Spike's Girl
by Herself_nyc

Summary

"That vamp in the bathroom?" Buffy says. "She was with you?" What happens when worlds collide.

Set firmly post-Not Fade Away, so, spoilers for everything.

Notes

Thanks: The Deadly Hook has, once again, nailed the fine art of beta-reading. If this is good, it's because she coddled me along.

All hail Joss from whom all these characters flow.

See the end of the work for more notes.

PART ONE

He's had almost three good years with Clio when she goes into a club toilet and doesn't come out.

After twenty minutes of waiting, of course Spike goes looking for her, and of course he starts asking all the women going in and out if they've seen her, and the third or fourth one he grabs looks scared and babbles incoherently about how this one chick asked this other chick to lend her the use of her mascara and the other chick sort of popped her in the chest and then she just, like, crumbled away into fucking nothing, man, I couldn't believe it, and then the second chick just walked out of the bathroom like nothing happened. The woman looks at Spike like maybe he can explain her own story to her, but he's frozen. For a moment they just gape at each other, Spike and the stranger who
saw his darling die.

Clio. His little Clio, who's never tasted human blood. Fuck no. NO.

Can she point her out, the woman who stabbed his girl? Yeah, the witness says, there she is, at the bar. The small chickie in the spangly top, with the brown hair.

He doesn't even think before he storms up to her. In his fury he hopes she takes him on too, because he'll clean her fucking clock. This is beyond slaying a vampire, this is murder. She's taken from him the one thing that makes it worth going on with his blasted unlife with Angel gone. He'll notch up his third slayer right here right now or go out trying.

"She was clean! Innocent! But you didn't care about that did you, you smelled vamp an' so you staked her!" He fists his shiv out of his pocket. He wants to draw blood from this one. He wants to cut her and hurt her and kill her.

The slayer turns. Spike's about to grab her, when the mutual recognition stuns them both motionless.

Buffy recovers first. Her hand flies up to her mouth, then flutters out to touch his arm, then returns to her mouth again. She stammers, and her eyes are huge. "Oh my God—you?" She's stunned, all kinds of emotions flitting across her face. Her eyes start to glisten with tears.

But he doesn't lose his focus so easily. That it's Buffy Summers who has slain his girl just kicks his shock and fury up a few notches.

He never thought he'd ever see Buffy again.

He really hasn't wanted to.

"Girl wasn't threatenin' you or anybody. Didn't deserve staking. Why couldn't you leave her be?"

"Huh? That vamp in the bathroom? She was with you?" Buffy's expression changes. She draws herself up, steps back. Her expression says that this situation has stopped being a miraculous reunion, and turned into a very possible slaying-about-to-happen. He can see her jumping to the conclusion, based on the company he was keeping, that he's got to be sans soul. And therefore, that she's got to take him out.

And seeing that, all the piss and vinegar deserts him. Little Clio, with whom he's spent all his days and nights for nearly three years, cherishing her and protecting her, helping her to be good, has been pulled out of him. She was like his spine—without her, he's only going to be able to crawl.

Because bloody Buffy, The Original Vampire Slayer, was blithely doing what she did as reflexively as breathing.

The knife slips out of his hand, clatters to the floor. He hears it fall, but the music is too loud for her to. She's staring at his face, anyway.

He turns and starts for the exit. If she follows and attacks him, he won't try to stop her. It makes a squalid kind of sense that after everything, it's Buffy who'll put paid to him at last.

Pushing his way through the throng waiting to get into the club, he turns his steps toward the alley entrance up the block. It's another minute before he's aware of her behind him, keeping pace. Tears are pouring down his face, but he doesn't care if she sees him crying. He has no control, and anyway, Clio must be wept for. She was the sweetest mistress he ever had. She's the only one he's
sure really loved as well as needed him. They had such nice times together, took such good care of each other. Every day he tried to make it up to her however he could, the misfortune of being undead. Even though he felt it more as misfortune than she could, she was appreciative. She wanted him to be proud of her, and he was.

She'd say she felt lucky, that she'd suffered what she did, because it led her to him.

Buffy grabs his elbow and yanks him around. "Spike—what are you doing here? What happened to you?"

"Fuck off! I don't owe you any explanations!"

"You were dead. I saw you burning up. You couldn't have gotten out."

"Leave me alone." He hasn't forgotten how to hate Buffy Summers. He hates her so much at that moment that he doesn't even want to kill her. To kill her he'd have to touch her.

Her lip trembles, but it's disdain and nothing else he sees in her expression, hears in her voice. "What, so, we're at square one all over again? You're Mr Look-Ma-No-Soul, and you're pissed off because I staked your new Drusilla? Excuse me, but how the hell did that happen?"

"Fuck off." This time it's a whisper. He turns his back on her, begins to walk away. Let her stab him from behind. He wishes she would, because he doesn't want to return to the flat, where Clio's things are and she is not. Why did she go into the bloody toilet at all? Not like she has to pee. He'd always told her she'd have to be vigilant, careful. That the world was full of slayers who'd see her as the enemy no matter what she did. But he'd never really imagined she'd run foul of one ... why would she? She didn't draw attention to that aspect of herself—she liked people, didn't see them as prey. She was just a girl. An unfortunate girl. The tears pour unchecked down his face, his whole body shakes with every step. It's too much. It's too much, what this existence keeps putting him through.

He goes, and Buffy stays behind him, yards behind, but he knows she's always there. She doesn't say anything else. He tries to shake her off, walking at random, not arriving anywhere, hoping maybe she'll get tired or bored and peel off.

Thinks about confronting her after all. Imagines what it would be like if he had a shotgun, like he'd had back in Sunnydale, that he could pull out from under his coat and use to blow her away. Not that he really wants to. Those days are long gone. He just wants the slayer to leave him alone. He doesn't want her of all people witnessing his grief. She doesn't understand what she's done. She doesn't understand who he is or how she's wounded him.

She never has.

At last he can smell the dawn approaching; he's got to go back to the flat, unless he wants to burn. Which has its appeal, except that he senses Buffy's still tailing him, and if he's going to walk into the sun, he doesn't want her to think she has anything to do with it. She always flattered herself that everything he did was about her. Which used to be true but it's not fucking true anymore.

He lingers for a few moments outside the hulking old building where he lives with Clio in the basement. The sky is starting to lighten, but he knows there'll be a shadow here for another while.

"C'mon then!" he cries out. "C'mon, slayer, have at me!" He stands with his arms outstretched, waiting to be staked, but there's nothing. A dog barks in the street, he hears a plane overhead, and then there's nothing else for it but to go inside and wait out the day with Clio's things.
The knocking wakes him. First it's part of his dream, but it doesn't stop, it gets louder and louder. He cries out angrily, and for a moment there's silence, then more knocking.

He doesn't know, as he staggers up, what day it is. He's been in here a long time, without blood, without moving. When he gets off the bed, photographs fall from the sheets to the floor. There's so many of them. Polaroids. Photo-booth strips. Spike and Clio. She liked plenty of pictures, because of the not having a reflection, but really because, before him, she'd never had anyone to be in photos with. She kept them in a shoe box, and she'd pore over them sometimes like they were evidence of something, until he'd come up and take her in his arms. "Right here, love. Real thing's right here," he'd say, nuzzling her neck, and Clio would turn and smile and embrace him.

He yanks the door open. Buffy's there. Beside her is the witch, substantially unchanged. Her eyes get big at sight of him, and Buffy's roll.

"Spike ... put something on, okay?" Willow says.

"She's seen it all before. Can stake me naked just the same."

"Not here to stake you," Willow says, "And I really didn't want to see it, so put it away. Can we come in?"

"No." He backs away from the open door, finds his jeans puddled at the foot of the bed, shins them on. The women are still standing out in the hall, apparently taking his refusal seriously. He doesn't look at them.

"Like I told you," Willow says then, addressing Buffy, "he has his soul, just like back in Sunnydale. I can't tell why he didn't burn up, but I don't get any weird vibe off him, he's just Spike. So, uh, I'm gonna go. Call me later, okay?"

Spike straightens up. "What the hell? You're goin', take her with you."

"I want to talk to you, Spike," Buffy's voice is like ice. Deep polar ice.

"Yeah, well, don't want to talk to you. This is a place of mourning. Don't need insensitive bitches hangin' about."

"I want to—"

"Don't you bloody get it? This's her home. The young lady you murdered, with no provocation. She lived here. With me. Under my protection. Which didn't end up being worth a tinker's fart, but show some fucking respect."

Willow's still there, hesitating, looking at Buffy, looking at him.

"Spike," Willow says, "... she was a vampire. A vampire, in a crowded dance club. We all know what vampires go to places like that for."

"What, you the mouthpiece now? Been to law school since I saw you last?"

"No, I just—"

"It's none of your damn business. Either of you. Why should I have to explain a thing about my life,
or hers? You an' me, slayer, we parted ways a long time ago, an' my account with you's marked Paid In Full. I'm not your problem anymore."

"I didn't know she was your squeeze, all right!" Buffy sounds exasperated, like a kid who's being forced to apologize.

"She wasn't a *squeeze*, you ignorant little cunt. She was Clio. She was my Clio. She never hurt anyone." Talking about her brings the burning again to his eyes, the twitching to the corners of his mouth. He grabs up a shirt, puts it on. "She was a good girl. You hear me? She was never anything but a good girl. Got lost, got cornered by a coupla vamps, an' by time I did for 'em, she was dead. Was going to put a stake in her corpse too ... but she was so delicate, so torn ... couldn't help lookin' at her. An' while I was lookin', she rose. An' yeah, I was lonesome, an' she was pretty. Not apologizin' for it! Always liked a pretty girl. She was frightened an' alone an' I decided to help her. Thought maybe if I could steer her the right way from the start, she wouldn't be like all the others." He puts his hands through his hair. His mouth's dry, and he's still lightheaded from standing up so fast. He wishes he was still asleep. He wishes he was dead. "An' she wasn't. She wasn't like the other vampires. Until you made her one, by staking her.

Willow's making that sad face she ought to be too old to get away with anymore, but the slayer's face is still flint. She must be mighty disappointed to be told he's got his soul, because what else did she come here for except to slay him? She still wants to, but she's ambivalent now. Buffy hates to feel ambivalent.

The rage rears up in him again, that she dares to come here after what she's done, after everything she's ever done. He didn't sacrifice himself for her—no, he did that for the world. For the world, which he always enjoyed even before he felt an ounce of compassion for anyone in it. He did what felt right in his restless soul, and it had nothing to do with impressing Buffy. But he wouldn't have fought for that soul if not for loving her. That passion tore him apart and made him into someone else he barely knew how to be. Someone who seemed destined always to be excluded.

He'd thought a lot after he came back through the amulet, about what it meant, Buffy saying she loved him when she did. Had finally concluded, after lots of gin-soaked mulling in L.A., that it meant only that, despite all they'd done for each other in those final weeks before the big battle, she still didn't really respect him. If she had, she wouldn't have breathed a lie like that. Not as the last thing he was supposed to hear on this earth. It was a conclusion that made it a little easier to raise his hand when Angel was looking for volunteers to go out in a blaze of no-one-noticing.

Except he hadn't gone out. He'd watched Charlie fall, and Angel, seen Illyria use her last might to open a portal and shunt the attacking armies through it, before she fell too, leaving him to bleed alone on the blood-soaked cobbles of that alley.

He'd gone on, confused and despairing and on his own.

He'd been rescued from that despair, that gaping solitude, when he rescued Clio. Her love, the love of a naive and trusting young demon who adhered to innocence for his sake, brought him back to purpose. It was the sort of thing that shouldn't be possible, the way a slayer loving a vampire shouldn't be possible—not twice anyhow—and he should've guessed from the start that it wouldn't last.

He doesn't know why it has to be Buffy who tears it all down. Who shows him again that loving doesn't get you anything but the chance to stand alone and feel all the pain in the bloody universe centered in your own flaming heart.

He'd have said she's already taught him all the hard lessons in the world. He can't think why she's
back again to repeat them.

Willow looks like she wants to sink into the floor. "Spike, I'm sorry."

He hears a lot in this. He thinks, that if it wasn't for Buffy's presence, Willow would want to break into some more elaborate apology, for things that have nothing to do with Clio. There's a petition in her eyes, asking him to understand more than she's saying.

He thinks that if Buffy wasn't here, he'd ask her in and talk to her about it. Monster to monster. They've got plenty in common.

Buffy says, "I didn't know. How could I have known? She was a vamp, and I'm the slayer."

He thinks of various retorts he could make, but then all he does is close the door on them.

With the door shut, the flat is dark again. He limps, one boot on and one boot off, back to the bed. The polaroids on the floor stick to his bare sole. He reaches down, scoops some up, flips on the bedside light.

She smiles in all of them. Her dark eyes are always bright. Her hair is dark too, shiny and squiggly and beautiful with that odd vibrancy that being undead brings. Her dewy skin is the smooth color of milk chocolate, and she likes that his is so white, milk without the chocolate; she likes the picture they make when they're naked and twined together.

It's almost three months after he's found her that it happens between them. By now they're pretty sure of each other. He's sure he can trust her to live the way he's taught her, that he isn't going to have to stake her after all. And sure too that he never wants to lose sight of her, that he can build a new life around looking after her. She's good company. She has a naturally trusting way about her. It's a laugh to say it of a vampire, but hers is a sunny disposition.

He's given her his bed, spends his days sleeping on the couch. Until she invites him to join her, invites him shyly, like the kind of bride he used to imagine having when he was a young man in London in a different century. He finds out, the first time, that she's a virgin. Even though she was twenty-three when she died. "I just wanted to wait," she explains. "It wasn't about religion or marriage or nothin'. I just wanted to wait for someone I liked." He's moved by this, more than he could have anticipated—it's the pity of her death, all over again, and it's the sweetness of her offering herself in a way demons aren't supposed to do, wanting gentleness. Her virginity should be a small thing, but it turns out to be enormous. It's something no other woman has ever given him. A kind of trust he finds he knows what to do with.

Afterwards she fangs out and wants to feed from him. She's never done this before, and filled with tenderness for her, he wants so much to consent, to attach her to himself like this, as if they were really sire and get, but he explains to her that it won't do. That she mustn't use her fangs, mustn't feed from flesh, even his. Reminds her, as he's taught her from the first, that they cannot be together if she won't mind him in this. But tells her also that she mustn't be ashamed either, of her desire, of her demon. She listens and nods and he knows that she isn't ashamed, she can't be ashamed, because she has no soul. But she loves him and is grateful to him, is so imprinted on him, that she's happy to obey. It's not the same as a conscience, but it doesn't interfere with what he feels for her, what she feels for him. They're so happy to have found one another.

And now she's gone and everything he tried to help her be is nothing, and he is nothing, and Buffy is still standing on the other side of his apartment door.
He's stretched out again on the musty bed, ignoring his hunger, looking at the pictures. Trying to get his head around what's happened. In the old days, he was never particularly troubled by the dusty thing, but now it's happened to someone he loves, so he's got no corpse to anoint and inter, nothing he can hold and bid farewell to, the horror of it comes home to him. The girl in these pictures, who loved dancing, and kept her sweet tooth, who knitted sweaters and afghans and socks, and could beat him at half a dozen different X-Box games, is in every way gone. Just erased from the whole world.

Buffy would say she was erased the night those vamps tore her throat open, and turned her. But that isn't true. Clio survived that. Clio was beautifully herself. He helped her be a new kind of demon, a demon like him.

She loved him as he always wanted to be loved.

He can feel the slayer out in the hall. After a while—it's been at least an hour—she thumps once on the door. "You can't get out of here without passing me! You might as well open up and talk!"

He ignores this, goes on shuffling the pictures, letting them drop onto the bedclothes like leaves. He spaces out, his mind floating off under the lightness of hunger, and she's there, giving him warm blood in a cup with a kiss. Sitting on his lap, talking about what happened on Passions and wouldn't it be nice to go away somewhere for Christmas, was there someplace they could go with snow? She wants to play with him in the snow.

Another hard thump and Clio shivers away. Sitting up fast, he throws a boot at the door.

"This is so stupid!" The slayer thumps again. "I'm sorry about your girlfriend! Just talk to me, Spike!"

When he opens the door, she looks sullen, gazing up at him through her eyelashes like Lauren Bacall in that old movie he's seen a hundred times.

"Piss off."

"Hello to you too."

That almost makes him slam the door again. But Buffy shoulders her way in before he can.

He could leave her here. Just walk off, leave her here with all this stuff he doesn't need anymore for a life he hasn't got anymore. Except that suddenly her little hand is curled tight around his arm.

"Jesus, Spike. You're alive, you've been around all this time." She takes him in. "Why? Why didn't you contact me?"

This is the very thing he never wanted to discuss with her. Now, some four years after the fact, it feels even more beside the point than ever. Why ask? Freeing his arm, he turns away. Buffy follows him further in. She crouches, picks something up from the floor.

He watches her look at the picture. He can't see which one it is, but it doesn't matter. "How could you ..." Buffy pauses, swallows hard. Her voice has gone husky. "I don't understand any of this. How could you care for another vampire? You have a soul, and she didn't."

He doesn't want to hear this. Where does she get off, interrogating him?
"Yeah, 'cause lovin' a girl with a soul worked out so well before." It comes out before he can stop himself. He wasn't going to engage, he was going to ignore her until she went away, and now he's said this. Which she'll think is about her, because she obviously thinks it's still all about her. But it isn't; for him, it's about Clio.

Clio was a girl who couldn't fight the monsters, and was made into a monster. Losing her soul was her misfortune—he tried to make that up to her, by keeping her from descending into the blood-soaked pit of no return. It should've been a futile thing to attempt—vampires have their nature. They'd had some close calls at the beginning, but more than she'd wanted to feed on live blood, she'd wanted to do what he asked her. It was so simple: she loved him. The exact reason for that love, as always, was enigmatic at the core. She would say, when he asked her, that he was the first thing she saw when she opened her demon eyes, "and that, Sweetboy, was that."

He could've reminded the slayer, as Drusilla had occasion to tell her once, that you didn't need a soul to love, that vampires could love quite well. But he isn't interested in giving Buffy a disquisition on love.

She's still looking at the picture. He plucks it from her fingers. "Go away now."

"I just don't understand. How is it that you're even here?"

"What difference does it make? Get out."

"It makes a difference. Spike, it ... it makes a huge difference." She looks at him, her eyes big and clueless and full of questions, and he feels like she's trying to manipulate him. It always used to work, too. She'd give him that look and he'd fling himself at anything to help her. To be a hero for her.

With Clio, there wasn't any heroism. She didn't expect him to turn himself inside out for her, and she didn't keep him guessing. She always wanted to hold hands when they walked together, liked him to cuddle her after a fuck, and she knew how to suck his cock in a way that didn't make him feel small. She told him what she was thinking, and wanted to hear what he was thinking. Saving the world wasn't on her radar, but she didn't want any harm to come to anyone in it, either.

She was perfectly lovable, even by a vampire with a soul. Since when was he too good for a girl like that?

"I thought ..." But Buffy doesn't say what she thought. For a moment she just looks helpless, empty-handed. Then she walks out. Spike stands for a few moments in the dim light coming in from the basement hallway, then shuts the door and begins to gather up the scattered photos. He looks around for what else he wants to take with him; he can't stay here any longer. He can call Hal, a bartender he knows, who will probably let him kip on his sofa for a couple of days while he figures out where to go now L.A.'s finished. For the first time he wonders what Buffy is doing here anyway, but he doesn't ponder it for long.

He's going to travel light. He won't even take all the photographs. Just as many as he can fit in his wallet. And he'll keep the black sweater she knitted for him, with the small white skull and crossbones on the right arm. And he'll take the big multi-colored afghan, because she worked on that for months, though he knows he'll probably have to leave it somewhere on the way. He'd have liked to take the necklace he gave her, the old-gold locket with their pictures inside it. But she never took that off, so it's gone now. Dusted with the rest of her.

He's pulling the duffle out from under the bed when the flat door swings open again.
"I ... I know you're planning to disappear. So if I waited to say this to you, I'd lose my only chance."

Buffy's shadow falls into the room in the oblong of light from the hall. It's a slender shadow, arms akimbo. Just like always.

"You asked me just now why it matters. Spike, don't you know?"

He doesn't answer. He's sorting through clothes—his own, because there's no point taking hers, and if he starts looking through them, he'll fall to weeping again, because everything she wore has some pleasant association for him. She liked him to help her choose her clothes. He bought them for her; he's the one who, thanks to Angel's foresightedness, has a little money.

Buffy takes a step into the room. She takes a deep breath. "It matters because if I'd had any idea that you walked out of that crater that Sunnydale turned into ... I'd have done everything I could to find you. To come to you. So I could be with you."

He wishes they'd done the laundry more often. Shakes out teeshirts, stuffs them in the bag.

Buffy trembles. He feels her tremble, hears her heart race. But it's got nothing to do with him, this is her drama, and she can enact it here or anywhere, it doesn't matter. He's going to go. He's going to go far away, and he's going to mourn, and then after that ... after that he doesn't know.

"Spike. I am sorry. I am sorry I dusted her. I didn't know. But you have to listen. This is important, okay?"

He goes into the bathroom, scoops the contents of his shelf into the bag: shampoo, hair gel, toothbrush and all that. Her shelf holds all kinds of cosmetics and lotions and scents. She would get a new lipstick practically every night. Why did she try to bum mascara off of the slayer? She was wearing mascara when they went out. She was looking fine, like always, no reason to go into that club toilet. Not like she could check herself out in the mirror.

He's sure that she meant no harm to any of the other girls in there. She liked to listen to their chatter, liked to join in it as if she was still a girl like them. She missed having gal-pals.

He picks up a bottle of her perfume. If he takes this with him, he can spray the pillow where he next lays his head, pretend ... no. He puts it back. He doesn't want to pretend. That'll just make it worse.

When he turns to go out, Buffy's in the bathroom doorway.

"Will you please just listen?" She's almost whispering. She touches his arm. "I should have told you sooner. Days sooner. Weeks. I knew. I knew I was in love with you. But I was afraid. And there was so much ... so much on me right then. I didn't think we had time to give to being lovers. I was afraid that if we started, if I ... if I got close to you again, I wouldn't be able to fulfill my responsibilities because I'd just want to hold you all the time. So I waited, and then ... when I did tell you, it was too late." Her hand tightens on him, and she starts to cry. Not sobbing, not making any noise, just the tears slipping down her cheeks, making glistening tracks through her dewy face powder.

He's going to walk right through her. He's going to walk on through the slayer like she's a mist, an apparition; he's going to pick up the last few things and get on out of here. Goodbye to this dingy little flat where he'd known affection and the pleasures of home; goodbye to the bed where he and Clio fucked so magnificently, and were so confidential and warm together under the electric blanket that generated a coziness their bodies couldn't.
He's going to go, leave Buffy to sing this aria to the tattoo of her galloping pulse.

He really is.

Until her hand slips off his clothed arm, and closes instead around his hand. So he's forced to feel the heat of her skin, its dynamic throb. "And now I find out you're still here, you've been here all along, hiding from me ... and just when I might've found you again and been able to tell you, I do this thing that makes you hate me. Spike, I didn't mean to. I didn't know. If I'd had any idea, I'd have left her alone. I'd have left you both to be happy."

She lets go of his hand quickly, but the damage is already done. He's felt her, and now he hears her —hears everything she's just said, that he was just pushing through without listening to. It unreels in his head, and he sees her, hears her telling him, full of sorrow and without hope, that she loves him. He hears the apology for killing Clio, hears the futility she knows is in it, and how she has to say it anyway.

He can't help it now. He stops. He faces her, and suddenly they're looking at each other, full on the way they've only done a couple of times in the past, right before the end. Naked looking, looking that speaks. She gazes up at him, inches closer, and then the toes of her shoes come into contact with the toes of his boots, and her body leans into his, and he drops his head and their foreheads touch. He smells the scent of her sadness, her regret, and he's powerless, as always with her, to do anything except be present to her.

Her brow is hot and dry against his, and she murmurs, it's almost a chant, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry that it all went wrong like this. I wish you wouldn't go. I'm so glad you're still alive, I don't want to lose you again."

He feels sorry for her now, sorrier than he would've thought imaginable ten minutes ago. She's threaded her arms around his waist, and he can sense that she'd like to hold him close to her like this for a long long time.

He can't allow it, though. He has to go. He has to honor Clio, he has to mourn. Buffy's changed everything, put him through so many changes in the last day that he doesn't know if he'll ever regain his balance.

When he tries to withdraw, she holds on. But when he peels her hands away, pushes them gently back to her, she retreats a step, staring at the floor. They don't look at each other again, before he lifts the duffle and goes out the door.

PART TWO

A one-eyed, underdressed man walks into the joint. It's almost the beginning of a very stupid joke, except that it's Xander Harris.

Spike doesn't stop polishing the surface of the bar as Harris crosses the dim room. In the red and yellow lights from the beer signs, he looks shaggy, and dark as the local Inuits. He sports a slight limp now to go with the eyepatch. Spike would very much like to abandon his rag and slip out the back, but he's the only one on the bar for the day shift, and he's got two customers in the corner booth.

Xander is breathing hard and his teeth are chattering when he scrambles up onto a stool. "Jesus
fuck. You couldn't have run off to some place where they put little paper umbrellas in the drinks?"

"What're you doin' here, Harris? There's no slayers in Deadhorse." Even as he says these discouraging words, Spike pours a mug of coffee, tips some brandy into it, and slides it across the bar. Xander catches it eagerly, just holding the steaming mug for a few moments before he lifts it to his lips. "Haven't you heard about Alaska, you berk? Gets cold here in winter."

"This is the warmest damn coat I could get in a hurry in Addis." Harris looks up from his coffee. "I don't need to tell you that I'm here because Buffy asked me to come."

"Asked you."

"She's been counting the days. Since she saw you in LA. It's been six months. She thought that was the least amount she should wait. She would like you to come to London."

"An' it's you tellin' me this ... why?"

Xander fidgets, eyeing his coffee, the shiny surface of the bar, his own reddened fingertips. "Because Buffy thought it would make a difference to you, knowing that her friends would also like to see you ... see you back in the club." He reaches into his clothes, holds something out. An envelope, rolled and squashed from being carried in a front jeans pocket.

Spike tries not to show how much this knocks him back. Xander Harris—never his biggest fan—has dragged himself from Addis Ababa to Deadhorse Alaska, to hand-deliver a billet doux from the slayer. It doesn't make sense.

When he doesn't take the envelope, Xander sets it gently on the bar, and takes up his coffee again. "She's changed this last half year. Since she found out about you. She talks about you all the time." He sighs. "Hell, we've all been talking about you. The emails, they fly like the wind. It's been a regular Spike symposium in Scoobietown."

"That so?"

"She kept wanting to come out here herself. She almost did a few times. But I told her six months might not be enough. It's been four years since Anya, and I still think about her every single day. Every other woman I meet, the first thing I'll notice about her is that she isn't Anya."

This, Spike thinks, is extraordinary. It's more than that—it's fucking weird and uncanny, and he's starting to wonder if Xander isn't under some kind of spell, or maybe he's The First, somehow come back to try again to ensnare him. Spike grabs Xander's wrist.

Xander's head whips up, and all of a sudden, he smiles.

"Knew that's what you'd think. Nah, it's really me. Willow did a locator spell on you, that's how I knew where to come." The smile fades. Back to serious, he says, "And Buffy didn't have to twist my arm—much—to make this trip. I've done a lot of thinking, been through a lot of changes, since the Sunnydale Big Bang. Finding out you weren't dead, I knew there was some stuff I wanted to say to you. I hope you'll let me."

He wonders what Clio would make of all this. He never told her much about Buffy and the Scoobies, just like he never told her much about his history prior to meeting up with them, the Drusilla decades, Angelus, Darla. They lived, as demons mostly do, in the present; and of course they didn't mix with other vampires. He'd explained a little bit about why he had a soul, but that was something Clio accepted without much curiosity, just as she accepted his rules about leaving humans alone, without wanting to have gritty discussions about why. She wasn't stupid, but she
was trusting—which was probably what got her turned in the first place. They didn't talk much
about her past either—he gathered it wasn't a happy one, and there didn't seem to be anyone from
her human life whom she missed much, except for a mother she'd lost before she was ten, and a girl
cousin, nearly a sister, who had died because her boyfriend was driving drunk.

In that respect, she was almost made to be a vampire.

In this cold dark place, Clio is still with him. Sometimes unbearably present, so that at first he
couldn't get out of bed for the heaviness of her fate, and his loneliness. And at other times,
increasingly in the last couple of months, she's just there, a light familiar presence, the imaginary
friend he keeps up a running dialogue with as he goes about the small business of the small life he
has here. He thinks only of her, so he doesn't have to think about the slayer, and what she told him
in L.A., and how for those few minutes they'd held onto each other, while through her skin and
heat and scent and tears Buffy impressed on him that she was not the same girl he'd believed her to
be during all the time he'd written her off.

But now, facing Xander across the bar, Clio's nowhere. She's not part of this at all. He can't lean on
her memory for anything. The time he spent with her isn't as real, as immediate, as the time before,
which Xander embodies by slumping on this stool across from him like a sack of old clothes.
Xander fresh from Africa, where, as Andrew told him that time, he scouts for slayers, helps train
them and bring them into the fold.

If he were to walk away from Xander right this minute, just drop everything and walk away ... no,
it wouldn't work. Not here. Deadhorse isn't L.A. Xander will be able to find his house by asking
any single person he sees, and Spike can't leave town without some few hours' preparation,
because the plane from Fairbanks only goes once a day.

He's not going to be able to dodge the slayer's world this time. Clio's already falling to dust all over
again, dust that isn't going to re-coalesce at the insistent bidding of his memory. And Buffy's
starting to crowd into his head, the way she always used to.

Spike takes out his wallet, flips it open and looks at Clio. If he sees her, she'll have to be real again.
She was right here, right here when Xander came in.

"Is that her?" Xander says. "May I see?"

Spike doesn't want to, but he lets Xander look.

"Pretty girl. Great smile. The way she looks at you there ... I'm sorry, man."

Spike grunts. Xander being complimentary to one vampire about another ... it's a bit much to
swallow.

"Buffy said you rescued her."

"Never rescued the slayer from a damn thing."

Xander pauses for a second. "No, man. I meant—your girl here. Clio? Buffy said you rescued her
from the vamps who turned her. That you kept her away from the biting and the mayhem. Kept her
innocent."

"Yeah."

"That's impressive."
He wants to say *oh fuck off. This isn't you, Harris.* Taking back the wallet, he flips through the pictures again. His sight dims, he wants to kick something. Sending Xander here, Buffy's finished the job. Clio is a half dozen little snapshots, and nothing else. He's lost her.

"Can I have a refill?" Xander slides the cup towards him. "And is there any food here? I've been on planes for what feels like days."

After he pours coffee, Spike steps into the kitchen. The frycook is reading a magazine. He orders up a burger platter, then goes into the men's room, turns the water on full, and bends over the sink. He feels like he might be sick, but nothing happens.

It's finished.

He takes the snapshots of Clio and himself out of his wallet, and one by one, he burns them over the sink. Watches the ashes swirl down.

When he emerges from the men's room, the burger order is up; he brings it back to where Xander is. He's taken his coat off now, and is sitting up straighter. Spike sees that he's a real man now, all trace of the fat boy gone. He's whip-thin, muscled, tanned and seasoned. He bites into the burger with gusto.

"Africa been good to you?"

"I wouldn't put it that way, exactly. But what I do now sure beats general contracting." He fixes his one eye on Spike, appraising, intelligent. "Don't you miss being part of the fight? I used to get your pride in it, even back when I didn't like you."

Spike thinks, *Now you like me?*

Xander touches the crumpled envelope. "You should read this, Spike."

In the last six months he's very deliberately not given any thought to what Buffy imagined she wanted from him. Didn't replay that last scene, what she'd said, how she'd touched him. How, in spite of himself, he'd responded.

But it's all right there inside him, he's got it now, as deep and full and clear as he doesn't have Clio. Buffy Summers, touching him the way he used to yearn to be touched. Looking at him with the expression he'd seen her give to others but never him. Telling her heart, even though she believed it wasn't going to get her what she was asking for.

It's all right there, but he still can't quite believe it. He knew—hell, he *saw*—that she was getting on with her life just fine post-SunnyD. Running around Rome with The Immortal. If she was doing that within weeks of his supposed death, she wasn't sitting around pining for him years later. Chewing, Xander says, "Running into you in L.A. just threw her. Finding out you weren't really dead ... she was beside herself. She came to see me right afterwards. We traveled together in Nigeria and Cameroon for ten days and she never shut up about you, all this yearning and regret came tumbling out. She was honest with me for the first time about what went on between you two. Maybe honest with herself for the first time too, about what she wanted. She was upset about how she'd slain Clio and just how fucked up it all was. She didn't ask me to say any of this, but I'm telling you, Spike, seeing her like that—it wasn't easy for me. I wasn't thrilled to hear you were still around, I didn't want her being in love with you. No surprise there, right? But she was all spun around, and by time I said goodbye to her, I was too. Talking it all over with her, my fixed ideas about you got knocked loose. I never gave you an inch, and that was wrong."
"Shut it."

"No, I ... okay, keep that for later. Point is, I really do wish you'd go to her, because she's never gonna be happy if you don't."

Spike fingers the envelope. He's not sure how much more of this vindication shit he can stand, but then he decides to get it over with, and tears it open.

It's a courting note, sure enough, but it's not from Buffy.

_Dear Spike,_

One hardly knows how to begin a letter like this, which must in a few short lines begin the process of turning an enemy into, if not a friend, then a trusted associate.

Given our history, you have every reason not to trust me. I went on mistrusting you long after I should've seen that you were on our side, and my machinations nearly cost Buffy her best ally.

You made what you assumed would be the supreme sacrifice, and we allowed you to do so without acknowledgement, let alone thanks.

This is one of my great regrets, of many in my career.

I don't think I can ever offer to 'make it up to you.' I certainly hope there will be a time—soon—when we can talk about it over a drink, and come to an understanding. When you will consent to shake my hand, if you can bring yourself to do so.

Spike, we need all our allies again now. We need your skills, your unique knowledge, your passion to do what is right in the struggle that, as you certainly know, goes on even now that the Sunnydale hellmouth is shut. If you will come to London, I'm prepared to discuss generous terms with you, to attach yourself to the reformed Council of Watchers and fight alongside us, as a colleague and—I do hope—a friend.

I can assure you that the reception you'll receive will be commensurate with the respect and esteem in which we all hold you. It has taken us too long to acknowledge the ways in which you changed, but I hope you will allow that we too have—finally—changed as well.

Xander is my agent in making all arrangements for your passage to London, should you decide to accept.

_Sincerely,_

_Rupert Giles_

"S'touching, Harris, you journeyin' all this way to see me. Bring me this." He says it like he doesn't give a fuck, but the hell of it is, he is touched. Touched to his core. As much as Xander's coming here has robbed him of Clio, it's left something else in the hollow place where she resided. It's something he's not sure he wants, because it's going to require that he try, that he care. Since Angel and Co. went down, he's pulled in his horns on that front. But as much as he had no control over Clio's slipping away, he has no control over how his soul and his reason and the part of him that's got no reason at all, that's pure emotion, responds to this visit, and to the letter, and to the strong sense memory of Buffy holding him in her arms, wanting to console him for Clio even as she knows he's going to pull away from her. He puts the letter back in the envelope. Xander is
watching him with curiosity.

"You seen this?"

"No, but I know what it says." He crams a last few french fries into his mouth. "Buffy hopes you'll team up with her, but that's not a pre-condition. We've got slayers by the car-load, and a serious watcher shortage. A serious experience shortage. We need what you know just as much as we need your muscle. More."

"I figured you lot must be strapped, what with Andrew bein' one of the leading lights."

A grin crooks Xander's mouth. "Oh, he's come a long way." Then the smile fades. "Wait. How do you know about that?"

It's surprising to realize that Xander and the others have no idea that he was with Angel. Andrew, instructed to keep schtum, really has. Spike wonders if Rupert has realized his mistake about Angel as well. His refusal to send help when Angel called for it almost certainly contributed to the deaths of the lot of them: Wesley, Charles, and Angel himself; that Giles doesn't mention this in the letter indicates that he doesn't know Spike was in on that apocalypse either.

He's got a lot to answer for, that Rupert Giles.

"You lot got Angel wrong at the end, too."

"What do you mean?"

"Can talk about it later." Spike puts the letter back in the envelope. "I'll come to London an' see Giles. But I need some time to wrap things up here, an' I can get there on my own."

"I've got the Council's plane, though."

"Council's got a bloody plane now?"

"They always did. More than one. Now Giles runs the place, the people who do the real work actually get to use the real tools."

Might as well, Spike thinks. Might as well go back with bloody Harris on the bloody Council plane. It's only pride that would keep him from saying yes to that, and he feels too tired suddenly to exercise any more pride.

They leave in the morning. Though Xander claims he slept overnight, in his room at Deadhorse's finest tourist accomodations, he falls asleep almost as soon as they're airborne, which suits Spike fine, because he has no clue what he's going to chat to him about for five or six hours. Unlike the Wolfram and Hart plane, this one has regular window-glass, so Spike has to stay in the back, with the shades pulled down, and can't watch the snowfields and seas of Deadhorse recede. Also unlike the W&H vehicle, this one lacks grown-up refreshments—he finds soft drinks and sugary snacks suitable for pubescent slayers, and not much else. He still carries a flask, but it's not enough to get drunk and stay drunk through this whole transformative journey, so he doesn't even start.

He tries to prepare himself, but he's not really sure what he's preparing for. Rereading Giles' letter, he can't imagine Giles talking to him like that face-to-face. Can't imagine really being a part of the
organization. The words *esteem* and *respect* alarm him. Who uses words like that in the normal course of things?

Will Buffy be there when the plane lands? Will she expect that his coming there means he's going to assent to whatever she wants? And what is that, exactly? What does she imagine, when she thinks of being with him? He's only ever fucked her in abandoned houses and musty crypts; their few meaningful moments took place in borrowed spots, on borrowed time. They don't belong to the same world. He used to tell her that she should dwell in the darkness with him, but he didn't believe that even at the time. Wasn't she right, when she decided to stay aloof from him, at the end? He still felt it was right, keeping her from knowing he didn't really die.

Yet the thought of seeing her again, knowing she might look at him the way she did in his L.A. flat, might touch him so longingly with her small warm hands, has Spike at such a pitch of excitement that he needs the seat belt to keep him from bouncing around the inside of the plane. Time and distance and Clio might've made his thing for the slayer go into abeyance, but it's all still there. He's not sure that's such a good thing.

The years with Clio were so simple. Deceptively simple. He squints at the light coming in through the windows at the front of the fusillage. He didn't make her exactly, but she was a sort of monster's bride, tailored to live neither in one world nor the other, neither truly demon nor truly human, existing for no other purpose but to ease his loneliness. For the first time it occurs to him to ponder what he'd have done about it if, after rescuing her, he hadn't gotten on with her. Would he have staked her, if she didn't please him in bed, if her talk bored him or she gave herself to other men? Or would he have sent her off to take her chances as a vampire like other vampires? And would he have let himself see that as a mercy? It wouldn't really be one, not for her and certainly not for the victims she'd have taken.

What would Buffy do if he wasn't the kind of demon lover she saw in her imagination?

"Oh my God. I was sure you'd have changed, but I couldn't picture how, so I kept thinking of you looking the same, and feeling stupid for it, but ... you are the same."

At first glimpse, moving towards him in the hanger where they disembark, Dawn's the same too—same bright face, same long hair, same nervous babble and big grin. But then she steps in to embrace him, and he can feel that she's turned into an adult woman, and the babble stops as she holds him. At first her hug is tepid, but then he realizes its because she's unsure of herself; when he pulls her against him, she sighs and squeezes him tight. "Spike."

"You're all grown up."

"Not really. Not yet. I'm still a student. Spike, I'm sorry I—"

"Hush." It's one thing to see Rupert's apologies on paper, another to hear Dawn start in as if she's got *anything* to beg his pardon for. The world feels upside down when that happens. "You've nothing to say sorry for."

Dawn glances away for a moment, then back at him. "I would *never* have burned you."

It makes him sad, to think that threat has been weighing on her, even for a day. He never resented her for it—it was no more than he deserved. He's never felt that anything he did afterwards really
takes away from his assault on Buffy. Apart from everything else, it put the lie to his illusion about himself, that even as a demon he was a sort of gentleman when it came to the woman of his affections. He can shrug his shoulders over what he did as a vampire—he's not the brooding type like Angel, he had his month of madness over it and has had his bad half hours since. But what he did to Buffy, even if he failed to do the worst—that will always stay with him, and he means never to let himself off the hook for it. No matter that she'd assaulted and belittled him over and over ... he kept showing up for it, didn't he, though nothing forced him to but his own obsession with her. Couldn't compare her behavior to his—she hadn't loved him, and so owed him no compassion. It was worse, immeasureably and irremediably worse, to hurt the person who owned your heart.

All this floods his mind even as Dawn waits for some reassurance that he's forgiven her for her girlish vehemence.

"I know, Bit. No worries. Thanks for meetin' our flight."

"Will you promise to have dinner with me? Sometime this week? Just us. I have so much I'd like to tell you."

He tells her he'd like this. She's leading him towards a car with black windows; Xander's already climbing inside. It occurs to him that he might as well be a prisoner, one of those important political prisoners who is treated politely even as he's completely deprived of his liberty. He doesn't know where they're going or what the plans for him are, and he doesn't quite want to ask.

It's still daytime, but the sky is overcast. As they reach the outskirts of London, it begins to rain. The Council's new headquarters occupy some contiguous townhouses on Gower Street. He's already inside before he realizes that neither Dawn nor Xander explicitly invited him; Giles must have issued the invitation already, to spare him even that small embarrassment at the door. He's the first person to greet Spike once he's climbed the stairs and entered a cozy former parlor, now a reception room. Willow is there as well, and Andrew, who embraces him with even more brio and exclamation than he did in Los Angeles; it takes a few beats for Spike to realize that at least part of this is a performance for the others, because Andrew is still keeping his promise of not letting on that he's seen Spike before.

He expects Buffy to show herself, but she's not there; no one mentions her. He's given a tour of the facilities, meets some watchers and slayers, and then Giles announces a dinner. They leave the Council headquarters, the whole group of them, and walking for ten minutes, end up at Giles' house, where Spike sees the woman he remembers visiting him when they all lost their voices. She's Mrs Giles now, and she's huge with child. Olivia welcomes him with a handshake and a smile as if she has no idea that he's a vampire, or that they've met before. Seated in the dining room, he finds himself at a proper candlelit London dinner party for twelve, of the sort he hasn't attended since he had a surname and kept a carriage. Dawn sits beside him, and keeps smiling at him and finding little excuses to touch him; she's brimming with happiness. On his other side is Giles, who, heartily keeps his wine-glass topped up. The table and the guests surrounding it seem to float; the voices swirl and jangle around him, and he doesn't really hear anything that's said. It's nice enough that they've welcomed him at last, the Scoobies and their associates, but this is not a way he can live. He thinks yearningly of getting up, going downstairs and out the door, treading his silent way along the pavement to disappear into the demon parts of the town.

Finally it's over, and he finds himself in a black cab with Xander, on their way to a hotel. The hotel turns out to be the Savoy. Spike has never stayed here per se, but he's debauched people in its rooms. That was a long time ago, during the War. He doesn't mention it to Xander.

"The Council does right by us these days," Xander says, leading the way through the opulent
Spike thinks he's a little drunk.

Their rooms are on different floors. Xander says goodnight, and they part.

When he walks into his room—which is vast, and smells of fresh flowers—Buffy rises from the sofa.

"I hope this doesn't seem like an ambush. I didn't know what wouldn't feel like an ambush. I didn't want to do this in front of the others."

For a moment they just look at each other. She's nervous. He thinks perhaps she wants to run into his arms, but he's not ready for that, and neither, apparently is she.

He comes closer. "Hello Buffy."

She tips her chin up; seems about to say something else.

Her punch knocks him back.

"What was that for!?"

"You—you—you disappoint me!"

"Do I fuck!"

Her eyes are like two stars—not exactly teary, but so bright. She rubs her hand like hitting him hurt her. She's pale and anxious and beautiful. He takes in again what he saw six months ago, but didn't, at the time, care about: the dark hair, the fuller body. She's not stringy and overwrought, like she was during the time of The First; but her throbbing heartbeat practically ripples the heavy air around her.

"Since I saw you last, I've been thinking. Before anything else, we have to have this out."

"Well, keep your hands to yourself. Didn't come here so you could rearrange my face again."

"Will you listen!" She stamps her foot. "Look, I'm sorry I dusted your girlfriend. I really am. But you had no business being involved with her!"

"Contradictory much?" After Xander's message and the reception he got from Giles, this performance of Buffy's throws him.

She begins to pace. "Not really! I just don't get what the hell you thought you were doing!"

"Livin' my unlife. Mindin' my own business."

"Exactly! How could you? You were so passionate about the mission—you died for it, or so I thought—and then I find out that you survived, soul intact, but instead of coming back to help us, you, what? Shacked up with a vamp girl? Took her out dancing every night? Okay, I get that you kept her from hurting anyone, and yeah that's great as parlor tricks go, but what was the point? That isn't the Spike I thought I knew! The one who made himself into a real man. The one who was my best ally. My best ... friend."

He'd like to return her punch, but he sees that she's arguing from what she knows, and she doesn't know everything.

She doesn't know about his months with Angel's operation in L.A.
So he tells her. Just in a few sentences, short and sharp, the highlights, which of course are all low-points.

And when he gets to the part about Angel being dead, Buffy goes pale, and sinks back onto the sofa. Here we go, he thinks. But instead of giving way as he expects, she draws herself up. "I want to know more about this. About why no one told me, and how he died. But you always think I put him ahead of you, and that's so not true anymore, so let's keep Angel for later. You. You walked away from another apocalypse—thank God—and even then you didn't call me?"

He blurts out what he feels, the disconnect between what she's saying, and what he experienced. "Had nothin' to do with each other anymore! So why should I have called you?"

"Why? Spike ... you got your soul because of me ... changed your path, sacrificed yourself because of me ... doesn't that ... doesn't that ...."

"What? Make me your property? That what you mean?"

She pouts for a second, then turns it into something grimmer and more grown-up. "Property? Of course not. But don't you still feel how all of that connects us? You used to. And so do I, even though I failed to make it clear enough to you before you ... Spike, you belong in the fight. Not frittering away years trying to make some poor vamp girl into a tame kitten. I mean, come on! Didn't your soul rebel against that?"

"You don't know what I—"

She jumps up again, gets into his face. "No, I don't know because You. Never. Called."

"Like you ever wanted to hear anything about my feelin's."

"I heard. I heard plenty!" Her eyes get all bright again, and she looks like she might say something else, but he runs over her, he can't help himself.

"You were datin' The Immortal, last I heard anything about you. You were gettin' along all right."

The mention of Piero makes her go all dark again. "Let's leave aside this business of us, okay? I'm just talking about how much the Council needs you active, on our side. All these slayers need help, and there aren't enough experienced people to help them. There's more demonic hoo-hah in more places now than ever. The Council's practically flying blind. If I'd known, if any of us had known you were still out there—"

"Guess Rupert never told you 'bout Angel's call. How, when we were about to go up against the Circle of the Black Thorn, he tried to let you lot know what was going down. Could've used a couple dozen slayers to help out. But Rupert refused. Wouldn't even hear him out."

"He said no?"

"Was in the room. Heard the whole thing."

Spike remembers how angry she was with Giles over the Robin Wood set-up. Buffy never explicitly said anything to him about it, but it was obvious from the way she let him off afterwards, that she understood the way things were; that she saw it his way.

She understands now. She sits down again, and presses the heels of her hands into her eyes.

"Know Wolfram an' Hart's not a name inspires confidence in a watcher's gut, but he could've done
a bit of investigatin'. He sent bloody Andrew in instead of someone with enough of a brain to figure out the real sitch. We should've been workin' together. Angel an' his people were brave an' outgunned, but they did everything they could. I saw 'em all die. So pardon me if after that I lost the bloody mission."

She drops her hands into her lap, gives him a defiant look. "I'm not going to pardon you. I, Buffy, am never letting you, Spike, off the hook. Got that?"

"Oh yeah?" he bristles. "Fuckin' hell." He's on the verge of turning on his heel when she says something else.

"But I understand better now. I know how you get when you're left on your own."

"You know how I get?" This isn't an improvement.

"You need ... inspiration. To keep you focused. Okay? C'mon Spike, I've known you long enough to see that. When you're left alone, you ... founder."

"Seems to me I'm not the only one."

"I'm not saying you are!"

"An' you don't know what Clio was! What bein' with her was like! She—she was ...." His arguments turn to mush before he can get them out. She loved him? Unconditionally? Tenderly? Without judgment or competitiveness? Poor girl was like the Buffybot that way ... she was what he made her. And sure, she might've been evil—she was one in a million, allowing herself to be controlled by him. Tamed. But taming her, what good did that do in the world? What good to her, or to himself?

Buffy's right. His soul should've rebelled. It's rebelling now. How unworthy of him, to hide himself in Clio's arms, when there was work he should've been doing. Work that was forever beyond her, good-natured as she was.

There's no one can shame him, like Buffy can. It's almost refreshing. Old times.

"I don't care what she was. What about me?" She's on her feet again. He thinks she might be fixing to get in another punch, so he half shies to get out of the way, but this time she grabs him by the lapels and drags him to her mouth. Her kiss feels like a good old I-hate-you-you-disgust-me-do-it-harder Buffy special. Except halfway through it, she makes a sound like a baby animal, and her hands slide up and around his neck. And he's already holding her so tight that her feet have left the carpet; she kicks them a little like she wants to swim up inside him, and then her legs clamp his hips and he's tumbled backwards onto the sofa, which, despite having those spindly eighteenth-century-type legs, doesn't collapse beneath them.

Good. Because nothing should stop this kiss, which is really a lot of kisses, over and over, punctuated by the kind of gasps that make a fellow proud, especially when it's the slayer who's gasping. The slayer he'd do anything for.

Anything at all.

"You are so stupid," Buffy whispers, nipping at his lips, burrowing her body against his. "So stupid. I thought—you had—more—on the ball—than to not get—what I felt about you."

"Gettin' it now."
She thumps him, "You have a lot to explain, mister."

"Can't talk when you're wrigglin' like that."

"I'm not—!"

But she is. She's wriggling like an eel with ten thousand volts going through it, and he's so hard he can't think, and it would be perfect to just pull her clothes off and make her his.

He drags himself out of her embrace, gets his feet under him and rises like a lurching drunk, while she yells "Hey!"

Before he can change his mind, Spike pulls her up too. Buffy yanks her arm away like he's insulted her. "What are you doing?"

"'S'what I'm not doing. Not doing this."

"Why ... why not?"

She still has that pout, the pout that kills.

He's not sure how to explain. He's hard and heated up and overwhelmed. Everything is unclear, except that it's not the right time to fall into her.

Buffy tugs at her clothes, her hair. "Okay," she says. "Okay, I get it."

Apparently, he doesn't have to explain.

She snatches up her bag, all busy and purposeful. "It's still early. Maybe we should patrol?"

"Yeah, all right."

She's quiet in the elevator. He's never stood in a posh elevator with her before, or any elevator. It's strange. She holds her bag and faces front, and when another couple gets on two floors down, she gives them one of those insincere elevator smiles. He paces her through the hotel's opulent lobby, and out to where black cabs are disgorging passengers beneath a glass awning. She seems to know where she's going.

"Lived in London a while?"

"A couple of years. Not long."

"Why'd you leave Rome?"

She answers very matter-of-factly. "After the Piero moment was over, it felt less fun. And I couldn't get the hang of Italian. I'm too old to learn languages, I guess."

"Too old!"

"That's Dawn's thing, anyhow. Besides, the Council is here, so I needed to be here." After a moment, she concedes, "I like it. It's not so Gilesy as I thought it would be. The shopping is fantastic."

She's walking fast—practically barreling—along the pavement.

"Where're we goin'?"
"Tube. This is not a part of town for vampires, mostly."

"What is?" He hasn't been to London in a long time—since the nights of the Blitz made the pickings so easy for hungry vampires. He'd like to slow down and look around.

"Well, duh. The lousy neighborhoods, of course." She ticks them off on her fingers. "Balham, Stepney, New Cross, Hackney, et cetera."

He almost grabs and drags her to a stop. What does Buffy the Sunnydale girl know about lousy neighborhoods? Even the wrong side of the Sunnydale tracks was a Mayberry compared to what goes on after dark—among human beings, no demons needed—in places like she's just named.

She glances back at him. "I don't need to tell you the vamps go where the murder is, do I? When the natives are slicing and dicing each other anyway, they can do anything they like." She's all grim-faced as they turn into the brightly-lit tube entrance.

She doesn't need to tell him, no. He was a well-fed vampire for over a century.

And he found Clio in just such a place, in L.A.

There's an obstruction now when he thinks of her, because he's ashamed of himself, and he hates that there's this taint on their love affair. He never wanted Clio to be ashamed of herself—she couldn't help being turned, and she was one in a million. She pulled him out of utter despair, and yeah, being with her meant he wasn't carrying on the mission. But then, he wasn't carrying it on anyway, and if it wasn't for taking care of Clio, he'd still be getting snockered among the pole dancers. There should be a little credit going—even if only a very little—for the fact that he gave Clio some happiness. She was only a soulless vampire, but happiness was something she said she'd never had when she was alive. When he was with her, he thought of more than just himself.

That has to go for something.

Buffy's at the turnstile, pulling out her pass. She looks back at him. "You need to buy a ticket."

"I—right. A ticket." He puts a hand in his pocket; glances at the ticket machines. He's got no British money.

Slowly, Buffy steps back to him. Slips an arm through his. "Or, we could leave the dodgy neighborhoods to be dodgy for another night, and just take a walk." She leads him back out to the pavement.

Now she goes slow. They've walked together before, of course, but never like this. It takes a little while for Spike to really take possession of hosting her arm through his; to grow accustomed to it. The streets they walk on have plenty of pedestrians; the restaurants and pubs are lit up and lively. Buffy never looks at him, but he begins to feel that they're together. Their silence feels less fraught, though not exactly companionable.

Then she breaks it. "So tell me about her. You loved her. Why?"

"Why?" Spike's not sure, but he doesn't think that's something you ask a bereaved man.

Buffy stops walking abruptly; her arm slips loose from his. When he turns back to her, her face is clouded. "I want to understand. Is it that ... I mean, I know you were in love with me. But did you think I wasn't really, like, girlfriend material? For you? That you couldn't ... I don't know ... live with me?" She looks down at her shoes. "Is that why you were so determined to stay down there and burn?"
"Buffy—" He's flabbergasted.

"I know I'm not easy to be with! I'm prickly, I'm uncommunicative, I've been told I'm withholding, my timing's always terrible, and—and—when I said I loved you, you didn't believe me! Maybe you still don't believe me! You probably think I'm just doing this so you'll come to work for the Council."

"Don't think that."

"But you'll always resent me because I dusted the girl who was good to you."

"Buffy, you were good to me. You saved me from The First, you believed in me when—"

"But it wasn't enough, was it! I'm never enough! That's what it is, over and over, I—"

A couple walking by turn to stare. Buffy puts a hand over her mouth. "Shit. Shut up, Buffy."

"No," Spike says, taking her shoulders in his hands, drawing her off to stand in the doorway of a shuttered shop. She blinks up at him, and he sees she's on the verge of tears. "Don't shut up. This cards on the table thing, this is right. Tell me ... tell me what you really want."

"What I want? But I want to know what you want, what you really need, so that—"

He speaks gently, because she's so rattled. "You want me to tell you about Clio so you can twist yourself into being somethin' you suppose is gonna please me. Forget that, Buffy. That's not it."

"Why? Why isn't it? She made you happy, and I—"

"Answer the question, pet. Tell me straight out. Don't make me guess."

She leans into the corner of the shop doorway, breathing deep, stilling herself. Her hand comes up and touches his face, the fingers tracing the orbit of the eye, the cheek and jaw. "I want to be your girl. To just always be your girl."

The way she touches him, the intense pleading in her gaze, brings him straight back to the same thing he knows she's remembering. Her warm fingers caressing his face so deliberately, recall other touches. Violent, angry ones. That denied the connection between them, that denied the feelings she couldn't allow herself to feel.

Nothing from their pasts can be forgotten, or discounted, or set aside. But it seems that there's nothing either that can't be turned to good purpose now, used to communicate the distance they've traversed, to this moment, when there is no distance left.

He catches her hand in his, presses the palm to his lips. Tears spill over her lids; she watches him kiss her hand, and her own mouth trembles, letting forth a low inarticulate cry. When he gathers her against him, she shudders, and begins to sob.

"Hey!" A woman's voice, loud, intrusive, at his back. "Miss, are you all right? Do you need help?"

"Fine," Buffy says, her voice a croak. Then, clearer, she says, "We're fine. Please go away."

For a moment Spike thinks the woman must be a slayer. Who else would—? But Buffy shows no sign of recognizing her, and she just shrugs, says women have to look out for each other, and moves on, glancing back a couple of times before she disappears around the corner.

The moment, of almost overwhelming emotion, is passed. But he's still holding her, and she's still
holding him. Buffy shakes out a laugh, and rests her forehead against his shoulder. "We have to get out of here."

"Where do you live?"

"I ... I have an apartment. In a mews. In ... in Mayfair."

"If you please," Spike says, smiling.

"Yes! If you please. It's part of the Council's vast holdings. One of the smaller bits. The First blew up the clubhouse, but the property—and the money—we still have."

"Well then, I'll take you home."

They set off walking again, this time with their arms around each other. They're moving swiftly, in sync, it almost feels like skating. When they pass a long sheet of plate-glass window, Buffy glances, then glances down.

"What?"

"I wanted to see how we looked, like this. But I forgot."

He sees it now, Buffy's solo reflection. Like she's miming strolling with a lover. Clio used to hate that too. It was partly why she liked to have so many photos. She needed proof, that they were there, that they were together, solid, real.

Buffy steers them around a corner, and then there's no more glass to reflect her. They penetrate into a tangle of small old streets, genteelly quiet.

"Mine's just here." She tugs him on, but Spike stops, glances around. Slowly, he follows her. They pass a few more dark shuttered houses, then there's the mews, all white-painted and window-boxed, charming and exclusive, right out of a fancy magazine. There's a chain across the front to keep out cars, and gas lamps flicker at either end. A strangeness creeps up his neck, recognition of ... something. He's been here before. When it wasn't charming, or clean.

Buffy's rummaging for her key. She finds it and goes to the second door down. It's painted bright green, a brass 2 gleams in the orange gaslight. He's still standing by the chain, taking it all in. The arrangement of the buildings, the close streets stretching away in three directions, the short vistas ....

"Spike?"

"This ... this is a place ...."

Returning to his side, Buffy slips her hand into his. "Do I want to know?"

"This is where I was turned."

"What?"

"Never told you, did I? Drusilla did for me in a stable. I'd left an evening party nearby in a—in a state that wasn't conducive to watchin' where I was going. Fetched up here—could've been anywhere. Thought I'd found a quiet spot to pull myself together. An’ Dru followed me in."

"Here?" Buffy looks around, at the neat domestic fronts, tiny like doll's houses.
"Wasn't an exclusive residential lane then, pet. Was a row of stables. You do know that's what a mews is, don't you?"

It's obvious that she wasn't clear on this point, but he doesn't belabor it.

"Okay, so you've been here before. And now you're back. But this is different."

"Yeah, I'd say it's different."

Buffy looks at him, and then she presses the key into his hand.

"What's this?"

She points at the door.

Spike goes to it, and puts the key in the lock. It turns smoothly, and the door swings open. He glances back at Buffy. She just looks at him; no nod, no word.

He steps into her flat.

There's nothing to keep him out.

In another moment she's right behind him; he turns and he's in her arms. She tugs his head down so she can whisper into his ear. "You're home. Wherever I am, you're home. Always invited. Always welcome."

It would be sweet to follow her up the narrow staircase to her bed. But after more breathless kissing—Buffy can't seem to stop once she starts, something overwhelms her when his mouth engages hers, so that plaintive noises escape her throat and she presses herself against him, pleadingly, needingly—he pulls back.

"Need to settle things with Rupert first."

"You know you don't need his permission, I hope."

"Course not." He smiles. "Not talkin' to him about you. Got some points to go over though, yeah?"

She gets a canny gleam in her eye then. "The Council is not in any way strapped for funds," she says. "Know-how, yeah. Money, not."

Which he understands to mean that she fully supports him in holding Giles up for a princely salary before he'll agree to sign on.

"And I hope ... I hope you'll want to team up with me. But if there's something else you'd rather do ... whatever it is ...."

"Was thinkin' I'd like to go back out to Botswana with Xander—"

Her pout shows that, for a moment, she's taking this seriously. Then she smiles.

There's more kissing, and he almost doesn't leave. But if he's going to make it back on foot to the shelter of the Savoy before dawn, he's got to get started. Buffy gives him a copy of the key to her door, and watches him walk off across the cobbles. He pauses again at the corner, the place where the confluence of shapes and shadows became familiar to him. What does it mean, that she's living in the very place where he died? It's the kind of thing someone given to brooding, someone like Angel, could make a lot of. Spike decides he's not going to do that. London, like all big cities, is a
place of coincidence and confluence. Everything overlaps everything else.

It's a place where he was once very unhappy. Where he suffered and made mistakes.

He's glad to be back here again. It won't be like it was before.

He hates this over-decorated hotel room, and won't stay here another night. What little sleep he manages is pervaded by disturbing images of Clio. Clio in tears, looking small and confused. Clio with blood running down her neck. Clio heaped on her side on a dirty floor; when he turns her over, her face is a terrible blank, and there's a stake in her breast. Spike knows he's dreaming; finally he wrenches himself awake. What part of his subconscious is sending him these scolding dreams? Staring at the ceiling, he wonders what would've happened if Buffy hadn't dusted her. If the timing was just a little different, they might've seen each other in the club, on the dancefloor, at the bar.

If she'd followed them, if she'd said to both their faces what she'd only said to his: *doesn't your soul rebel against this?*

He wants to think that it wouldn't have mattered. That he'd have kept faith with her. That he'd have turned his back on Buffy, gone on as happily with little Clio as ever.

He begins to cry. Lets himself sob it all out, because he knows he'll never cry over Clio again.

He's glad Buffy dusted her.

He goes back to the Council headquarters in a black car with black windows that Giles sends to the hotel. Today there's no one waiting to greet or meet him. He's ushered straight into Giles's large book-lined room.

The man looks older. Having seen him at home, Spike knows he's happier than before, but the weight of responsibility he's taken on shows in his face, his carriage. He seems to be constantly aware of the dead whose places he's trying to fill, whose work he must carry on.

Spike says, "Don't want to hear you go through any apologetic speeches. The past is the past, an' neither of us is goin' to be better for rehearsing' it. Got your letter, an' I'm here, so we can take that as read."

Giles' expression lightens. "I'm jolly glad to hear you say that. Let me just say I'm immensely glad—we all are—that you've come here. When I learned that you'd survived—"

"Yeah, you danced a little jig," Spike says. "Wait a bit. There is one thing. This business of Angel. That's all done an' dusted too. He's dead, an' far as I can tell, he's not coming back. But I want you to know you made a mother of a bad call there."

Giles gives a start. "What do you know about it?"

"I was there. Thanks to that amulet. An' then there were good reasons why I hung around an'"
helped Angel's crew."

"Good reasons? He'd associated himself with an organization we've long known to be the representatives—and facilitators—of most of the biggest evil that—"

"Yeah, certainly looked bad. 'Course, if you'd really *looked*, you'd have known it wasn't so simple. They weren't pure—who is?—but they were workin' to take W&H down from inside."

Giles frowns. "It's been all we can do here to put our own house in order."

With a shrug, Spike says, "So I see. Seems to me half the problems you evil-fightin' lot have, you create on your own through keepin' secrets an' omittin' to mention things others should know."

"There have been many miscalculations and mistakes," Giles replies. He takes a deep breath. "I've made many mistakes."

"We all have," Spike says. He's not interested in rubbing the watcher's nose too hard in all of them. He's said his piece.

But Giles turns to him now with a different expression. "It's all very well to tell me what I should've done. But after I wouldn't speak to Angel, why didn't you ring me? In fact, why didn't you contact us here as soon as you were able?"

"Like you'd have taken a call from me!"

"From you, I certainly would've."

Spike opens his mouth, but Giles's seriousness precludes any remark. He sees what the letter, and yesterday's meeting, didn't yet convince him of: Giles' attitude towards him really has changed. He regards Spike not as a nuisance, or as some necessary evil of Buffy's, but as a colleague. A colleague who is just as culpable in the general failure as he is.

The moment elapses. Giles's eyes release him.

"I'd like to sit down with you soon and hear the whole history of this business as you understand it. I want the Council to learn from this."

"Course."

"Very good, then."

There's a silence; Spike waits for the other man to break it. When he doesn't, Spike thrusts his hands in his pockets and plunges on. "Right. Here's how it'll be. I'm with Buffy, first an' foremost. Go where she goes, do what she needs me to do. Which isn't to say I won't pitch in on anything else called for by the greater good. As for remuneration, I'll take same as she gets, money an' perks an' all."

Giles' brows shoot up, then he goes to his desk and shuffles some papers. "That's acceptable, of course."

"And if Angel *does* come back somehow, *he* reports to me."

"Quite."

"An' one last thing. Don't need the Andrew Fanclub trailin' round after me."
"Andrew's duties will keep him, for the most part, in other spheres."

"Right. That's me sorted, then."

Giles extends a hand. "Well then, Spike, it only remains for me to welcome you to the Council of Watchers."

PART THREE

Of course that isn't all that remains; he's passed off to various bureaucratic types who issue him with all the documentation he needs to be admitted to the Council's highest security levels, as well as to travel as a British citizen, and others who handle the myriad details of his pay and extras. He's given an office—a former back bedroom with a ceiling rose and a plaster fireplace—that he hopes never to sit in, and introduced to a secretary he's fairly certain he'll never need. There's to be a car—with necro-tempered glass—and he will have his pick of flats—someone will take him around to see some as soon as he'd like. He's issued with a mobile that's also an organizer—which he suspects isn't going to help the communication cause much at all—and told, very politely, that there's a tailor's representative who comes in once a month and will be pleased to measure him for suits and shirts if he'd like, the day after tomorrow. He has a sit-down with a nervous but bright young researcher who wants to begin an ambitious project to interview him on his own experience and everything he knows—about vampire methodologies, demon languages, and who did what to whom and where and when and why.

All this takes some hours, and is bemusing. He suspects it won't feel real until he sees some action. Right now it's a bit like hanging around at Wolfram & Hart, except for the being treated with respect part.

It's the middle of the afternoon when he's back in the chauffeured car. He assumes he'll be returned to the Savoy, but when the driver opens the door, he's back at Buffy's mews. It's raining lightly as he gets out, so instead of running up to her door, he gives in to a faint desire to reorient himself ... to the night of his death. The Addams house, where the party was ... he walks, finding that without thinking of it, he's hastening as he did that night ... it must be just around this way. There was a small street that once held shops ... the street is still there, but the shops are gone, perhaps bombed in the war, and replaced by other, more recent buildings. He turns the next corner. Miss Addams' house—every house in the row, opposite a small fenced square—is right where he left it. In the grey drizzle, the street is substantially unchanged from what he remembers, except for the parked cars. The houses are dark, the windows curtained, the inhabitants out at their jobs. He strolls along slowly beside the iron area railings, and stops in front of Cecily's door. It's not her he thinks about. For a moment Drusilla flits through his mind, but he has no fondness left there, and can barely fix on what it was about her that fascinated him so. Her Spike is long gone.

It's Clio who lingers, smouldering. He thinks of how little she knew him. She'd never seen him at his worst, never had to forgive him anything. Her love overcame no obstacles to come to him. She had no hooks to keep him on, nothing bigger than herself to hold him to, like Buffy has.

Clio was a demon, but it's Buffy who's fierce.

He hopes that eventually the shame that's pinned to her now will fade, that he'll be able to enjoy the memory of what was, from Clio's perspective, a nearly blameless time. He doesn't think, despite her vehemence, that Buffy would want him to go on being ashamed of having loved Clio.
He thinks she's acquired more compassion since he parted from her last.

Retracing his steps, he lets himself in at number 2 with the key. The downstairs of the flat is dark. He doesn't switch on a light, doesn't need to. There are two attractive rooms, the back one with a view into a flourishing garden he's sure Buffy has nothing to do with, and a neat eat-in kitchen. He'd wondered last night if Dawn lived here too, but he can tell now by the atmosphere of the rooms that she's only an infrequent visitor. He can tell also that Buffy is upstairs.

The second floor is one room, large and low-ceilinged. The blinds are drawn on both sides. She's asleep in the big bed, the sheet pulled up over her chest, one arm doubled under her cheek. Her clothes are laid neatly over a chair. The radio is playing very low, and a scented candle flickers on the bedside table. Spike stands in the doorway and looks at her. It may eventually be possible for him to look at Buffy and see her only as she is in the present moment, but now he sees all the Buffys. The whole history of her, playing out in the darkness, around the woman breathing quietly in bed.

She opens her eyes, focuses on him, smiles. "I was waiting for you and I got so sleepy. I didn't sleep last night at all."

"You were waiting for me here?" He goes to her, sits beside her.

"Giles said he'd send you home as soon as they were done with you on Gower Street. I knew you'd just let yourself in." She yawns, still smiling, and twists around a little on the pillow to see him better. "So are you an official watcher guy now? All stamped and signed and notarized? But not folded spindled or mutilated."

"Guess I am."

"It's funny ... Xander told me that he had a dream, years ago, after the Adam thing, that Giles was training you to be a watcher."

"That so? I once dreamed that the House of Commons had turned into a giant cream cake."

"Is it all right? I mean, I hope you don't feel like we railroaded you."

"Feel like I've been brought in out of the cold cold rain."

She reaches up to touch his hair. "You are moist."

"S'drizzlin' out. Settin' up for a nasty night."

"You could take your clothes off and join me. Bed's nice and warm."

After their two broken-off encounters, the propulsive physical hunger that would've escalated quickly to torn clothes, broken furniture and bruises, he didn't think it would be like this, so quiet and matter-of-fact, or that he'd want it to be. She watches him undress, and when he's naked, she holds the sheet up for him to slide in beside her. The bed is warm, so warm, so fragrant of her. He inhales deep, and sighs.

Buffy is still smiling. They regard each other, not making contact yet.

"I'm so happy you're here. I've imagined this moment for a long time. Wished for it." She drops into a whisper. "I was afraid to plan for it."

That she would want him—and be so unsure of being wanted in return—is something that still
unhinges him; it feels like part of his fantasy—a fantasy he'd long ago set aside—not something that's really happening.

But she's still whispering. "I'm really excited about making love to you. I have some ideas about it. I hope I'll be able to remember them though, because I think as soon as you touch me, I'm going to forget my name."

The little house is silent inside, insulated from the city by the patter of rain on the windows. It's still only late afternoon; London is going about its business in the next street, but right here it's as if time has slowed down, and all there is is her face, her warmth, her voice.

"I'll remind you. I'll say your name."

"I might not be able to hear you. I'll be so immersed."

He regards her in wonder. "When did this happen, Buffy?"

"What? When did what happen?"

"When did you turn into this? This sweet thing? Who's sweet to me, I mean." He lays his fingertip on her arm, just lightly, and she shivers, her eyes falling shut, lips parting.

"You changed me. Spike, you changed me. You think it was all the other way, but it wasn't."

She's so beautiful he doesn't think he can stand much more of this before he gathers her into his arms. But first he wants to hear her speak.

"And then you were gone, and I ... I tried to do what I believed you'd want, I lived my life. I thought it was going pretty okay. And then six months ago I saw you, and ... nothing was the same, then. Nothing. I couldn't just do what I was doing anymore, knowing you were in the world." She shakes her head. "But I wish it hadn't gone that way, with me slaying your girlfriend. That part of it ... that part of it is bad."

It is bad, he thinks, but there's a lot of ways in which it could've been much much worse. At least Clio didn't suffer. She was slain without warning, so she would've felt no fear, no pain. She didn't have to see him encounter Buffy again ... didn't have to feel the incursion of a rival, watch him struggle with himself. She didn't have to be left, or not left—except to wonder if he was staying with her because he felt obliged to, because she was in so many ways his creature, like a child he was responsible for.

He gropes for the right words. He doesn't want to say that it was time for him to move on from Clio and what she represented. That would sound calculating, as if she was a phase. She wasn't a phase, but she was a demon. It was a relief, quite apart from having found Buffy again, to reconnect with a bigger purpose than keeping one little vampire girl from tasting human blood.

"... don't dwell on that, pet. You couldn't have known, an' if you start worryin' whether every vamp might be some prodigy of innocence ... you'll just get yourself hurt."

She nods. "You forgive me, though, don't you? Not just about Clio, but for everything?"

"What everything?"

"For all the ways I was cruel to you, and careless, and mean ... Spike, I'm different now. Do you see that?"
"You don't have to ask."

"But I do. I do have to. It's not a contest, who hurt who more. Just because of what you did, doesn't let me off. And I need you to know I know it, and I want your forgiveness."

"You have it. You always did." He'll never be easy with this question of forgiveness, because he'll never feel he merits forgiveness himself. He's not going to let that feeling keep him from partaking of the good things he's being offered now, but it'll always be there in his mind, keeping him thoughtful, keeping him in check.

She nods, satisfied. "Because I need it."

"Do you, love?"

"That's what Giles taught me. That we forgive people because they need it, not because they deserve it."

Some people, he reflects, may need not to be forgiven, or at least, not too thoroughly.

He wonders if she's going to ask him now if he's forgiven Giles, but instead of opening that conversational worm-can, she snuggles closer and kisses him, and that effectively changes the subject.

At every one of the messy, incoherent, unforgettable sexual encounters that composed his brief affair with Buffy Summers, Spike held tight to the idea that whatever she was doing, he was making love. Buffy actively fought the very notion with every fiber of herself, even as she flung herself wildly into each extravagant fuck. She refuted his love by the things she said, and wouldn't say, by the softer caresses she reacted to with impatient violence, by the way she refused to let him hold her afterwards, even if she did sometimes fall asleep for a few minutes at his side. When he dared to actually refer to their exertions as lovemaking, she spat ridicule in his face.

So it's only now that he finds out what Buffy's like when she's making love.

The strength he remembers, the confident insistence and the sheer lust, are all still there. But he never knew this yielding, melting, coaxing woman before. She wants him to make himself heavy on her; she wants him to go slow. She likes it when he pins her hands above her head. When he kisses her breasts, she begins to cry. It's all very simple, the things they do; the bed barely rocks, let alone collapses. Her first climax comes quickly, before he's even gotten started, just from his belly brushing across her clit, and this makes her laugh a silvery laugh he's never heard before.

He's so excited he has to pause a few times, to hold himself back, because this should last, he should acquit himself well, but she licks his ear, and whispers, "Let go," and he dissolves in a helpless gush.

She holds on tight; her body is dewy with sweat, and that, along with the fluids of their spending, fuses them together. "You've drenched me," she whispers, stirring her hips. He's still hard, but for the moment he's collapsed. It doesn't matter, because his pleasure is still resonating, and she's not pulling away—the opposite. She wants full contact, stretches beneath him, winding her legs round his, tracing his back and arms and flanks with her hands.

"Your skin is amazing," she whispers. As compliments go, he's heard more elaborate ones, but
coming from her, this is stirring. "You have a fantastic body. And it fits with mine, like, perfectly." He meets her eyes, and she blushes. "Okay, I suck at this stuff."

"What stuff?"

"Saying nice things to a man in bed."

"Is that what you're doing?"

She frowns, hesitates. "Actually ... no. No, I'm trying to tell you ... to tell you ... what I can't say. What's boiling in my head."

"I think I get it."

"No, you don't. I mean, it's enormous."

"Love—"

"Yes. That. It's impossible to really talk about though, isn't it?"

"Is it?" That she feels this delights him.

She gives him a look that's sly at first, then suddenly shy. "Do you remember the things you used to tell me? When we ... when we were naked together?"

"Every word."

"So do I. I'd lie here at night, trying to go to sleep, remembering what you said, and I'd make myself come and pretend it was you."

He kisses her. "Pet ..."

"I'm not talking about the dirty things. I mean, I remember those too—you got me so hot, saying that stuff. But I'm talking about ... what you'd say that I didn't want to listen to. That I tried to stop you saying. I heard it all."

"Did you?" All at once he's plunged back into the desperation, the frustration, the wild unrooted joy of those short weeks. Possessing the slayer and knowing with each encounter that he'd never possess her, that she'd never care.

"I fucked myself a lot the last few months. Thinking about you. Telling myself it would have to be all right, that of course you'd come here, come to me. I was so afraid. And for some reason that made me really horny."

She'd never have told him anything remotely this intimate before. He imagines her pleasuring herself, and he's painfully hard again. He's still inside her; she squeezes with her inner muscles until she wrings a cry from him.

"Just because I remember all that stuff you said, doesn't mean you shouldn't repeat it," Buffy says.

He nods, but at the moment, he's speechless.

Little by little she rolls him over, takes charge. She handles his prick and balls like an idol she's worshipping. She almost overwhelms him with sensation; everything she does seems to be at half-speed—her deliberation is exquisite. She may be inarticulate with words, but not this way. This way she gets her message across.
The sight of her astride him, taking her time, working through the ideas she mentioned at the beginning, suffuses him with dizzy awe. He holds her by the hips as she rides him with slow tender squeezes, and she holds his gaze with hers, her expression at once witchy and warm. Taking his hand, she caresses herself with his fingertips, then sucks them delicately into her warm mouth, before bringing them back to her pearly clit. He loses track of how many times she comes. When he finally spends, she's right there with him, urging him, taking it—that's new too, because in the past she used to drop away somehow when he'd shoot—he never could figure out how or why or where she'd go—but now she's here. When his control spools out and he drags her in tight, jerking into her, groaning, she's saying his name, she's moving with him, and he doesn't lose her for a second, even when everything goes blurry.

When he's back, she's crouched over him, smiling that clear sweet smile. "You are so pretty."

"That should be my line."

"Nah." She leans in to kiss him, then collapses slowly, stretching out against him, curling one leg over his. "We do this together so well," she says. "We're artists."

"Lost you at 'we'. Hearin' you say 'we', meanin' you an' me, is the big thrill."

"I feel so lucky. The people I love always get taken away from me. They don't get returned. But here you are."

"Here I am. Tell me something."

"Anything."

"When did you fall for me? Really?" As soon as the words are out he wants to reel them back. Before I tried to rape you, or after?

Good as this is shaping up to be, there'll always be ways in which they're not ordinary lovers. Can't ask the ordinary questions ... can't compare notes.

But she doesn't seem put out. She considers. "There's a lot of answers I could give you. But the point where I really admitted to myself that I couldn't bear to lose you from my life ... was when you took me to that house where you'd buried all those people The First made you turn."

"Oh Christ." He doesn't want to hear this. Doesn't want to be reminded. Doesn't want her dwelling on that time, either.

"After I killed all those vamps, and you were crumpled there in the corner wanting me to kill you too ... look, it's not romantic. I mean, I could give you a romantic answer. There is one, and it wouldn't be a lie, and I'll tell it to you whenever you want. But that was the time when I knew that I was on your side, and that I wasn't wrong to be. And not just on your side ... that ... that you were special to me."

His throat's in a knot, so he doesn't speak. Buffy presses a kiss against his jaw. "I didn't mean to make you sad. That was a long time ago, and it wasn't your fault at all."

She can read him now. Follow his train of thought. She never used to be so sensitive, but she loves him now, and that gives her flashes of omniscience.

"Y'know, I don't want there to be things we skip over. That we never refer to. Our history is what it is, right? Anyway, it's a great story."

"Suppose it is, at that. Do you tell it?"
"I told it to Willow, and Xander, and my sister. I told it to Giles. It was important to stop being evasive with them. Of course when I did, I wasn't sure if I was going to be happy or disappointed. But whatever you decided, I wanted them to know what the truth about us was. I hid that for too long from everybody. Including myself. Including you."

He breathes her in, licks the salt from her neck. "I'll do everythin' I can to see you're happy, slayer."

"I want you to be happy too. I'm going to be so good to you, you'll see. Spike ... do you still want me to call you Spike?"

"Huh?"

"Or should I call you William now? Is that even your real name?"

"S'my name, yeah."

"But you don't want me to use it."

"What's brought this up all of a sudden?"

She laughs. "I don't know!"

"Guess because things're changed between us. But I'm still Spike. Hope I always will be."

"So do I," she says, snuggling closer, though she's already as close as she can be. "I just thought—"

"What?"

"You can call me anything you want," she says. Whispering again.

He knows instantly what she's referring to. Her memory for all that passed between them is apparently as prodigious as his own. "Shall I call you sweetheart?"

"If you want to. If that's what I am."

"If! 'Course you are."

"I'm not good at the honey and darling thing. But I ... I think of you like that."

"That a fact?" This is better, he thinks, than a blow-job.

"It is now. Now you're here."

Later she brings a tray up to bed, with sandwiches and a pot of tea, and blood for him in one of those insulated travel mugs with a lid that keeps the warmth—and the smell—inside.

"An' what a little domestic goddess you turn out to be," he says, sloshing cream into his teacup.

He thinks this compliment will please her, but Buffy goes still with the sandwich raised halfway to her mouth. "Oh."

"Oh—what? What'd I say?"
"This ... this is too frilly and boring and old marrieds for you, isn't it?"

"Who said?"

"I mean, you're a vampire. You've never wanted me to forget it, anymore than I could forget it. You always wanted us to be wild, and here I am expecting you to just slot yourself right into my neat little—"

"What, you think I'm humorin' you right now?"

"I don't know. Maybe you hate this whole set-up. Maybe you don't want this at all."

"You're forgettin' I was always the vamp with the feathered crypt." He doesn't mention the flat he shared with Clio; she saw it, but maybe she didn't really take it in. "I like to be clean an' comfortable, an' have nice things to eat put into my hand by the woman I adore."

"Oh."

"Wouldn't have come here, wouldn't be sittin' here right now, if I wasn't in for the whole package. I know you, slayer, I know what sort of housekeepin' you go in for. I also know you've got a tigress in you you'll show me soon again."

She blushes. That's one of the things he always found arousing, the combination of unrestrained kink she'd exhibit when they were in the throes, and the prudishness she never overcame when he'd mention it.

"We're gonna see plenty of danger an' chaos—don't we always? Needn't have it at home."

A little smile blooms on her lips. "At home?"

"You said I'm home here. Aren't I?"

"Yes."

They eat the sandwiches and drink the tea.

Later the rain picks up; it drives hard against the windows, rattles on the roof. The candle burning down on the nightstand still provides the only light in the room; by its flickering glow, Buffy grunts, rippling and pushing back at him. Their shadows on the wall are huge. She's on her knees and elbows; he's fucking her ass. It's something they've never done, though he can tell by how she takes it that it's not her first time. He doesn't much care about that, because he's pretty certain Angel never had her this way either.

She's immensely excited, clenching and stirring, vocalizing, strumming her clit with one hand. His view of her from this vantage—her twisting, twitching back, heaving shoulders, the profile as she turns her head, swimmerlike, to breathe, arouse him even more than the sight of his prick going in and out of her. He fixes on the nape of her neck, showing white and smooth through her dark hair. Even as he's taken up with the incredible sensations of driving into her slick tightness, part of his mind imagines what that nape would feel like against his lips, how it would yield to his fangs.

He grabs her shoulders, hauls her upright against his chest and belly. The change of angle makes
her cry out, makes the pressure on his prick almost more than he can stand. He's got her breasts in his hands now, thumbing the nipples, holding her by them; he's mouthing her neck. The idea of fanging out, tasting her, wings its way through his heated mind; he wonders what she'd do. Buffy squirms and moans; she throws one arm up to hang from his neck, and goes on caressing herself with the other hand; she's flexing around him in a rhythm he can't withstand for very long. With a convulsive jerk, he spills; they tip over sideways and collapse. For a few moments he lies inert, listening to her panting breaths and the rain. She grabs his hand and brings it to her cunt; she needs more. Her flesh palpitates. He buries his fingers inside her, strokes her twitchy clit with his thumb. She groans, stretching her thighs wider; her hands cover his. She fucks his hand, her head thrown back, emitting small, demanding, grunting cries.

"Come, sweetness. Come, pet. That's a good Buffy. Come on." He knows he's got his fingers pressed on the right spot inside, because Buffy's vocalizing is ratcheting up; she's drawing in huge breaths, and her whole body is beginning to shake. It's incredible, watching her climb towards her release; as awe-inspiring as it is to watch her cutting down foes. That she trusts him with this, demands pleasure from him without any hint of self-consciousness, stirs him up with the old feelings he used to try to put down in poems. The huge mystery of the universe, of women and love.

As she reaches it, hips snapping up, Buffy bites hard into his arm.

When she's done, they see she's left a red oozing half-moon on his biceps.

She glances at it uneasily. "I'm sorry."

"You know I like that kind of thing," He licks the blood off, and grins at her.

"I just ... I should be more careful. Because I wouldn't want you to bite me."

For one panicky second he thinks she must know what passed through his mind a little while ago—did he say something? Did he fang out without realizing it?

Then Buffy says, in a tone he can't quite parse, "You probably did that all the time with her."

"No. Never."

She gives him a look that says, Yeah, right.

"Not kidding, Slayer. I wouldn't have it. An' I won't so much as show fang when we're together like this, 'less you ask me to. Serious, now."

"I trust you, Spike."

"I know you do. As for you biting me, last thing I want you to be when we're fucking is careful."

She nods, thoughtful. "Aren't we getting to know each other? Listen to all this negotiating we're doing tonight."

"Always wanted to work things out with you. You never used to talk to me."

"No, I never did." She sighs and works her head into a comfortable spot on his shoulder. "That would've been letting you in."

"Whereas the fucking—"
"No one teaches you really, that there are ways and ways with fucking. Ways of doing it that let nothing slip, and other ways ... where it's all out there."

"You know that now." Indeed, she's just shown him. He'd like to ask how many men she's been with since him, since the affair with The Immortal, but he doesn't want to sound like he's jealous. He isn't jealous, and it doesn't matter, but he'd like to know what she's been through, what she thought and felt and enjoyed, what she learned. He'll have to wait for her to tell him. He suspects she will, bits of it anyway, over time.

A low rattling noise awakens him; he's plunged in light. Spike scrambles up; a nude and tousled Buffy is blithely drawing up the blinds on either side of the bedroom; bright sun inundates the warm still air.

"Bloody hell, I'll be flambéd!"

She pushes him back down on the bed. "Relax, you won't. It's special glass."

Tawny and smiling in the brightness, she clambers across him. "I had it installed a couple of months ago."

"You were so sure I'd be here, then?"

"Well, I thought if you refused, I'd have to recruit some other vampire to service me, so I'd need the glass in any case. I put it in all over the house. My car too. The Council paid."

"Some other vamp to service you? So now the truth really does come out."

"Yup," she says, shaking her head as if agreeing that its a damn shame. Straddling him, she's glorious and queenly in all this clean light. "I'm a bad, dirty, corrupt vampire slayer whose insatiable sexual needs can only be satisfied by slim but well-muscled bleach-blond undead guys with amazing cocks that I'm so gonna suck off in a little while, and London accents that, the longer I live here, the more I understand are totally made up and as fake as their hair color. It's not something I'm proud of, but facts are facts." As she blithely talks, she's creeping up his body towards his face. He's got a good view of her sex in the brightness, can smell the perfume of her arousal. Hooking her thighs in his hands, he drags her the last little way to his mouth. Crouched over his face, she gasps and giggles as he licks her clit, presses herself against his busy mouth.

"S'like eatin' an oyster."

"Shut up and service me," she says, her tone low and fond. Her hands grip his hair.

A little later she makes good on her promise to go down on him. She does it better than she used to. Part of this change Spike ascribes to affection—he'd assumed, the first time around, that she found it humiliating, in her ambivalence, to suck his cock, though the few times it happened she'd always been the initiator—and part to a vaster experience. Someone has given her some pointers, especially on what to do with the balls, and she's using them all to give him a lingering good time. But it's apparent to Spike—fills him with pride—that she's enjoying this too, as much as she enjoys
all the other things.

When he's finished, she kisses his mouth. "Next time I'll tie you down, you'll like that even better."

"You know what I like."

"I love you. You won't forget?"

"I'll try not to."

"I'll remind you from time to time." She lies beside him, looking up at the ceiling. Her body, and the whole room, reeks of lovemaking; the aroma heightened by the sunshine warming the air. The scented candle has burned down and gone out. Spike breathes her in. Buffy's stomach growls.

"You stay here, I'll bring you your breakfast."

"No, I want to get up." She swings herself to the side of the bed, gathering her disordered hair back. He reaches for her, twists it around his hand. "Why'd you change color?"

"Tired of the dumb jokes. It's easier to be dumb when you're a brunette."

"You're not dumb. And no one makes jokes about you."

She shrugs. "I just wanted a change. Don't you like it?"

"It's fine. Would you put it back the way it was if I said I liked that more?"

She turns and regards him seriously. "... I would. To please you. This once, anyhow."

She means it, and it's at once immensely important, and of no importance at all—what does it matter what color her hair is? But that she cares what he prefers .... He kisses the coil of hair and lets it go.

They drive to Gower Street.

Buffy goes off to train, and he finds himself closeted with the researcher, who after listening to him talk for just a few minutes, calls in half a dozen other young watchers. Spike wishes they were doing this with beer, but he likes telling his story—he always has—and these listeners are a good audience—not too naive, but still shockable. They're careful not to appear to pass judgment; he can see that they've schooled themselves in this, but he finds his own past exploits sickening enough now, without having them point it out.

Later he spars with half a dozen slayers who've just been brought in for the first time—girls of thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, who don't yet know the extent of their powers, who've never seen a vampire before. It reminds him of taking the Potentials out in the graveyards of Sunnydale, except that here they've got plenty of space, all state of the art, and these children aren't potential anythings, they're full slayers.

Xander sidles in, observes for a little while, then says, "Don't go easy on them. Don't break them, but don't go easy. You're the only real vamp they can test themselves against who won't kill them."
Half the girls look deeply unhappy when they hear this; the others get determined, even excited, expressions on their faces. Spike fangs out and begins to enjoy himself.

Until one girl stakes him.

The stake is plastic, but she drives it right through—the shock, the immediate intense pain, shakes him out, turns everything red and blindish—the air seems to rush around his head. He grabs her by the hair—a long swinging braid—gets a hand around her jaw, and is about to twist when Xander's shout makes him let go.

"Fuckin' hell!"

"Take it easy, Spike."

"Take it easy!" The whole world spins before his eyes. Had Xander not been there, he'd have snapped her neck. The other girls, shocked into immobility, wouldn't have been in time to stop him. His whole body prickles, with physical rage, with the old deep potent lust for destruction. The demon bays and roars through the blood that leaks from the gaping, sucking wound. It feels like his life-force is leaking out with it.

While he's in the grip of existential crisis, Xander is teaching.

"What's the lesson here, girls?" Xander looks around at them, gathered uneasily in a half circle around Spike's splayed form.

One girl holds up her practice stake. "Use real wood?"

"The lesson here is aim. You wound a vampire by missing the heart, you find yourself in the same situation as if you were facing a wounded rhino. Your danger doubles. More."

"But if this was a real stake, he'd be dust, and he wouldn't have been able to grab me."

"So maybe," another girl says, her voice shaking, "the lesson is that we shouldn't make Mr Spike mad."

Pain throbbing through him, Spike manages to wave a hand. "Wounded rhino could use a little help here, you pillock."

Xander and the girl who stabbed him haul him to his feet. Spike clutches his chest; it feels like his insides are going to tumble out. Upright now, he bleeds more. Even knowing he'll be healed up in a couple of hours doesn't take away from the disorienting wrong of having a hole punched out of your heart. "You," he gasps, "what's your name?"

"Rosie." She has an Antipodean accent—New Zealand, or some such.

These dainty girls with their girly names and their unerring strength. "You've killed me, Rosie."

She stares at him, full of apprehension, as if there's some angle to this that she doesn't understand. She's fourteen at most.

"An' you've torn my shirt."

Her eyes are saucers. "... I ... I'm sorry."

He reaches for her; she starts to shy, then forces herself to stand fast. Gently, Spike fingers the long braid. "Might want to think 'bout pinning this up before you go into action. Xander's right—you'd
have made a clean kill just now, if that was wood—an' good on you for it—but you see what almost happened. I don't mean you any harm, but I've got a demon in me, same as all the other demons. Another second an' I'd have had you starin' into eternity."

Her breath hitches, she looks at him like she can't quite understand, or believe, what he's saying. Then Rosie is sobbing. Without thinking, Spike pulls her against him; she lashes her arms around his waist, trembling all over, but holding on hard. He could cry too—at the idea that he could've so easily broken this slender reed, who is real to him now, suddenly precious. He wonders if it's such a good idea, training like this—his self-control obviously isn't perfect, at least when he's wounded. He still contains all the fury and instincts of the demon, it's all there waiting to be unleashed.

Rosie lifts her head from his chest; her cheek is streaked with his blood, strands of her hair sticking to it. She gazes intently into his face. "You ... even you. Who're supposed to be good, to be helping us, but you almost .... Yeah, I get it now." She turns to look at the others. "Guys, this is serious. Vampires ... are feckin' dangerous." She backs away from him, scrubbing tomboyishly at her face with her shirt-sleeve. "Thank you, Mr Spike. I will always remember this. Always."

It's grotesque to him, that she would be grateful for this. But he says nothing.

When they're gone, Xander, who's found him a bandage and a cup of warm blood, shakes his head and smiles one of his ironical smiles. "You just made your first slayer, Spike. A little girl walked into that training room, and a slayer walked out."

"Yeah. But she made herself." He fingers the torn cloth of his shirt. "That's what they do. All on 'em."

Later there's a briefing. It's evening; the humans in the room are looking variously hungry and tired. Spike is introduced to the administrative side of the Council—there's piles of files for him to go through. Giles wants him to be familiar with the slayers—who they are, where they are, who their watchers are, and the general situation worldwide, in terms of demonic activity. He's about to shove them back and say that paperwork's not his department, when something gives him pause. Okay, he'll look through the pages. Giles won't give him a quiz on the contents, and maybe some of the info will stick. Maybe some of it will be handy when he goes into action with Buffy. And besides, these people—the ones sitting around this conference table, and the ones whose names and pictures and details are in the files before him—are his comrades now. He's back in the world—and they're the world he's in. He'd better get to know them. They'll have his back as well as him having theirs.

So after listening to Xander fill them in on a situation that may be brewing near Darfur, where the civil war is going to make it almost impossible to send in slayers in the usual way, he retreats to his office—ha bloody ha—puts his boots up on the desk, and starts in.

He's still reading an hour later when a knock startles him. He expects to see Buffy, but it's Rosie standing in the doorway.

"Mr Spike?"

"Don't call me Mister. Yeah, what is it?"

"I'm sorry about your shirt. I got carried away. I went out before the shops shut and got you a new
one." She approaches and puts a shopping bag on the desk beside his crossed ankles. "Does it still hurt?"

"'M all right. An' you didn't need to buy me a new bloody shirt. Here, take it back. Keep your money."

"I'm sorry."

"An' stop apologizing. Ever heard that phrase—'never apologize, never explain'? Goes double for slayers."

"I just ... sorry, I just ... oh. Don't you at least want to look at the shirt?"

"Why? Does it match my eyes? Don't you go gettin' a crush on me, little miss, just because I had my arms round you for a minute."

She colors up, stammers, and turns to flee, but Buffy's there, blocking her exit.

"Rosie, don't run off. Spike's bark is much worse than his—I mean, he doesn't mean it. Spike, can't you be nice? It's only your first day."

He notices right away that Buffy's blonde again. Rosie looks miserable. He pulls his feet down from the desk and stands up. "Here now, she's right. I don't mean it ... much."

Rosie pulls herself up, glances at Buffy, then makes a defiant gesture at him. "I was only sorry about your shirt—I'm not sorry I staked you!"

Buffy bursts out laughing. When she's had her laugh out, she pats the girl's arm. "Okay, kiddo, you certainly won this round. Go to bed now, it's late."

When he's sure they're alone, the door shut, Spike grumbles, "She won the earlier round too, little baggage."

"Oh, she's got your number, all right!" Buffy's still giggling. She gives him a look, up through her lashes, that raises the temperature in the room. "I heard you had quite an interesting training session."

"I'm in one piece." He fingers the bandage on his chest. It still smarts a bit. He bears Rosie no resentment, despite his growling. It's all right, that he be the girls' punching bag, that he be reminded how easy—and how difficult—he is to extinguish.

She spills the shirt out on the desk. "Huh, it does match your eyes."

"'Spect they'll all fall in love with me. Can't help it, can they, little slayers confronted by a vamp with so much raw sex appeal."

With a snort, Buffy puts the shirt back in the bag, shoves it in a drawer. "I'm glad you're in one piece. I like you in one piece."

"As do I. An' you're blonde."

"You like me blonde. Right?" She comes close to him, gazes up into his face with a coquettish smile. "It makes you happy. I really wanted you to be happy, thoroughly, unreservedly, stupidly happy, when you look at me." She leans into him. "Because that's what I am, looking at you. Talking to you. Touching you."
She takes his answer in kisses. In another minute she's sprawled beneath him on the desk, the file folders shoved over the side. She isn't wearing any panties beneath her dress. She whispers suggestions about where she'd like him to put his cock, and how, and how quickly, while her hands burrow insistently into his clothes. Then when she'd got it in her hot little hand, and he can barely think of anything that isn't getting right up inside her, she says, "Willow's waiting to send us to Darfur. She's going to magic us in, so we can take care of this situation before it gets out of hand."

"Magic us—"

"Teleportation. We leave in half an hour. Just you, me, Xander, and herself."

"Just—"

"You thought she was powerful before. You should see her now."

"But—"

"Fuck me. Talk after."

"I've had my fill of bein' magicked places."

"It's really all right, Spike, we do it all the time. It's a practical way to travel. C'mon. I want you now, before we have to start."

He wants her too, and of course he'll go. She puts him inside her, and they get a nice rolling rhythm established; he's face to face with her, and she holds his eyes the whole time, smiling an encouraging, a pleasured, smile. It's good, it's very good, it's all there is, until he glances up.

Spike sees her reflection in the black window beside them, skirt hiked up, legs spread wide, head thrown back. He's lying on her, buried in her to his cods, but in the reflection she's still alone. The world tilts, and he's thrown into a whirling confusion—what is he doing? How dare he make love to the Slayer, how dare he work for the Council, how dare he stand up alongside real human beings, who are natural, who are born and then die properly, cleanly—irrevocably. He's never going to be what they are, and he's robbing Buffy of her life, her naturalness, her time to be a woman in the world, by taking her this way.

She's alive, and he isn't. How dare he? He's trembling; he stops. He'd be in a guilty sweat, if his body worked that way.

Gently, Buffy tugs his head around. "Ah ah ah. I'm here, boy-o. With you. This is what's real, not the reflection. I'm your girl, right?"

Her voice, affectionate, calm, implies that she knows—that she's privy to his whole involved, desperate train of thought—and that understanding it, she can make it go ppphhht like a newly risen vampire impaled before he's even climbed out of the grave.

She's magnificent. Always has been. Always will be.

"My girl. My good girl."

"That's me. I don't want you to worry about us. You are my best," she whispers, her breath tickling his ear, as her hips rock up. "You're the one who loves me and who I love back and even though I love you you still love me. That never happens. It's crazy .... God I'm not making any sense. When you move that way, my brain blinks—" She hisses, tenses, ripples. Holds him tight.
It does make sense, it makes perfect sense. It's a relief, even as he knows that the dread, the misgivings, will recur. But not now. He kisses her, and makes her come again, before he spends.

Almost as soon as he's done, an irreverent fist pounds the door, and Willow calls out, "Some people who don't have anyone to screw at the office, want to get down to business!"

"All right, all right," Buffy calls, laughing, sitting up. "Hold your horses, Will!" Then to him, in a whisper, she says, "It's going to be bad there, in Darfur. Had to do this, before ... in case ...."

"Nothin's gonna happen to you, or me, or Red, or Harris," Spike says, forceful, insistent, putting his clothes straight. "We're expert, we are. Right?"

She nods, business-like. "Right." Buffy pulls herself together quickly; donning panties she's pulled from her bag, running a comb through her hair, she's ready for anything and everything.

Spike says, "Gonna fuck you on this desk again soon's we get back."

"That's a date, then," she says, bestowing a completing kiss before she flings open the door. Willow and Xander are there, with a big duffle that clanks when Xander hefts it; there's only just time to see his smirk, and Willow's eye-roll, before she chants something, and they're all four gone, into the chaos.

~End~

End Notes


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