he’d earned her lips, for the next thing she knew, she had flung herself into his arms and was warring his mouth over possession of his tongue. She stole whatever condescending, albeit wrapped-in-love insult he was about to toss her way, gaining some of her own back when she got him moaning.

“Awww,” Willow cooed. “That’s... Well, that’s... Why do people keep making out in front of me?”

Buffy pulled back reluctantly, licking her lips. “Mmmm. Sorry,” she said, turning to her friend. “I just... In the moment.”

Spike grinned and nipped at her mouth. “A boring moment?”

“With you? Never.”

“Cause without impromptu town burnings and deranged old men with poisoned arrows or demons with a yen for slayer mojo, I don’t know how you’ll ever put up with me.”

Willow rolled her eyes and returned to the table without another word.

“I don’t either,” Buffy retorted before sucking his lower lip into her mouth as she gave his exceptionally fine ass a much-deserved pinch. “But I’m willing to find out.”



THERE WAS A CERTAIN MORBID FASCINATION IN HOW XANDER AND Cordelia moved together. They were practically different species, and yet for Xander’s bumbling clumsiness and Cordelia’s oddly graceful-but-bitch-heavy aura, they seemed to complement each other.

“How did this happen again?” Buffy asked Willow as they stared at the couple gyrate on the dance floor. “Cause this? Match made in... what’s the place that’s not Heaven?”

“Wouldn’t throw stones, pet,” Spike remarked before sipping at his beer.

“Oh come on!” she retorted, turning back to him with barely concealed amusement. “At least we make sense. This is just... It weirds me out on levels I didn’t know could be weirded out.”

“Apparently, they got trapped in the cage overnight,” Willow said, sighing heavily.

Spike arched a brow. “Cage?”

“In the library,” the redhead replied, either ignoring or not hearing the amused edge in Spike’s voice. “Where Giles keeps all the weapons. I don’t know how they got there or why or whatever, but they got locked in and... Well, one thing led to another and now we have this...”

“I’m surprised Cordy’s out of the cage, so to speak.” Buffy winced at her own bad pun. “I figure she’d be sticking to the shadows as much as possible.”

“And so say all of us,” Willow muttered, not at all bitterly. “And here I didn’t think it was possible for Xander to sink lower than Preying Mantis lady.”

Spike frowned, his beer-hand halting midway in its trek to his mouth. “Do I wanna know?” he asked.

“Not at all,” Buffy replied, her eyes falling to his glass. “Hey...thirsty.”

He perked a surprised brow and offered her a sip, which she declined with a disgusted shake of her head. “I was thinking more of the carbonated fizzy sort,” she clarified before flashing him a sweet smile. “Buy me a drink?”

There was no delay—Spike nodded and slipped off his stool without protest. “Sure thing, sweet,” he replied. “Diet?”

“You know me so well.”

“I keep tellin’ you this, but you don’t seem to get it through that gorgeous thick skull of yours.” Spike smiled softly and pressed his lips to her brow. “Back in a flash.”

Thankfully, Willow waited until he was a safe distance away before releasing her whistle. “Wow. Not even a week and you have him all trained and stuff.”

“A week in this lifetime,” Buffy agreed, trying and failing to hide her giddy grin. “He’s wonderful.”

“You’re so lucky. I mean... Yeah, obvious roadblock. Vampire. Only not so now. But he’s all with the sweet. And he’s...” Willow’s gaze wandered over her friend’s shoulder. “...picking that guy’s pocket.”

Buffy’s eyes went wide. “He’s what?”

“He just lifted that guy’s wallet.”

Buffy deflated and somehow managed to swallow her groan. There were certain things she knew she would have to reconcile with having a very soulless vampire as a mate—his penchant for thievery and other evil misdeeds notwithstanding. And yet, even though she anticipated a mountain of morality debates in the future, she was surprised to find herself only mildly annoyed.

“So he’s not perfect.”

“Not perfect?” Willow replied, not even bothering to mask her surprise. “That’s...well, a nice way to put it?”

Buffy shrugged and flashed Spike a grin as he reclaimed his seat beside her. “You’re a bad man,” she said, taking the proffered soft drink.

“Never claimed not to be,” he replied easily. “What’d I do now?”

“Petty larceny.”

His brows shot upward. “Oh,” he said. “You saw that?”

“Willow did.”

Spike turned to the redhead, his eyes narrowing into a glare. “Snitch.”

“Don’t blame her for catching you doing a bad thing,” Buffy scolded, dipping her hand brazenly into her mate’s left back pocket and fishing out the purloined wallet. “Badness.”

“What? You said you wanted a drink. You never said I should pay for it.”

Buffy rolled her eyes and turned the merchandise over to Willow, who immediately slipped off her seat to return it to its rightful owner. “Are we gonna have to go over the dos and don’ts about socializing?” she asked. “Stealing from patrons is badness.”

Spike shrugged and tossed back a mouthful of beer. “Wouldn’t be me if I played by the rules, love.”

“And we can’t have that.”

It would likely help her argument if she could pull off some genuine form of irritation, but she couldn’t. Overall, he was right. She’d accepted it once, and she found it was even easier to do this time. Not that she would allow him to get away with everything—or anything, for that matter—but the struggle was one of the reasons she loved him.

They fit. They worked.

And somehow, they always had.



THE DATE OF BUFFY’S PAYMENT CAME AND WENT. WHILE NO ONE said anything, there was a certain aura of apprehension about how the Hell King would react. The cosmos had been rearranged, Buffy and Spike pitted into a century in which they did not belong, and she had cheated a demon out of her debt.

Nothing happened on the night she was supposed to have died. Nothing at all.

It was unnerving. She wanted him to come out of the shadows. She

wanted the confrontation over with. She wanted Paimon behind her completely, else she knew he would hang over her head forever.

Two nights following the new moon, her wish was granted.

As he had before, Paimon materialized out of nowhere while she patrolled. Only this time she wasn't alone—her vampire was at her side.

"I suppose," the demon purred, stepping out of the shadows, "you feel you have won."

Spike tensed and seized her hand. "Yeah," he barked, "now that you mention it. Why don't you bugger off?"

Paimon smiled and spread his hands. "I am merely here to collect what is mine."

"The girl's not human anymore, you pillock."

The Hell King delivered an icy glare, fixing his inhuman eyes on Buffy. "We had a deal, remember?"

"Kinda hard to forget when you go through what I went through," she retorted. "Sorry. Shop's closed."

Paimon's face hardened, if such a thing was possible, and the air around her grew very cold. "It is unwise," he said softly, "to spit in the face of Hell."

Buffy blinked, refusing to betray fear. She thought, perhaps, that seeing the demon again would be easier with her strength fortified, with her future certain. However, no matter what had passed, no matter what she had defeated, there was an air about him that couldn't be overcome. The raw power he oozed in a simple look. She didn't want to fear him—she didn't want to fear anyone.

She couldn't help herself.

"And here I don't remember spitting," Buffy replied, squeezing her growling mate's hand. "I just decided I didn't want to die."

"Why don't you sod off?" Spike snarled. "Find someone else to haunt. The girl beat you. Bloody deal with it."

"Hell does not accept defeat."

"Hell will have to get used to disappointment." Buffy stepped forward, swallowing hard. "And you know, with all this brand-spanking-new strength, you're striking me as less of a king and more like a

common demon. So why don't you get back to Hell before I send you there myself?"

Paimon stared at her. "You dare threaten *me*?"

"I dare. Didn't you hear me? I could do it again." She shrugged. "I should've figured a demon of your age—what, three, no, *four* million years old...might be hard of hearing." Buffy quirked her head and held up her stake. She was surprised to see a flicker of fear ripple through Paimon's eyes. There were many things she'd expected from him: fire, brimstone, another taste of the inferno he'd shown her just a week before. She hadn't expected fear. Not from one who inspired so much of it. And she'd be lying if she said the rush wasn't a potent one.

Creating fear in a Hell King was heady. She could get used to this.

"It's funny," she continued conversationally, taking a step forward and grinning when he quickly recovered it in the other direction. "Now that I'm all Slayer, it doesn't take nearly as much force to dust the local baddies. I barely tapped the last three."

Spike, apparently having caught on, tossed in, "Not to mention she has these muscles that squeeze a bloke just—"

"Sweetie. Now's not the time."

"Course, love. Just trying to help."

"I've killed a few non-vamp demons with stakes," Buffy continued, the fear that, just seconds before, had gripped her insides, quickly evaporating into nothing. "Wonder if this would do the trick on you?"

Paimon's chin shot up. "Are you so arrogant—"

"I think you're backing up for a reason, Hellboy." She twirled the stake in her hand once, twice, and grinned. "Let's find out."

Whether or not the pointed end ever met its target, she didn't know. All she knew was one second the Hell King had stood just feet from her, hatred and fear rolling off him so thick she was surprised she didn't choke, and the next there was nothing but wisps of black air. The stake soared through the smoke and embedded itself through the bark of an oak tree, leaving them alone once again.

"Huh," Spike said, caressing the small of her back. "That was...a littl anticlimactic."

"I dunno," Buffy replied. "I kinda got off on it."

“Oi! The only one allowed to get you off is me.” He paused. “And you, ’cause that, well...”

She smirked and thwapped his shoulder. “Not that way, perv-boy.”

“I think that’s the only way those words can be taken, pet.”

“I’m just saying...guy who has haunted me for three hundred years being afraid of little ol’ me?” Buffy wrapped her arm around his waist. “I could get used to it.”

Spike smiled and brushed his lips across her brow. “You think that’s it, then?”

“I think he’ll be too embarrassed to come back. And if he’s not...” She focused on the stake protruding from the tree. “Well, if he thinks Buffy-with-stake is scary, imagine how he’d feel about Buffy-with-cross-bow. Or Buffy with any kind of cool weapon, really.” She grinned. “I kinda kick ass right now, don’t I?”

Her vampire’s eyes were glowing with pride, and the look he gave her made her a puddle of instant goo.

“My love,” he replied, “you always have.”



THE PLACE SPIKE ACQUIRED WAS NOT COMPLETELY UNLIKE THE ONE they had shared lifetimes ago. It was marginally larger, built out of brick rather than wood, and instead of a basement, they had a spare room for sparring. It wasn’t as large as they would have liked—Buffy mentioned once or twice about knocking down a wall and merging the area with the empty guestroom. Spike countered it would make more sense to merge it with their bedroom, as most of their sparring sessions ended there anyway.

The move was a slow one. Buffy was still technically a resident of 1630 Revello Drive, though as weeks passed, she spent less and less time there, often sneaking into her bedroom just seconds before Joyce popped in to make sure she’d spent the night under her roof.

More than once, Joyce asked why Buffy’s closet was so empty. More than once, Buffy didn’t answer. She didn’t have the heart to tell the woman she’d moved most of her items, save the few things she absolutely needed, to Spike’s place.

To *their* place.

The home where she planned to reside as long as time would allow. The Hellmouth was unguarded, as far as the Council was concerned. And Buffy wanted to keep the Council out of *her* Hellmouth.

The Council might not have ordered her execution in the eighteenth century, but they had created the mindset that had led Kenneth to that very conclusion. As such, she was determined to fly under the radar as long as possible.

She would slay. She would do her job. Angel would take the credit and Buffy was completely cool with that.

Her life wasn't about slaying. Not anymore.

Then again, it never had been. Spike reminded her of that every day.

And this time when she painted the sunrise on their bedroom wall, she didn't do it alone.

This time, they did it together.



## EPILOGUE

*NEW ENGLAND, 1701*

She knew not to do anything without salt. There was no rhyme or reason to such knowledge—only the knowledge itself. Salt was invaluable. Salt bade witches away. Salt shielded hallowed grounds. Salt was the only mineral that offered pure, unadulterated protection.

Even with the Powers in her corner, salt might well be the only thing that could hope to keep her alive.

However, the circle of salt would not protect her if she had a stake in hand. Salt required a tacit contract of pacifism. She could leave the book open and on the table beside her sacred circle, but she could not bring it into the circle itself. No, save for the clothing on her back and the ritualistic dagger needed for the sacrifice, nothing synthetic could enter the circle.

She thought it odd that she could hold a dagger but not a stake, and decided not to dwell on it.

She felt so alone here, in her watcher's abandoned cottage, surrounded by the very symbols that had betrayed her. She'd stopped weeping if only out of exhaustion, her tears rubbing her skin raw. If she paused, if she allowed reality to catch up with her, she was certain the rest of her would break.

He was gone. He was *gone*.  
Resolution hardened her veins. She shook her head.  
*Nothing is ever set in stone.*



SUNNYDALE, CALIFORNIA, 2007

There was something about the way his lips curled around his fangs that fascinated her. It was a small thing, practically indiscernible, and perhaps it had nothing to do with the aforementioned curling at all and everything to do with what those lips did to her at night. Buffy didn't know. The only thing she knew was the next move would be sadly predictable, and no matter what she did, she couldn't avoid falling into the inevitable trap.

Spike knew this, of course, and he used it to his full benefit. He knew what the slightest look did to her. He knew how to make her squirm without so much as batting an eye.

"Ready for me?" he growled, his eyes flashing.

The problem with trying to answer a vampire was the fact that they very rarely played by the rules. This was another thing Buffy knew, and well. Thus, as her mind raced to come up with the perfect retort—a combination of wit and pun, as was her trademark—she found herself tackled to the ground.

"That's three for three, Slayer," Spike purred, closing his hands around her wrists as his yellow eyes flashed triumphantly into hers. "You sure you're playin' with a full stack?"

"My stack," she hissed, her hips bucking upward by their own accord, "is plenty full."

"Mmm." His eyes wandered over her. "I'll say."

Buffy put up a futile struggle. Well, not really a struggle. If she truly struggled, she could toss him off in a blink. Maybe. Spike never disclosed how much of her strength he could access through the claim—and aside from a few averted apocalypses and other impending disasters, there hadn't been a need.

She kept telling him to come at her full strength when they sparred, and he swore he never held back.

The tell in his eyes spoke differently. It always had.

*Always.*

“You ready to call it in, love?” he asked, running his tongue down the length of one fang. If possible, the gesture made him look even sexier, something of which she was certain he was aware.

Buffy smirked and flexed against the padded floor. They would soon need to replace that padding, she absently noted. The stuff they bought was often too flimsy. Well, more likely they were too hard on the rec room, but she liked to think they weren't *too* horribly rough on their things.

“We've only gone three rounds,” she retorted. “Sorry. I don't think so.”

Spike winked. “I love it when you're feisty.”

“I'll bet.”

“Then again,” he added before kissing her nose, “when it comes to you, I love everythin'.”

“You're not charming your way out of going another round.”

He grinned. “Oh, I'm *up* for goin' a round...or ten.”

“A round of—”

“Glorious shagging?”

She flushed. “We're sparring. And I seem to remember promising a certain someone I'd mop the floor with his scrumptious ass for not letting me take out the Burloch demon last night.”

Spike offered an unapologetic shrug. “To be fair, I called it.”

“You big liar!”

“Am not. What do you call loppin' its head off?”

“Taking my kill,” she retorted, pouting.

“You say potato. Anyway, how d'you fancy you're gonna get up, though, eh? Big Bad here. Got you all nice an' trapped.”

Buffy rolled her eyes. “Oh, I dunno...” She trailed off and lured him right into a headbutt. She was free in an instant, rolling to her feet and assuming the position as Spike managed to climb upward, pressing his palm against his brow and glaring at her as though she'd kicked his favorite puppy.

“That actually hurt!”

Oh no. She wasn't falling for the fake guilt-trip. Not again. It was

silly, really. Spike loved pain—this kind of pain, as it were. They both did.

After all, this was foreplay.

“If that hurt, I can’t imagine how this is gonna feel.”

Buffy took off for him and dove in a forward-flip, bracing the rubber-matted floor with her hands as she closed her thighs around his neck. The tactic worked beautifully—sending them both to the ground, and trapping him snuggly between her legs.

“That was too easy,” she giggled.

He had the decency to look like it might have hurt—or, had he not been a vampire, that oxygen might have been an issue. That was, of course, until he quirked a brow and said, “Uh huh,” and utilized the obvious advantage of his position to nuzzle the warm apex of her thighs. “You smell all nice.”

“Spike, we’re not—”

“I am.”

Buffy frowned and wiggled, but he was gripping her hips and tugging her forward before she could stop him. “This... I’m trying to fight you here!”

“I know. And it’s making you very wet, you naughty girl.” He chuckled and tongued her through the cotton of her very thin sweat-pants. “Why don’t you just admit you’ve been outdone by the Big—”

“Stop calling yourself that! It’s totally lame!”

“Riles you up good and proper. Makes you nice and gooey.”

Her struggles became more pronounced and even more futile. His hold on her was insurmountable. “Spike—”

“Oh *yeab*—”

“*William!*”

“That’s just hot.” He winked at her. “You wanna do this here or head back to our room? ’Cause once we start—”

Buffy pouted and glanced down, which proved to be a major mistake, as his sparkling eyes had faded back to blue, and no matter how hot the demon got her, there was something so precious, so irreplaceable about this—something she knew but couldn’t name. “I was under the impression that we were sparring,” she said, her voice dropping to a pout.

“You can say that as much as you like, pet, I’m not gonna cave.”

“You’re not the easiest person to love sometimes,” she said, feigning a hard sigh to cover how quickly her resistance was crumbling. Not that it did any good. Not that it *ever* did.

“I’m challenging,” he countered. “And for the last time, we *were* sparring. We’re not now. I won. Gimme my prize.”

“You get a prize?”

“Course. I get *you*,” Spike replied, and brushed a sweet kiss against her clothed inner thigh. “Won you fair and square, I did. And I have you all the time.”

“Some could argue that *I* won *you* fair and square.”

“Right now, I wanna have you on your back with your legs in the air. But since I’m in a giving mood, I’ll let you decide whether or not we race each other to the room or have at it right here.”

Buffy quirked a brow. “Giving mood, huh?”

He shrugged. How he managed to shrug—how he managed to bark orders at her while he was on the floor with her straddling his face—was completely beyond her. “Y’know me,” he said. “I’m a giver. So how about it? Myself...I’d like to watch the sunrise.”

Heat flooded her face. It was amazing—nearly a decade later and she could still blush over the artistic sexcapades that had occurred after they’d painted the mural on their wall. But then, for the way his eyes softened as he took in her blush, she knew he wouldn’t have it any other way. Wouldn’t have *her* any other way.

He liked it when she blushed.

Just as she enjoyed watching the sunlight spread across their painted wall. It was something she never took for granted. Ever. Every morning waking with him was a gift. A blessing. Something she’d fought to earn, but had cheated to keep.

Something she would never give up.

“I let you win,” she informed him.

Spike grinned and released her. “Believe what you like. I still get the prize.”

“That’s debatable.”

And then he was on his feet, grabbing her hand and tugging her out of their rec room and down the hall.

HOLLY DENISE

Into the room that was theirs. In the home that was theirs. This life that was theirs.

It might have taken generations to make it, but made it they had. Even with the knowledge that for all that had passed, there was so much more ahead. The future didn't scare her. Nothing did anymore.

The future, after all, was just another sunrise.