

# HOLIDAYS ON THE HELLMOUTH

*A Spike and Buffy Romance*



HOLLY DENISE











“OH, GOD, THIS IS A NIGHTMARE.”

“I really think you’re overreactin’, pet.”

“Overreacting? Do you have any idea what all is supposed to go into dressing?” Buffy eyed the ingredients list her mother had provided with a whimper, stomping her foot before shoving the damn thing in her pocket. “There are things on there that, I swear to god, she just made up. Stupid *family* recipe. Why can’t we make it like normal people?”

Spike rolled his eyes and boldly slipped his hand into her front pocket to retrieve the list. “You’ve never heard of butter?” he asked, smoothly sidestepping a headstone.

“That’s not the only ingredient,” she retorted.

“Onion. Chopped celery. Crumbled cornbread and toasted bread crumbs. Minced fresh parsley...” He favored her with an arched brow. “Don’t suppose you’ve ever heard of parsley.”

“I know what parsley is, smartass.” She paused. “But honestly... minced? What the hell is minced? Sounds...” Her bravado faded under his incredulous gaze, and she poked out her lip in a pout. “Evil.”

“Tell me, Summers, how is it that you actually made it to college?”

*Just when I think he might be somewhat decent...*

“Shut up,” she said instead.

“Bakin’ powder,” he continued. “Hard-cooked eggs, chicken or turkey broth, and rubbed, dried sage leaves.”

“Aha! See! Whoever thought of adding leaves as an ingredient? It must be a hellmouth thing.”

“You’re hopeless.”

She shrugged. “At least we’re agreed on this. That’s why you’re helping me, remember?”

Spike leered. “I thought I was helpin’ you so you could spend the day seein’ what good I can do with my hands.”

Buffy flushed but ignored him, snatching back the list and stuffing it into her pocket once more. “Get over yourself.”

He didn’t reply, merely flashed a smile and shook his head.

It was strange pretending that nothing had changed. Pretending that a few days ago, her world hadn’t nearly rolled off its axis. Granted, things had been changing between her and Spike so gradually, she shouldn’t have been surprised when a moment of utter awkwardness had interrupted their unusual camaraderie. She knew, after all, how he felt about her. She didn’t understand it; didn’t know why or how his hatred for her had changed at the rate it had, but somehow, she didn’t question it. Like all things in her world, some ends were simply inevitable.

What she hadn’t anticipated was the sudden wealth of *things* she felt in return. These things had originated, it seemed, from nowhere at all. After all, her relationship with Spike since he’d paraded back into her life couldn’t exactly be called healthy. There was the chip, his numerous attempts to get it out, his suicidal resignation that he was handicapped, his micro-attempts to get his evil in, and then the gleeful realization that he could harm other demons. This much had launched him into the unlikely role of ally overnight, and weird as it was, she didn’t question it. Much.

It had made them grow close. It had turned their hatred for each other into begrudging acceptance, then mutual admiration, then to friendship. And now, Spike loved her.

He’d never said the words, of course, so it was possible she was imagining things, but she didn’t think she was. The words weren’t

needed when he told her in a lot of different ways—the things he did and said without thinking, the way he looked at her when he didn't think she was watching, and how he'd started growling anytime someone mentioned setting her up on a date.

Spike loved her, and recently, the feelings she had for him were well-paced to convergence. But they never talked about it.

The other night, though, had changed things. They'd been fighting a nest of newbie vamps when the last had tackled Buffy to the ground, pressing her wrists above her head and forcing her to drop her stake.

Her ears were still ringing from the howl of rage Spike had unleashed. Angry, raw, and possessive. Though how she knew it was possessive was beyond her—call it slayer intuition or wishful thinking. Spike had pounced on the would-be assailant and made quick work of dusting him, only to land directly on top of Buffy.

The feel of him lying between her legs was a sensation that had yet to give her a night's rest. She'd never forget how wide his eyes had grown. How he'd looked so open and vulnerable, so unsure. They'd stared at each other for what felt like ages as if daring the other to move. He'd murmured her name before dropping his gaze to her mouth, and for a second, the world around them had ceased to exist.

It hadn't lasted, of course. A fresh grave a few feet away had begun to stir, and they had been forced to break away. Neither had mentioned it after patrol was over, or any night thereafter.

But he thought about it. She knew he thought about it. If she was so obsessed with it, it must be driving him crazy. Her dreams were haunted with a thousand visions and scenarios. She wondered what he would have done had she rolled her hips against his erection. If she'd moaned his name. Hell, if she'd breathed differently. He was so good at reading her, so why was it that the signs she'd purposefully given him went unnoticed?

"Y'know," Spike said, drawing her back to the present, "I don't think I've ever seen you get so fanatic about a bloody holiday as you do over Thanksgiving."

"It's a time for family togetherness," Buffy observed.

"Unlike Christmas?"

"Thanksgiving is a purely American holiday."

He gave her a look. "This bein' why two Brits are gonna be at your dinner."

"Shut up."

"Ah, the markings of a truly intelligent debate."

She pouted, kicking at the ground. "Meanie."

"Well, yeah. Vampire."

"Keep that up and I'll take your name off the guest list."

"Not bloody likely. You need me to help you cook."

Her pout deepened and she kicked the ground again. "You don't need to rub it in. Anyway, I have the turkey, which I'll start thawing tomorrow."

"Do you know how to thaw a turkey?"

She shrugged. "I figured I'd use my blow-dryer."

Spike laughed loudly as though she'd said something deeply amusing. He stopped and sobered, though, when he caught the look on her face. "Oh, you're serious."

"What's wrong with my idea?"

He laughed again, a bit uneasily. "Well...Buffy, a bloody blow-dryer?"

A long moan hissed through her lips. "God, I suck at this," she complained, whipping out the list again. "I swear, it's going to be a disaster...and it's all Xander's fault with his stupid 'let's make crappy holidays a tradition' remark last year." She shook her head. "Okay...thaw turkey."

"Not by bloody blow-dryer," Spike added.

"Yes, okay. No blow-drying. I'll do it some other way. What else... I'm supposed to baste the turkey? God, what does that mean?" She glanced to him quickly. "Please tell me you're a master baster."

Spike ducked his head and snickered.

"Oh, grow up."

"I'd call myself a superb master baster, love."

"Perv."

"Oi. You're the one that said it. I just took it an' ran."

"Seriously. Can you baste? Can you do...half the things on this list?" She handed him the slip of paper again. "Or at least be in the same room as I try to so you can tell me what I'm doing wrong?"



“Pet, I’ve already committed myself to not leave you alone in the room with the oven so much as preheatin’. I think you have me well under your thumb as far as this sodding holiday goes.”

Buffy nodded and shoved the list back into her pocket. “I’m just nervous.”

“Couldn’t tell.”

“You could be a bit more supportive, you know.”

Spike nodded. “Right. The dinner will be a smashing success. People’ll chat about it for years to come. It’ll be the bloody bar by which all future holidays are judged.”

“You suck.”

“Very well, but we’re not talkin’ about that.” He wagged his brows. “Though, if you wanna sample of my suckin’, I’m sure we can slip into a mausoleum. You’ll scream enough to wake the undead.”

It probably didn’t help her *why won’t he recognize my signals* conundrum when things like that had her replying with, “Stop it,” rather than, “Yes, please.” The former just seemed so much safer.

He smirked. “Just like seein’ you turn that color.”

The cool November air burned her skin, and she shook her head, looking for a change in subject. “It doesn’t look like we’re gonna have any luck tonight,” she said, indicating a headstone.

“I can rectify that,” he sneered. “If you’re lookin’ to get lucky.”

Again, a perfect opening. Again, the fool mouth of Buffy cockblocked her. “Shut up.”

Spike shook his head and chuckled. “You’re just too easy to embarrass, sweetheart.”

“Am not.”

He arched an eyebrow and ran his hand down her back—farther down her back than usual. Actually, all the way to her ass. Buffy jolted so quickly she nearly left her skin behind, then wagged a finger at him. “Perv.”

“Just provin’ a point. No need to get all skittish.”

“I am not skittish. I’m just...I don’t like to be...”

“Touched?”

“Teased,” she emphasized.

“Well, hell, love, if you’re achin’ for the real thing—”

Buffy shook her head and held up a hand. "There are no vamps tonight," she said. "We've made three sweeps of this cemetery alone, and no one's coming out." She sighed. "Which means that there'll be a ton of fledglings tomorrow when I'm getting everything ready. Stupid Hellmouth never cuts me a break."

He rubbed her back again, this time in reassurance. "It's all right, pet. We'll patrol tomorrow night after everything's taken care of. And if you like, I'll go with you to the supermarket tomorrow to make sure you get everythin' you need."

"Really?"

Spike shrugged. "Sure. Seems only fair, especially since I'm apparently responsible for the whole bloody meal." A smirk nudged his lips. "You think you can manage toast without turnin' it into a catastrophe?"

"Don't hold your breath."

"Not really a problem."

Buffy offered a grin, then stopped and released a deep sigh. "Okay, well, I was planning on doing my shopping early tomorrow morning. I don't... You're usually sleeping then, aren't you? I was just gonna spend the day, you know, decorating the house and such, but I guess I could—"

"Let's just stick to your schedule, pet. I can be at your place whenever you want me."

"Actually, how about the Magic Box?"

"Bright and early? Is the bloody place even gonna be open tomorrow with half the sodding town visitin' the family they can only stand once a year?"

"Xander convinced Anya that it would cost money to open the store, rather than make it," Buffy agreed. "But I think there's something I can use there."

Spike brought up his hands. "No bloody magic herbs for the dressing."

"No, I mean to thaw the turkey. Since my blow-dryer plan is apparently a bust."

"Magic to thaw the turkey? Doesn't sound much better."

"No, no, no. I saw it on TV once. You'll see tomorrow, okay?" She grinned. "Besides, it's closer to the supermarket."

"I don't mind goin' to your place."

"Well, I'm gonna be at the Magic Box, so unless you wanna be put to work by my mom, you should be at the store by eight."

"Then there I'll be."

He favored her with an affectionate smile and tucked a wayward lock of hair behind her ear, and just like that, she realized how close he was. As in, *super* close. Close in ways that wouldn't have affected her just a few days ago. But god, he looked good. So open and inviting. The impulse to throw herself in his arms grew more persistent by the second. She needed to get home before she did something stupid or embarrassing. Or both.

Stupid distracting vampires.

"Tomorrow, then?" he asked hoarsely, as though having the same conflicting thoughts. Well, he better be conflicted. She sure as hell didn't want to be in this by herself.

*Snap out of it!*

Buffy nodded and forced herself to ignore the protesting voice that demanded she take him by the hand, drag him home, and do naughty things to him until morning. As much as she might be crushing on Spike now, as much as she wanted him to take charge... Well, she really wanted him to take charge. Buffy was done putting her heart out there. If he wanted it, he had to come get it.

"Tomorrow," she said with a nod. "Goodnight, Spike."

"Night, Slayer."

She turned and walked away then before her disobedient hands could do something that would make their friendship even more awkward. It was hard enough trying to reconcile that not-hating him and enjoying his company made him a friend, even though she knew they'd been anything but enemies for nearly a year now. Progressing from that to the realm of conscious lusty thoughts was a huge leap.

One huge, terrifying leap.

*Falling for vampires is always a bad.*

Well, really, falling for men was always a bad. If she was going to

judge Spike on the precedent Angel had set for all vampires, she'd have to judge men based on guys like Parker.

*Spike's different. You've hung out with him for months. You know he's different.*

Lousy logic.

Best to put him out of her mind until tomorrow. Until she was made to uselessly torture herself with wanting again.

It wouldn't work, but the thought was at least encouraging.

THERE WERE DEFINITELY A FEW PERKS TO HAVING A VAMPIRE AS A friend. Particularly, she found that locked doors weren't a problem anymore. And she didn't have to worry with costly property damage. Either Spike was the vampire version of MacGyver, or there were some demonic tricks that Giles had never thought to tell her about.

It was a good thing Anya was out of town with Xander's obnoxious family, as Buffy didn't think she was up to dealing with lectures on ethics as told by ex-murderous demons at present. She supposed she should feel guilty for breaking in, but it was Giles's store, and he was used to such behavior from her.

It was about twenty to eight, and despite her lack of sleep the night before, Buffy felt amazingly alert. It was way early for her, but as predicted, her dreams had been tormented by images of a certain vampire, and she had been entirely grateful for sunrise. While her time with Spike did little but add to her confusion, there was something about being with him that made everything absolutely clear.

For a time.

*"It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas,"* she sang absently to herself, hauling the frozen turkey to the wrap desk. *"Everywhere you go. Take a look at the five-and-ten, glistening once again, with candy canes and silver lanes aglow."*

She stopped at the counter and glanced up, surveying the column of fluorescent lights. "Okay," she murmured. "Looks good."

The next second, she had raised herself onto the surface, careful of the random cheap collectables that Anya placed near the register for

last-minute buyers. She had to stand on her tiptoes to get a good view of the dusty metal shelf that rested above the lights.

*"It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas,"* she continued, satisfied. She looked back at the turkey. *"Toys in every store. But the prettiest sight you'll see is the holly that will be on your own front door."*

It was going to be a tight squeeze, but she knew how hot the lights became once activated. Really, the plan was bulletproof.

*"A pair of something and something and something or other is the hope of Barney and Ben."* She lifted the turkey into her arms and carefully situated it on the metal shelf. The fluorescents gave a whine and something else creaked; Buffy counted to ten, and when nothing else cracked or popped, released a sigh of relief. The turkey was secure. *"Dolls that'll something and do something else is the wish of Janice and Jen."*

*"And mum and pap can hardly wait for school to start again,"* rang a familiar baritone from the back.

Buffy jumped and turned, slapping a hand across her chest. "God, Spike!"

"Was just enjoyin' the view, love." A wicked grin spread across his lips. "Why? Did I scare you?"

"No, I was jumping on a counter for my health."

"What are you doin', anyway?"

She nodded at the lights. "Thawing a turkey."

The grin melted and Spike stalked forward, his eyes going wide when he saw what she had accomplished. "Bloody hell, Slayer..."

"What?"

"That's not gonna work."

"Sure it is," she argued. "There's no one in the store today and those lights are really hot."

"It's a bloody fire waitin' to happen."

"It's on the small thing between the lights and the ceiling. It's not directly on the lights. Besides..." She indicated the showcase lights that were designated to hit the collectables she'd noted earlier. "See? It's a double heat ray. It has to work."

"You're impossible."

"You're just jealous 'cause you didn't think of it."

Spike tossed her a wary smile, then held out a hand to help her

down. "You're either insane or you're brilliant," he decided, shaking his head. "Let's just hope it's the latter."

Buffy shrugged and grinned. "*It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas,*" she continued. "*Everywhere you go.*"

"*There's a tree in the grand hotel, one in the park as well. The sturdy kind that doesn't mind the snow.*"

"You know the words?"

He waved a hand. "Hello. I've been around forever. And aren't you singin' about the wrong holiday?"

"There are no Thanksgiving songs," she said. "And everyone starts decorating for Christmas in November, anyway. So it's actually beginning to look a lot like Christmas."

"There are Thanksgiving songs," he countered, frowning.

"Are not."

"You were never taught 'We Gather Together'?" Spike rolled his eyes. "For fuck's sake, it's your bloody holiday."

"Sing it for me," Buffy suggested, crossing her arms.

"What? No!"

"What? You were singing a minute ago!"

"I'm not gonna bloody serenade you."

She pouted. "Well, phooey, you're no fun. Come on, Spike. Where's the Thanksgiving spirit?"

"I'm British. Now's the time when I'm supposed to begrudge you for stealing our colonies."

"Need I remind you how badly we whupped your British ass in the Revolutionary War?"

"Hell, pet, I'm just impressed you named the right war."

She scowled and elbowed him, ignoring his laughter. "You're just bitter because our country's bigger," she said.

"And you paid for it with blood. How very American of you."

"You're really not gonna sing the song for me?"

He shook his head. "Really not."

Buffy pouted. "Fine, party pooper," she said, pulling out a revised edition of the grocery list. "Are you ready to go?"

"Let's go a-shoppin'," he agreed, but she didn't reply. Instead, she turned to make sure the front door was locked, then took lead down-

stairs where they'd use the vampire-friendly mode of travel, ignoring him as best she could. This, she'd learned, was a guaranteed way to get what she wanted. Spike could stand a lot of things, but silence wasn't one of them. If she played the quiet game long enough, he'd relent and make with the serenading.

They'd spent enough time together that her tactic became clear to him in seconds. Spike released a long sigh then growled something about bossy women.

*Yeah, that's gonna help.*

It didn't take long. A few seconds later, Spike sighed. "Oh, fine. I'll sing the bloody song."

Buffy flashed him a brilliant smile.

He just shook his head. "You're impossible."

"And yet, you love me anyway."

There was a pause at that. A long, uncomfortable pause. Buffy willed herself not to retract, or even look at him. She stared straight ahead, trying to look as though she hadn't said anything remarkable or approached an issue that neither of them had acknowledged.

In the end, Spike didn't reply either way. He released a deep breath and began slowly, "*We gather together to ask the Lord's blessing; he chastens and hastens his will to make known; the wicked oppressing now cease from distressing, sing praises to his name: he forgets not his own.*"

"You don't strike me as an evangelical," Buffy quipped, entirely too aware of his presence. The song hadn't done much to distract her from the awkwardness.

"I'm not," Spike agreed. "You wanted to hear the bloody song."

"Is there more?"

"Yeah."

She smiled, trying to overcome her discomfort, and batted her eyes. "Please?"

"Why? You didn't even know this song existed."

"Well, I do now and I'm trying to broaden my horizons. Besides..." Her cheeks warmed. "I like the way you sing."

Spike's eyes brightened at that. "Really? Err...really?"

She nodded. "You know, when you're not drunk or singing to the Sex Pistols."

“Don’t be criticizin’ my taste in music.”

“You have taste in music?”

“Slayer...”

“Spike? Please?”

He studied her for a minute longer, then weakened and conceded. “Bugger, you’ll be the death of me,” he commented, reaching for his cigarettes before moving forward to open the hatch that led to the sewer. “Right. *Beside us to guide us, our God with us joining, ordaining, maintaining his kingdom divine; so from the beginning the fight we were winning; thou, Lord, wast at our side, all glory be thine.*”

The lyrics sounded more than bizarre coming from him, but that did little to diminish the waves that crashed over her just at the sound of his voice. Begging him to sing for her? Not the best way to convince herself that she was just casually interested in him.

It just made her wonder what else that mouth was capable of.



SPIKE WAS BEGINNING to suspect that Buffy's grocery list was possessed, or had been hexed to keep them in the supermarket forever. It had only been twenty minutes, but so far, they hadn't made it out of the produce section. By the time they wound around to the breads, they'd be getting ingredients for next Thanksgiving.

He was tempted to battle through the hordes of last-minute shoppers by flashing some fang, but somehow, he didn't think the Slayer would approve.

"Why on sodding earth do you need a cantaloupe?" he demanded, narrowing his eyes at her as she examined the small orb in her hand.

She shrugged. "You never know," she said, dumping the fruit into a cellophane sack and tossing it into the cart. "Maybe we'll have a cantaloupe emergency."

His earlier assessment of insane or brilliant leaned more toward the former, though her brand of lunacy was a refreshing one from Dru's brand of crazy. Buffy was quirky if nothing else. She wanted everything perfect to the degree of an all-out obsession, but with as nutty as her ideas became, he found her more and more adorable. And the way that she wanted him so desperately to be a part of the holiday had his insides singing with hope.

“Can you think of anything I’d need a kumquat for?”

Spike smirked. “Gigglin’ inappropriately at the fact that it’s called a kumquat?”

She rolled her eyes. “God, how old are you?”

“You age long enough, pet, and you end up where you started from.” He pointed. “And don’t be callin’ me black, Ms. Kettle. I saw you snicker.”

“At your immaturity,” she agreed.

“Believe that if you must.” He held her gaze a minute longer, gratified when her cheeks rouged and she glanced down. God, he could never get enough of that. “You makin’ your potatoes from a box or from scratch?” he asked. “Or rather, am I makin’ the potatoes from a box or from scratch?”

“Well, if you’re willing...”

He was already reaching for the roll of plastic with which to collect said potatoes. “Do us a favor, then, and put the cantaloupe back.”

Her blush deepened and she nodded, reaching into the cart. “If we have a cantaloupe emergency, though, I am so blaming you.”

“Fair enough.” Spike flashed a grin as he sacked the potatoes. “So, what kinda party are you throwin’? You lookin’ for somethin’ you could put on the cover of a Hallmark card?”

“I just want it to be normal,” she replied.

“Bloody impossible.”

“Well, as normal as my life can get, I mean. I’m not looking for anything completely unobtainable. I want you there, after all.”

“To cook,” he emphasized.

“No. I want you there. Your cooking expertise is just a big perk.”

From the way her heart was hammering, he knew that admitting that much was a big thing for her, despite how far they’d come. Small hints like that warmed him thoroughly. After the almost-kiss of a few nights before, he’d half-expected all the progress they’d made since their days of fighting to the death to evaporate.

Her behavior, her shameless flirting, and the way she looked at him—well, he was only almost-human. He didn’t trust that she was fully aware of half the things she did that drove him crazy. She couldn’t know.

Not how he felt about her.

“Ugh,” Buffy grumbled, scowling at her list. “I have to get three different kinds of dessert.”

“What the bloody hell for?”

“Everyone likes different things. I don’t like the taste of pumpkin, Mom hates coconut, and Giles is weirdly addicted to German chocolate cake.” She shook her head. “So, I need a German chocolate cake, a pumpkin pie, and a cookie cake.”

“Why a cookie cake?”

“Cause as long as we’re going twenty rounds of favorite sweets, I want mine. It’s my party, dammit.”

Spike smirked. “I don’t suppose I get a vote?”

“You’ll eat my cookie cake and like it.”

“So we’re not buyin’ everythin’ to make from scratch. Pumpkin pie’d take a good chunk of the day.”

Buffy shook her head. “Nope. For the desserts, nobody does it like Sarah Lee.”

They turned the corner toward the frozen meat section, where evidently the entire population of Sunnydale had decided to congregate today. Spike expelled a deep breath. “Well, as long as we’re doin’ that the easy way, do you really need that big sodding bird? Can’t we just...” He looked to the crowd around the packed meats. “Buy a pre-prepared turkey?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Love—”

“I have a turkey. Buying one of those overly processed turkeys would take away from the holiday.”

“Sweet—”

“My turkey’s just fine.”

Spike sighed as she rolled the cart by, wishing desperately for a fag. The bad feeling he had about the dinner was intensifying. He wanted everything to go well for her, especially since she was pouring so much into the meal’s success, but her methods had him predicting all-out disaster.

Maybe she wouldn’t notice if he grabbed a packaged turkey. Just in case.

It couldn't hurt to be prepared.

Losing Buffy in the store proved to be a decidedly bad idea. Spike found himself surrounded by pounding hearts and racing pulses, sweat and exhaustion, and completely alone. He could smell the Slayer. He could pick her out in a crowd, blindfolded if need be, but every time he thought he'd caught up with her, the scent would shift. The next twenty minutes were spent plowing his way through the entourage of last-minute shoppers and battling his innate need to shift faces and snarl.

By the time he finally spied her, the panic blazing across her face stabbed him with both guilt and an odd sense of gratification. It wasn't that he didn't know she cared—he did; god, he did—but seeing it was a pleasure he wouldn't soon deny himself. And the way she managed to look both relieved and pissed off when her eyes met his? It was hard to believe at times that she didn't know exactly how sexy she was. How she tempted him with every breath. How he spent his nights remembering the taste of her kisses and wishing that Willow's spell had lasted just a little longer.

Buffy grabbed his arm and pulled him close once they were within reach. She then proceeded to hit his shoulder several times.

"What the hell happened to you? I've been worried sick!"

"Worried?" he couldn't help but echo, trying to hide his grin as he slid the back-up turkey into the cart. She seemed too preoccupied with him to notice. "About me?"

"I turned around and you weren't there, you big stupid...guy."

"In case you didn't notice, pet, the entire bloody town decided to show up at the same time." As though to prove his point, a random customer bumped into him rather harshly, nearly knocking him over. Spike growled a bit too primitively and turned back to Buffy before she could open her mouth to reprimand him. "There now, you see?"

She frowned and caressed his shoulder. "You just need to be careful."

"I'm a vampire, for Chrissake! These people are snack food."

"Jeez, a little louder, maybe? I don't think they heard you in Bangladesh."

“Oh, for cryin’...this is the bloody Hellmouth. You really think that announcement would shock anyone?”

Buffy shook her head and rolled her eyes. “Just...come on. Let’s get going. I want to get the frozen stuff in the fridge ASAP so we can run back and check on the turkey.”

He sighed and nodded, placing a hand on the small of her back. “Right, love,” he murmured. “Let’s go.”

“I’m sorry if I was patronizing... It’s just that I turned around and you weren’t there.”

He bit back a grin at that. “Right. Had to be bloody traumatic.”

“Hey! You could’ve been dust for all I know.”

“Yeah. In broad daylight, done in by the granny hoarding all the candied yams. Have a little faith. I didn’t crawl outta the grave yesterday.”

Buffy snickered. “Well,” she retorted, “you never know.”

No. You never did.

Spike smiled at her, his bravado on the rise. She couldn’t possibly know how much the little things like that affected him. What she told him without saying a word.

He had the sinking suspicion that, despite all, he was going to end up loving this holiday.



EVERY SUPERMARKET IN THE WORLD HAD A NOVELTY AISLE THAT, for most of the year, was filled with nonsense things that people didn’t know they needed until they saw them. The same aisle would, near the holidays, perform the amazing feat of becoming the essential pit-stop for anyone in need of last-minute decorations.

Walking down that aisle in Sunnydale reminded Spike of news reports from the war—the pictures he’d seen following Hiroshima and the coverage that had plastered the evening news during Vietnam. There were old women beating each other with their purses over pilgrim salt-and-pepper shakers and pumpkin candlestick holders. He was beginning to wonder if the prophets had it wrong. Perhaps the end of the world was going to be nothing more than a brawl on who got

the turkey napkin holders rather than a definitive battle between good and evil. At that moment, he'd believe it. The entire place had turned into ground zero for some cataclysmic disaster.

"I got something!" Buffy gasped when she resurfaced from the mob, holding a few unrecognizable items above her head in victory.

"What the hell is that?"

"Streamers," she answered. "And some turkeys to hang from the ceiling."

Spike just looked at her, then chuckled and shook his head. "Your fanaticism about this sodding holiday is beginnin' to worry me."

"What?"

He pointed at the mob of people behind her, grabbing her arm and pulling her out of the way of a shopper who was about to leap into the fray. "We need to get outta here," he said. "Before you spot some whipped cream with turkeys on the canister."

Her eyes brightened. "There's whipped cream with turkeys on the canister? I didn't see those."

A low growl rumbled through his throat and he jerked her out of the Aisle of No Return, toward the city-length checkout line. "No."

"But if it's seasonal—"

"No," he barked. "We've already been here for three bloody hours. I'm not gonna let you risk your neck by goin' back into that madhouse for whipped bloody cream that might not exist. The stuff we have's fine, all right?"

"You really don't want to be here, do you?"

"The first hour and a half or so wasn't so bad."

"Oh." She winced. "Sorry. How long did you say we've been here?"

"Three hours."

Three long, agonizing hours with bloody pulsers all around him, complete with pounding hearts and racing pulses and tasty-smelling adrenaline. Not a bite to be had. He was starving, he was in a food market, but they didn't sell what would satisfy his hunger. It was torture.

Buffy's eyes widened. "Liar!"

"Yeah. I've bewitched time to do my bidding." He pointed to the clock which read a quarter of twelve. "Well, nearly four hours."

"We've been in the grocery store for four hours?"

"This is what I'm sayin'." Spike tugged on her arm again, pulling her out of the way of another flying customer. Maybe the entire supermarket was possessed, not just the Slayer's grocery list.

"This is the kinda thing that people usually exaggerate about," he muttered.

"What?"

He gestured at the ensuing madness around them. "This. All of this. It's the sort've thing you'd see satirized in a comedy skit. Not bloody well acted out in live-action."

Buffy grinned and shrugged. "Only on the Hellmouth, eh?"

"All the entertainment's up close and personal," he agreed.

Her grin broadened into a smile, and Spike decided right then that it was worth a thousand torturous years to be on the receiving end of her good graces.

Even Buffy's fervent obsession with the holiday was worth it. He'd do anything to be near her. She was his kind of crazy. The only kind for him. And if she let him close enough, he'd never let her go.



SOMEHOW THEY HAD MANAGED TO SPEND THE ENTIRE AFTERNOON at her place, which was perfectly fine with him. After putting the groceries up, Buffy had yawned and stretched and noted that she was tired. Spike had scoured the video selection, and after persuading her that slowing down to watch a flick when she obviously needed a break wasn't going to hurt anyone, popped in *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles*. Predictably, she was asleep within five minutes.

It touched him that she was comfortable enough around him to sleep in his presence. Admittedly, he'd spent more time watching her than the movie. She was snuggled at the opposite end of the sofa, hugging a pillow, and she looked so peaceful it made him want to scribble down verses.

He only wished that she had curled in his arms before napping, but that would take crossing a boundary they hadn't come to just yet.

The movie had been over for about an hour, and Buffy was back in

full holiday mode, reenergized. He watched her under the pretense of being irritated with himself, though there was nowhere in the world he'd rather be. She was so bloody adorable when she let herself worry about anything but demons and sacred callings.

Spike glanced up from where he was leaning against the wall, an unlit cigarette wedged between his lips. The Slayer was currently atop one of the dining room chairs, holding up the red and orange streamer before the window. She had hung another in the entryway before the staircase alongside the several decorative paper turkeys that would make Martha Stewart proud.

"Well, what do you think?" she asked.

He was impressed. Buffy had taken a few dollar-store items and utilized them wisely. The touch was subtle, slightly silly but it suited her well. And she was looking at him with such anticipation that even the witty retort curled and waiting on his tongue died without ceremony. Her nerves were beginning to get the better of her.

"Looks good, pet."

She furrowed her brow. "Really?"

Spike nodded. "I like it."

"You're just saying that."

"Well, I'm not sayin' it looks like Windsor Castle, but I think you've done a right good job, considerin' what you had to work with."

She smirked. "Funny boy."

Spike arched an eyebrow and removed the fag from his lips. "Boy?" he drawled.

"Well, I'm assuming you have that which makes you male." She dragged her eyes southward, and out of nowhere, he became self-conscious. Bloody unpredictable chit.

*You lookin' for a demonstration, pet?*

The thought made him tremble, and he had to break eye contact to maintain a semblance of control. "Erm, well," he said, pushing himself off the wall. "Point is, not a bleeding boy. All man here."

"Awww. Did I hurt wittle Spikey's pride?"

"Who are you callin' little?"

"Someone's sensitive," she teased.

"You know, for someone who's so bloody dependent on me for her



party, you do talk a good talk.” He smirked and ran his fingers down his front, a small thrill shivering down his spine when the tease abandoned her eyes.

*Just say the word, Slayer, and I’m all yours.*

“I...ummm...” Her cheeks reddened and she turned quickly back to her decorations. “I’m just going to...ummm...”

It all happened fast. Buffy’s speedy whirl-around caused the chair she was standing on to rock against the sofa, and in seconds, it fell from under her. Spike didn’t have time to think—it was all instinct. He bolted across the room, catching her in his arms as she reached for him. Her legs went around his waist as a surprised yelp tore from her lips, and somehow he ended up with his face buried in her soft breasts.

*Oh fuck.*

Spike was in sodding paradise for a few wonderful seconds. Buffy was in his arms, warm against him, her heart hammering, her pulse racing. God, she smelled good enough to eat, a combination of her girly soaps and body spray, not to mention innate womanly heat. Fuck, she was ready for him. He’d enjoyed long whiffs of her arousal before—usually something that accompanied them mutually through a long patrol. Something that inspired a good wank afterward. He couldn’t get enough of that scent, and he was closer to it now than ever before.

It’d be so easy, too, with his mouth where it was. He could pull down her shirt and tease her nipples as he explored the wetness pooling between her legs. He could put this agonizing charade to a rest and give them both what they wanted. He’d make it good for her. So bloody good that she’d never question his feelings, or think to tell him that it was wrong between slayers and vampires because of one lousy experience with his wanker of a relation.

It couldn’t last, though. Not in their world. Their world was reserved for longing glances and lonely nights.

Buffy expelled a deep breath. “Spike?”

“Slayer,” he growled into her, his hands sliding up her thighs until he was holding her ass. “Buffy...”

“I—I think you can p-put me down now.”

He sighed and lowered her to the ground, missing her warmth

immediately. "Was just gettin' comfy," he complained, plastering on an awkward smile.

"Well...I...ummm..." She was bright red, and looking anywhere but at him. "I... We better go to the Magic Box now. It's almost dark...and stuff. Turkey."

Spike nodded and sighed again, casting a hand through his hair. "Right. Come on. Let's be off."

The day had gone by so quickly, and he didn't want it to end. He didn't want to go home that night and be away from her until tomorrow. Every time he was allowed near her, every time the part of him that was hopelessly addicted to her got its fix, the pangs of withdrawal dug deeper. He always needed more by the time she left him to return to her life of forced normalcy.

Buffy slipped into a jacket at the door, which baffled him as she was hot enough to warm the both of them. It barely hit seventy-nine degrees on the coldest day of the year, yet she managed to shudder as though she was freezing.

*Women.*

She turned to him at last, smiling, her nervousness still palpable albeit controlled. Spike couldn't help himself—his insides melted on cue and he soaked up her warmth as though he hadn't seen her face in a thousand years.

"You were right," she said.

"Huss'at?" He was staring at her mouth. She was a breath away.

A wicked look danced across her face and she dropped her eyes to his crotch. "Definitely all man."

Spike nearly choked in surprise. "You saucy minx."

She grinned and sprinted out the door.

He followed her with a predatory gaze. "I'm gonna let you have it," he drawled before taking off after her.



THE AIR BETWEEN THEM HAD CHANGED. BY THE TIME THE SHOP WAS in view, Buffy was certain she was just hanging around Spike as means of reminding herself of what she couldn't have. Forbidden fruit, as it

were. Been there, done that. She'd already gotten her fill of the Tree of Knowledge. No going back for seconds for Buffy.

And yet, Spike was right beside her. He'd had that look in his eyes again tonight. He'd wanted to kiss her almost as much as she'd wanted to be kissed. Lousy vampires ignoring lousy preset boundaries by lousy Powers That Be that were determined to make her life all-around lousy.

*He's not like Angel*, that logical voice told her for the millionth time.

*He's still a vampire*, replied the increasingly annoying voice that she wanted to jerk from her consciousness altogether. Honestly, what did it know, anyway?

"I really shouldn't have left the turkey all day." She sent him a meaningful glare. "Damn you and your tempting nap suggestions."

"That's right, love. Blame the vamp."

"It's what you're there for, right?"

"Savin' your bum when things go south? Yeah, seems about right."

"Well, you're not a very good vamp, then. Saving the Slayer? Totally not a part of the job description."

Spike tossed her a narrow look. "Oh, I'd say I'm a very good vamp, Slayer."

Her face heated and she looked to the ground. "You would."

"Well, after all, good is relative." He winked as they came to a halt before the Magic Box. "'Sides, heaven forbid you get a little shuteye. Yeah, I guess you're right, kitten. I am one heartless bastard."

*No, you're not. That's the problem.*

Spike gestured to the lock. "You wanna do the honors, or shall I?"

"You're a bad influence," Buffy retorted, digging in her pockets for a hairpin.

He favored her with a rakish smirk and ran his tongue across his teeth. "The baddest, baby."

She shot him a look but didn't reply. There were certain things she simply couldn't trust with her voice.

"Prepare to be amazed," she said a minute later, standing straight up. "Inside is irrefutable proof that there's more than one way to thaw a turkey."

They proved to be famous last words. The minute she opened the

door, whether by movement or eerily timed tricks of the Hellmouth, said turkey crashed to the counter. It was so sudden, Buffy couldn't help but jump. Anya's trinkets broke and scattered and bits of water splashed across the floor. The turkey rocked for a second at the edge of the wrap desk, then finally collapsed to the ground with a hard thud.

The air around them grew very still. Then Spike threw his head back and roared with laughter, bringing his hands together in a round of applause.

"Well done, Slayer."

She didn't say anything. Rather, she stared at the mess for a long beat, released a sigh, then turned and walked away.

"It's not that bad!" Spike amended quickly, scouring to lock up the store again before he tore after her. "Buffy!"

She stopped and waited for him to catch up.

"Love, I'm sorry, okay? I just...I don't know what you expected. You stuck the sodding turkey up there and just—"

Buffy threw her hands up. "I know, okay? No lecture."

"I wasn't gonna—"

"No lecture." She shook her head. "This isn't going to work. None of this is going to work. Who am I kidding? I can't pull off a Thanksgiving meal. I can't even thaw a turkey! I'm just—"

"You pulled it off last year, didn't you?"

"Giles and Willow were helping me," she whimpered, wiping at her eyes. Stupid girlish tears. *Gonna mock me for that, too.* "But Will went to see Tara's aunt and Giles..."

"You don't need the Watcher, pet. We'll work this out, yeah?"

"Nothing is going right!"

"Bollocks. The turkey fell. So what? We dunno that it didn't thaw. Looked to me that the shelf was just slippery from where the ice was meltin', which was really kinda predictable." He placed a hand at her back again and began caressing her soothingly. "Everything else is goin' fine. Just stop expectin' the worst from yourself. There's no need to panic every time somethin' happens off the hoof like that."

A long sigh rolled off her body. He was right, of course. He was right too often.

"You're right," she said, kicking at the ground.

"I'm what?"

"You heard me."

"I want you to say it again. Come on, now. It's not so hard. Take a deep breath and say, 'Spike, you were right, I was wrong, and as a reward for bein' right—'"

"You get rewards now?"

"What fun is there in bein' right if there are no rewards?"

Buffy rolled her eyes, biting back a grin. "Typical."

"But I'm still right against your wrongness."

She offered a non-committal shrug. "However—"

"No. No 'however.' Just be wrong. Just stand there in your wrongness and be wrong and get used to it."

"Ass."

"Bint."

A giggle rose in her throat and she looped her arm through his, ignoring the annoying voice of everything anti-vampire. "You're a big jerk, but you're kinda fun sometimes," she said as they crossed into the graveyard. It shouldn't have surprised her that this was where he'd led her—or rather where they led each other. This routine was rooted in the fabric of every night.

"I'm fun all the time," Spike retorted. "In fact..." He gestured to the nearest headstone. "Sit down, love."

Buffy's eyes went wide and her heart started thundering. "What?"

"Sit down. Gonna show you how much fun I can be."

*Oh god, oh GOD! So not ready for this.*

Yet she didn't object. She was tingling with fear and anticipation, but she couldn't deny him anything.

*I am in so much trouble.*

Spike moved behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders. "You're tremblin'," he murmured. "Scared, sweetheart?"

"Scared?" she replied, hoping she didn't sound as uncertain as she felt. "You've never scared me, Spike."

"Now, now, pet. You're lyin' again."

"I am—ohhh. Ohhhhh, my god! What are you doing?"

Suddenly his voice was very close. "Don't tell me no one's ever given you a massage before, Slayer." His hands were playing her body

like a harp, and she was melting rather rapidly into a puddle of slayer-putty. God, he could proposition her all he wanted if he kept doing that.

“Ahhh.” She rotated her shoulders into his magical touch, shuddering. “God, that feels fantastic.”

She heard him exhale deeply, as though strained. She knew she sounded suggestive, and at the moment, she didn’t care. It was a rare day that anyone ever sought to see if she was doing all right like this. As long as she was still breathing, the world seemed content. No matter if she pulled a muscle here or sprained an ankle there—she was the Slayer, and as long as she was alive and kicking, everyone around her was satisfied.

“Better?” he asked raggedly.

Buffy nodded dreamily and relaxed into him. “Mmmm...I am so your bitch for life.”

Okay, so he had obviously hexed her. There was no way she would say that to Spike, whose job, other than being evil, had somehow become full-time seducer of slayers.

Said hex was likewise the reason she didn’t know when to stop talking. “How do you always know?”

“Know what?”

“What I need?”

Her mind had been completely taken over by Buffy the Lust Bunny. Whatever she said was against her will.

Unfortunately, she couldn’t seem to convey that to Spike. Whenever she tried to open her mouth and let him know that this didn’t mean anything, she either sang his praises or moaned in delight.

“Buffy,” he murmured, his mouth much closer now. Then—oh god, he was sucking at her throat. Vampire at her neck and all she could do was whimper her encouragement. His hands left her shoulders, wrapping around her middle as his mouth laved her skin in sweet, soft kisses. “Want you so bad, kitten.”

“Guh.”

The next thing she knew, she had twisted in his embrace, thrown her arms around his neck, and had attacked his mouth with hers. To hell with everything else—Spike was the only thing in her world that

made sense. That kept making sense. That didn't surprise her, even where he should. The fact that they were friends? It seemed natural after everything. The fact that he was the one she kept running to? Well, that's what friends were for, right? The fact that no man's touch had ever made her feel so alive? That had to mean something. Cliché as it was, it was the truth. Her body reacted like a lightning rod if he so much as brushed up against her. Now his lips were forming words against hers, their tongues tangling, a low, throaty moan rumbling through him that she had somehow inspired—she swore then that life didn't get any better than this. He tasted of cigarettes and smelled of leather, and god, he had his arms around her, holding her to him as his tongue explored her mouth. If he was temptation embodied, then she wanted to roll in it. Screw the rest, she had what she wanted.

She'd never been so turned on from a simple kiss before. Granted, nothing between her and Spike had ever been simple.

"Buffy...my god."

She didn't know how they ended up on the ground, or at what point she'd straddled his waist. And it didn't matter. Nothing mattered at all. She was grinding herself into the hardness that pressed against her, swallowing his whimpers with her own. She drank him in as though she was dying of thirst, and he was the only one who could quench it. It didn't seem too far off the mark.

At some point, though, reality had to come crashing down. Buffy tore her mouth from his with a heavy gasp, taking in their surroundings. They were still in the cemetery, despite the fact that the ground had definitely moved.

"Buffy," Spike gasped. She was on top of Spike. Her legs were on either side of him, and she was sitting on his erection. He was looking at her like a man starved, though recognition burned behind his eyes. He knew what was coming. God, he knew before she did. "Buffy, I...I didn't..."

The world collapsed around her with all its cruelty.

*Stupid, stupid.*

"I...I'm sorry," she said awkwardly, clamoring to her feet. "I was...ummm..."

He stared at her for a minute, swallowing her in his gaze.

“We...” Buffy brushed the dirt off her jeans, avoiding his eyes at all costs. “We should get back to the Magic Box,” she said. “See about the turkey. Get stuff ready for tomorrow.”

There was a long pause followed by a sigh of defeat. Spike climbed to his feet, wiping his hands, and nodded solemnly. “Sure thing, pet. Lead the way.”

She released a deep breath and forced herself to look at him. Plead with him without words to understand. “Okay.”

She took his hand without waiting for him to offer it. There would be no running from this. No denying that it had happened. No pretending that her world hadn’t again been turned upside down. No pretending that whatever she had with Spike wasn’t exactly what she wanted.

“Just give me time,” she muttered when he shot her a confused look. “I wasn’t ready.”

Spike held her eyes for a long minute, then nodded and kissed her brow. “I’ll wait till the end of the world,” he replied.

“That’s a long time.”

“Says who?”

She smirked. “Touché. Call it wishful thinking.”

“Well, I know what I’ll be thinking of wishfully tonight.” He shot her a cocky grin and waggled his brows. And her body flooded with warmth.

Maybe, for the first time, what she wanted and what was right could peacefully coexist.

Maybe. Spike made the impossible seem possible.

And when she was ready, she was going to take him by storm.

It gave her something to look forward to.





THE RING of the doorbell was undoubtedly the best sound to ever grace the air

“Oh, thank god.”

Already she had been cooking since she awoke and she felt her control on the situation slipping from her grasp. She had the unsettling feeling that the day was going to be a disaster.

But now it was okay. Spike would take care of everything. He was, after all, the designated cook.

Buffy threw the door open with a sigh of relief. “Oh, thank god,” she gasped again, somehow managing to avoid lunging into his arms. Cook now, play later. “I thought you’d never get here.”

“I’m ten minutes early.”

“I know!” She grabbed his wrist and jerked him into the house. It was just a few minutes before dawn, and between pacing in wait of his arrival and groaning at the sight of the mess she’d created, she’d fretted about asking him to come over so near sunrise. The day had not started off on the right foot. “Sorry, today’s just a massive wig-fest.”

Spike perked an eyebrow. “Miss me already?”

“That and I’m about ready to bomb the kitchen.”

His eyes sparkled. “Looks like I got here just in time, then.”

“Get in here.”

“I think I’d like to hear you say that when we’re both naked,” he purred, favoring her with a long, rakish leer. “Calm down, pet. We’ve got time to fix whatever you feel you’ve bugged up.”

“This is going to be a nightmare,” she whimpered.

“Where’s the trust?”

“I’m panicking here!”

Spike smirked. “Couldn’t tell. Look, pet, it’s gonna be all right. Just let me get to the kitchen. Half the stuff we won’t be able to get into until two hours before your dinner. Let’s just get the turkey cookin’, yeah?”

“It’s in there. And I think the stuffing looks good, but I—”

“Buffy—”

“This is a mess. Why did I get myself involved in this? It must be some spell, some holiday-crazy spell. I’m insane. I’m certifiable. I make Drusilla look like Einstein. I—”

He burst out laughing at that and took her by the shoulders. “Sweetheart,” he said slowly, “calm down. It’s all right. All right? Spike’s here now and he’ll take care of everythin’.”

His eyes were warm and his embrace looked so welcoming that she couldn’t help herself a minute longer. The next thing she knew, she had buried herself in his arms, sighing when he held her against him. There was nothing suggestive—nothing much. It was nice simply being held. He gave her more comfort in a matter of seconds than any other man had given her in the duration of an entire relationship.

“Thank you.” She pulled back reluctantly, shaking her head. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“No one really does.”

Buffy smirked and hit his shoulder. “Okay...let’s get this thing done.”

“Just for the record, love, you could never be as insane as Dru.”

A shiver of jealousy surged through her at that. She didn’t handle images of the men she loved with other women very well, though the second she met his eyes, time suspended and all became abundantly clear.

“Trust me,” he said softly. “I consider that a virtue. You, I can talk

to. I didn't even realize I was missin' that until..." He glanced down awkwardly and cast a hand through his hair. "Well, I..."

It was somewhat disconcerting to see Spike all nervous and flustered when hey, that was so her role. And yet, there wasn't even one part of her that didn't warm. Buffy smiled softly and leaned forward to brush his lips with hers. "Gotcha," she murmured.

"You have no bloody idea."

She flashed a grin. "I think I have some idea."

"And here I thought I was supposed to be the evil one," he retorted, breaking away and moving toward the kitchen. "Come on. We need to salvage what we can."

"What we can? What happened to the optimism?"

He shrugged. "Calmed you down, dinn't it?"

"You ass."

The insult had no punch. She wasn't angry, rather incredibly relieved. The burden of perfection was off her shoulders. She now had the perfect scapegoat.

"And don' even think about blamin' this mess on me, love," Spike said as he surveyed the kitchen.

"Why not?" she whined.

"It's your bed. You lie in it."

"You mean you won't lie in it with me?" She paused, not meeting his eyes, her cheeks flushing. "I mean—can't I use your being British as an excuse? 'He's from England. He doesn't get it.'"

"No deal. I'm not here to take the fall for your shortcomings."

"Hey!"

Spike just tossed her a grin and pulled the fridge open. "I take it you've got the bird in the oven?"

"Are you kidding me? I've been up for a half-hour. That was the first thing I did."

"Well, it's either gonna be extremely well done or just right. I thought it was supposed to cook for only four hours or so. It's a twenty-pounder, right?"

"Four to five, and yes."

"So your guests are gonna be here at ten in the bloody mornin'?"

"It's a noon thing."

Spike just shook his head. "Bloody Americans changin' traditions on me. Wasn't the supper in the evenin' last year?"

"I'm trying to avert disaster by not starting a tradition!" she cried. "Something you're not exactly helping me with, Mister!"

"Anyone ever tell you that you have more mood swings than—"

"Finish that sentence and I'll—"

"My point exactly." He grinned. "Look, you have the thermometer, right? Turkey'll be ready when the thickest part of the thigh reaches a hundred and eighty degrees."

Buffy sighed. "How do you know these things?"

"I did my research. Didn't wanna botch up your dinner." He gestured to the island. "Also, your cookbook is open."

"The thermometer's in the cabinet."

He nodded. "And you said you had the stuffing?"

"It's cooking."

"Where?"

She arched an eyebrow and pointed at the oven. "In the turkey."

Spike sighed. "Bollocks."

"What?"

"Well, now we gotta make sure it cooks. If it doesn't cook, people are gonna get sick." He paused. "Though that might be bloody funny. Fancy to see what shades of green we can turn your Watcher?"

Buffy froze. "Are you kidding me?"

"No."

"Are you kidding me? Where does it say that? How do you know that? Why do you know how to cook a turkey?"

"I don't...or I didn't until I cracked open a cookbook last night."

"You read cookbooks?"

He gave her a look. "I nicked one of yours. Didn't think you'd mind since I did it with your best interest at heart."

"Well, you probably took the one that mentioned that, with my luck."

"I was gonna be doin' most of the cookin' anyway. Figured it was only fair." Spike finished his survey of the fridge and closed the door with a sigh. "But let's worry less about that right now. We have another problem."

Buffy released a long, strangled moan. "Oh god."

"Apparently, we forgot to pick somethin' up at the Battle of Antietam yesterday."

"The supermarket?"

"I hear they call it that."

"Is it something mega important? You don't want to go to the supermarket on Thanksgiving."

"I didn't particularly wanna go yesterday, but yeah, I'd say it's important."

"Important to the point where people will notice?"

Spike tossed her a look. "I dunno, pet. How important do you think butter is?"

Buffy reached for the counter for balance. "Oh, crap."

"In a bloody nutshell. Guess it's back to the quickie mart for us. In the meantime..." He slid on a pair of oven mitts, which made her giggle in the midst of her panicking. "Let's save the turkey, yeah?"

He pried open the oven door and peered inside. "Oven looks cold," he observed. "Bet you forgot to preheat."

"Yeah...I don't understand preheating. How can you heat an oven before heating it?"

"Well, it might buy us some time, then."

It didn't take much. Spike, predictably, did the bulk of the work.

"Will you marry me and be my cook?" Buffy asked from where she was seated on the counter, mesmerized by the way he worked.

He tossed her a narrow glance. "Be careful what you wish for, love," he retorted, dumping the stuffing into the trash.

"Hey!"

"You made it without butter," he reminded her, silencing her objection. "Don't reckon even I'd try to brave it."

Buffy glanced down. "I thought I was being helpful. I didn't want you to have to do everything. It's supposed to be my—"

"We'll deal with it, sweet. I don't mind doin' everything."

"I mind you doing everything."

"You're just afraid I'm gonna lace the veggies with cyanide," he teased, sliding the turkey back into the oven. "We'll let this cook while

we brave the market, yeah? Figure we have to be back within five hours.”

“Five hours?”

“Well, we’re just goin’ for butter.”

“Oh god.”

He smiled. “Relax, love. Unless you want me to get you a sedative while we’re out.”

“Very funny.”

“Come on.” Spike placed his hand on her back as they navigated toward the basement. “It’s early enough that we might miss the rush.”



THIRTY MINUTES LATER, ENTERING A PLACE THAT COULD ONLY BE explained as D-Day sans the whimsy, a flying customer collapsed at their feet as they walked inside the sliding doors, followed by an old granny who was using language that would make a sailor blush.

*Might miss the rush.* Famous last words.

Buffy sighed. “You were saying?”

“Yeah, well, I called that wrong.”

“I think this place is hexed.”

“Right there with you, love.”

Two rows of fluorescent lights had gone out, giving the market the eerie post-apocalyptic feel. Buffy supposed it would be different once the sun had fully risen, as she’d never been inside a grocery store before dawn, though for the moment, she had her doubts.

There was no room for movement. The muffled arguments and barked commands, the battles over the shopping carts—she was beginning to resign herself to the fact that the holiday was doomed.

Spike seized her hand. “Come on,” he said hurriedly. “We’ll make a run for it.”

“I don’t—”

“Just don’t let go of my hand,” he said.

And before she could object, they plowed forward, right into the eye of the hurricane. How he navigated them through the sea of people, she would never know. She felt tugged in every which way, her

sides jabbed, her ribs elbowed, and her feet trampled on. Spike cursed loudly several times, but he didn't stop. A vamp on a mission.

"Are you okay?" she asked when he came to a stop in the dairy section, placing a hand to his face. He looked a bit dazed.

"Bloody chip fired about a thousand times."

Buffy nodded, seizing the last container of butter with a long sigh of relief. "Okay. Let's make another run for it. Keep running no matter what happens."

"You want me to nick it?"

"Well, technically I'm nicking it. And don't give me that look! I think this place is possessed, and I have no qualms about stealing butter from a possessed supermarket."

Spike nodded, impressed. "Way to go, Slayer."

"Shut up."

"This is a big step for you, you know."

"I swear—"

"I'm proud, really. After all, this could—" He broke off suddenly, pulling her out of the way of another flying customer. The man crashed to the floor and hopped up again, seemingly undeterred, before leaping right back into the mounting chaos around them. "Right. Enough of that. Let's go."

Before they could make a run for it, however, something grabbed a hold of the vampire's wrist and nearly tugged him to the ground.

"What the bleeding—"

Attached to his arm, seemingly from nowhere, was a small, mean-looking old woman wearing an ugly scowl.

"The hell!" Buffy yelled. "What's your problem, lady?"

"I believe you're holding my butter," she said crossly.

Spike yanked himself free with a snarl. "You believe wrong."

"I saw it first."

"Says who? We've been over here for five minutes!"

"I'm an old woman. I can't cross the store as quickly as you ungrateful youngsters," she grumbled. "Now hand it over. I saw it first."

"Well, I grabbed it first," Buffy retorted, her eyes narrowing. "So tough luck."

Spike flashed her a surprised look, as though he had expected her

better angels to overcome the devil on her shoulder. He was in for it, if that was the case. The day was going bad enough without some old granny trying to wrestle them over a tub of butter.

Especially with an argument as lame as hers was.

“Let go!” the woman shrieked. “You little harlot!”

Buffy’s eyes went wide. “What did you call me?”

Spike wasn’t quite so passive. He stepped forward, all graceful predator, his eyes flashing yellow. “Look, you old bint, we nabbed the bloody butter fairly, and we’re leavin’ with it. Now apologize to my lady and go bother someone else.”

There had to be some Thanksgiving demon going around, controlling things and people at random. Either that or something truly was in the water. The next second, the old woman, unfazed, lifted her handbag high over her head and brought it crashing down across Spike’s back as though he had just made a lewd suggestion.

“Fuck!” Spike snarled. “What the bleedin’ hell is your problem?!”

“Hey!” Buffy cried, shoving the old woman back, but the bitch didn’t relent. Rather, Buffy’s interference made her the handbag’s target, and that was the death knell for Spike’s control, apparently. He released a wall-trembling roar as his fangs descended.

*Oh boy.*

“Try it again, you rotten old bird,” he growled before snapping his teeth at the granny. This, however, proved to be a mistake, as the act had him clutching his head the next moment as the chip fired. He sank to his knees with a whimper.

Still, seeing his fangs was evidently the push the old woman needed. She backed away from Buffy with a shrill scream, butter forgotten, and in seconds had disappeared among the masses.

Buffy fell to her knees beside Spike and ran her fingers through his hair. “You okay?”

“Bloody hate this chip,” he grumbled, nuzzling her hand.

“I know.”

“Crazy old bird?”

“Gone.”

“Good.” He sighed and rose to his feet, holding onto Buffy’s hand all the while. “Let’s get the hell outta here.”



Sweeter words were never uttered.



“WELL, DON’T YOU LOOK EDIBLE?” SPIKE DRAWLED, RAKING HIS EYES down her body as she bounded into the kitchen. “You’re bound and determined to distract me, aren’ you?”

Buffy flushed and looked down. She wasn’t wearing anything special—rather, she had changed into a baggy T-shirt and a pair of sweats. Things she didn’t care about getting dirty, and definitely nothing worthy of the lusty looks her vampire was sending her. The combo was perhaps the least sexy outfit she owned.

“I need to find some Christmas music to play while we make stuff,” she said, averting her eyes. “Giles is on his way.”

“Already?”

“Yeah. I think he wants to be near to supervise the cooking. Make sure I don’t do something...well, hazardous.”

“And by you, you mean...?”

She smiled and stroked his arm. “He just knows you too well to trust you.”

Spike smirked. “Funny girl.”

“Now you’re beginning to sound like me.”

“Perish the thought.” He plopped a casserole dish before her and handed her a wooden spoon. “Stir.”

“What is it?”

“The new stuffin’ plus butter.”

Buffy shook her head. “I swear, I’m going to talk to Giles about getting the supermarket exorcised,” she muttered. “There is absolutely no way those people weren’t under the influence of something.”

“I’ve been sayin’ that since yesterday when *you* were under the influence.”

“What? I was not!”

Spike arched a brow. “I knew I shoulda brought a camcorder.”

“I was so not under any influence.”

“You jumped into a bloody moshpit of battlin’ customers to...what?”

Get a couple of paper turkeys and festive streamers? You were off your nutter.”

She looked back to the ingredients she was stirring. “Was not.”

“You nearly tripped over yourself to go back and find whipped cream with a turkey on the canister.”

“Shut up.”

“Just sayin’, love.” He moved to the oven and pried it open. “Where’s your mum?”

“Upstairs, getting ready,” Buffy replied.

“Getting ready?”

“She wants to look nice for our Thanksgiving dinner. Is that so hard to believe?”

“Just seems a little much to get ready for a bloody meal that’s bein’ cooked in your own home.”

“You just don’t get it.”

“Not arguin’.” He paused. “Slayer? You say you had the turkey in the oven an hour before I got here this mornin’?”

“Half hour,” she corrected. “Why?”

“So it’s been in...an hour an’ a half? Two hours?”

She moaned. “Were we really at the supermarket that long?”

Spike smiled. “Possessed, remember?”

“Yeah. Okay. Why?”

“It’s not cookin’.”

There was a long pause.

“What?”

“It’s not cookin’. This turkey’s a twenty-pounder; it should be... well...” He gestured to the oven. “It’s not cookin’.”

“Oh my god. Why?” Raw panic that she was certain would be associated with Thanksgiving from this point forward surged with sudden strength. “Oh my god. Oh god. Oh god. What am I going to do?”

He turned to her and grasped her by the shoulders. “Calm down.”

“Calm down? My turkey—”

“I got another one.”

It took her a few long seconds to comprehend that sentence.

“You...what?”

“I bought another turkey yesterday.”

"When? You were with me all day!"

He nodded. "Remember when we got separated?"

"You got separated from me 'cause you didn't have faith in my ability to cook a turkey?"

"I wanted to make sure we had all the bases covered."

"Well, thank you very much."

Spike sighed and rolled his eyes. "Look. If you wanna be pissed at me for lookin' out for you—as usual—fine. You can yell at me all you want, but I have to make your bloody dinner right now, okay?"

He turned to the fridge without waiting for a reply. Buffy glared at his back for a few seconds, then exhaled and realized she was being foolish. Unsurprisingly foolish. So what if he'd been looking out for her best interest, and that her best interest just happened to involve buying something as means of making sure they had a Plan B should her Plan A go sour? Wasn't preparation the smart thing to do?

Logic told her so, even if she felt she reserved the right to be irritated. It would be nice, after all, if someone just once had a little faith in her ability to do something normal.

"Bollocks," she heard him murmur.

"What?"

"Never mind about the spare."

*Urge to panic rising.* "What? Oh no, why?"

"I didn't look at it. Couldn't...too many bloody people, and I didn't want you to see it. Didn't want you to get all upset and..."

"Spike?"

"It's not turkey." He held up the package. "It's steak."

Buffy just stared at him for a long moment.

"Yeah, I know," he muttered, tossing the frozen meat to the island. "Sorry. I just wanted to make sure everythin' went right for you, 'cause it was important. I bugged it up."

No, he hadn't. None of this was his fault.

"Spike..."

"Look, I'll go back an' face the mob. Bloody doubt there's any turkey left, but we might be able—"

"What? Are you crazy? I'm not sending you back to that place."

"Slayer—"

“Make the steak. It’ll be fine.”

He was looking at her as though she had sprouted horns. “Kitten, I’ll just—”

“No, you will not. I don’t want you to go back there. Especially now with Giles on the way and...look, the steaks will be fine. It’ll be our new tradition to avoid Buffy-screw-ups when it comes to thawing impossible-to-thaw meats. It’s fine.” As if to solidify how fine it was, she narrowed the space between them, cupped his cheeks, and brushed a tender kiss across his lips. “And I’m sorry for being bitchy. I just...I wanted to do something right.”

His eyes smoldered. “You do many things right,” he retorted. Then grinned. “And please, Slayer. You wouldn’t be yourself if you weren’t bitchy half the time.”

“Shut up,” she replied, albeit good-naturedly. “And make the steaks?”

“Consider ‘em made.”

Buffy beamed at him. “I’m gonna go search for Christmas music.”

“Wrong bloody holiday,” he reminded her.

“There are no Thanksgiving songs,” she retorted.

“I’m not singin’ ‘We Gather Together’ again. No bloody way.”

“Then don’t complain about my musical selection.”

He smirked and pried open the cellophane wrapping surrounding the frozen meat. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”



THERE WERE CERTAIN STYLES, BUFFY RECKONED, THAT HER MOTHER had kept simply for the hope that one day they would be back in fashion. The sweater she was currently wearing was no exception. A big brown gaudy thing with pumpkin-orange checkers. Buffy usually thought of her mother as being somewhat stylish. For a mom.

Nevertheless, she was her mother, and moms were prone to dress like hapless stylist victims...especially on holidays. Besides, the sweater was, if anything, seasonally appropriate.

“Hey, Mom? Where’s our Bing album?”

"In the basket of CDs next to the fireplace," she answered. "What smells so good?"

"Whatever Spike's cooking in there."

Joyce favored Buffy with a long, maternal look. "Are you making Spike do all the work?"

"Mom, he practically volunteered."

"She has me shackled!" Spike called from the kitchen, his voice full of mirth.

"Buffy!"

She rolled her eyes. "He's kidding."

"I thought the entire idea was that *you* were going to cook dinner."

"Yeah, well, Spike's a rare breed of...helper vamps. That's what he does."

"She threatened me! Said she'd bathe me in holy water if I didn't comply!" Spike, however, appeared in the doorway the next second, looking anything but imprisoned. "Got the steaks going," he said, nodding politely to her mother. "It's you wanna start on the other goodies..."

"I wanna find my Bing album first."

"I keep tellin' her she has the wrong bloody holiday," he explained to Joyce.

"Just don't let her work you too hard."

Buffy froze from where she was digging through the CDs. She could practically hear the retort ready and curled on her vampire's tongue, and silently begged that the one shred of tact that he had in his vile body would command his lips to keep it in that deviant mouth of his where it belonged.

Fortunately, she didn't have to suffer through the next few seconds of uncomfortable dialog to determine whether or not her plea had been answered. The doorbell rang.

"Oh, that'll be Giles!" she said, leaping to her feet. "I'll get it!"

She felt Spike's amusement as his eyes followed her to the hallway. Lousy pervert vampires.

"Happy Thanksgiving!" she said as she opened the door, a large smile plastered on her face. A smile that froze there.

Because the guy on the other side of the door was not her Watcher.

“Dad?”

From the living room, she heard her mother pause and say, “I’ll go get the Scotch.”

Hank Summers just smiled warmly and nodded at her, as though his unannounced presence after four years of missed birthdays and limited phone calls was just what the doctor ordered.

“Surprise,” he said.

Buffy just stared at him.

He really had no idea.

SPIKE TOSSED BUFFY A SYMPATHETIC GLANCE. She had been pacing ever since she'd returned from her second wardrobe change, muttering a tapestry of obscenities that he was impressed she knew how to use properly. Hank was in the family room, chatting with Joyce and the Watcher, going over the past few years as though he had been gone for a long weekend.

"I can't believe him!" she cried in loud whisper. "He hasn't had anything to do with me since my sophomore year of high school, and he suddenly shows up as though I owe him something?"

"Kitten—"

"Like I give a crap that Jenna ran away with the mailman." She pointed to the living room. "Serves him right, really. I hope she and the mailman have a ton of mail-babies and send him postcards of their happy family during the holidays. He's only here because he doesn't want to be lonely on Thanksgiving. I'm a freaking excuse for him. His fallback position just in case the rest of his life isn't going as hunky-dory as he'd like."

"You could always kick him out, y'know."

Buffy shot him a confused look. "What?"

"If he's gonna mess everythin' up for you..." Spike sighed and

wished he'd just kept his mouth shut. He could see the wheels spinning in that gorgeous head of hers. She was about to impart on some tangent feminine illogic, to be sure. Then again, that feeling of loving through resentment wasn't exactly new to him. Such had been his entire story with Drusilla until the golden goddess standing before him had helped him open his eyes to the world he was missing.

"I can't kick him out," Buffy grumbled, hoisting herself atop the kitchen counter, jutting out her lower lip. "Believe me, I'd love to, but..."

"He's your pap?"

She nodded, her expression a mixture of heartbreak and self-loathing.

Spike wanted desperately to take her into his arms, but at this point, he figured making sure that the rest of the dinner went off without a hitch was his best way to help her. They had already had their share of small catastrophes to guide them through the day—the last thing she needed was the rest of her meal to follow suit.

"And now he's gonna see what a colossal screw-up I am. Who has steak on Thanksgiving?"

"Pet—"

She held up a hand. "It's not your fault. I'm sorry... God, I'm lucky enough that you're here and this hasn't turned out worse than it has. At least we have a main course. Though... Oh my god! What are we going to do about dessert? The pumpkin pie needs to—"

"No worries." He smiled. "I figured out why the turkey wasn't cookin'. Had to in order to cook the stuffin'."

"Why wasn't it working?"

"Apparently, to get the thing to work, you gotta turn it on with the timer."

She released a pitiful moan, dropping her head into her hands. "I'm too stupid to live."

"You bloody well are not. Who knew that—"

"My mom did. She told me it was going to...and I forgot. Oh, god, I can hear her now. 'Buffy Anne Summers, you've lived in this house how long and you still don't know how to turn on the oven?' Or better yet,



the 'you never listen to me' speech. I ruined everything. I am so dumb."

"Buffy—"

"I suck. I am the queen of suckage." She peered through her fingers at him as though daring him to laugh. "And don't you say anything nasty!"

"Wouldn't dream of it." Spike paused and bit back a grin, unsure where to go from there. "If you want, we can postpone the big supper so that—"

She shook her head, eyes wide. "No! No, we can't do that. I don't want my dad here any longer than he has to be. Let's just get this over with."

"Right." He tossed her a pair of mitts and nodded to the oven. "Pop out the stuffin'. I already have the veggies on the table. Just gotta warm the bread and make sure all condiments are out."

"Why do we have stuffing when we have no turkey?"

"Because you didn't tell me to not make it and I figured it'd be better to go ahead rather than let you down."

Buffy was quiet for a minute. "Did anyone ever tell you that you're God's gift to women?"

Spike bit back a smirk at that. "If I knew it was this easy to get you eatin' outta my hand, love, I'd've tried it a long time ago."

"Seriously, I don't know what I would've done without you today."

"Me, either."

She made a face at him and struck his shoulder half-heartedly with the oven mitt. "Watch it, wise-ass."

"I do my best." Spike drew in a deep breath. "Best go get everyone in the dinin' room, yeah? It's about time to eat."

"First I'm gonna go downstairs and see if I have any blood left."

He arched an eyebrow. "And tell your pap what, exactly?"

"That it's none of his damn business and maybe he wouldn't be so clueless about the happenings of my life if he was a dad even when it's not convenient for him."

She was so vibrant when she was angry. He could watch her all day. "You're magnificent," he murmured.

A charming flush filled her cheeks, and she glanced down. "Well, thanks. I try."

"Toddle off. I'm gonna get everythin' on the table."

"Is there a cap on the amount a person can say 'thank you'?"

He just grinned and nodded to the basement. "Oh, I'm sure we can find some nice way for you to repay me for all the hard work I've done," he purred, winking.

Buffy's eyes flashed. "Name the time and place."

"Tease."

"Just you wait."

Spike seared her with a look. He didn't want to wait. He wanted to tell the others to bugger off and cart her off to bed, let her work out her stress by riding his willing body. In all honesty, he was surprised he had maintained any self-control with the way she kept provoking him. Those subtle looks, all-too-brief kisses, and that shameless flirting that had seemingly been liberated from the previous night's snogging session.

One thing was certain—what had happened between them last night was undoubtedly the most magical thing he had experienced in his century-plus of living. And best of all, she wasn't denying it. She was embracing it.

The other dinner guests had wandered on their own accord into the dining room. Spike sent Hank Summers a scornful look that undoubtedly went unappreciated, but he felt he needed to do something on his lady's behalf. From everything he had learned about the man, he had very little reason to give him the benefit of a doubt.

Furthermore, when he met Giles's eyes, he found something in there he could have sworn was appreciation, as though the Watcher was grateful that his slayer had a vampire handy. The man had never looked at him like that, even when he'd found himself transformed into a snarling Fyarl demon that growled in languages only Spike could understand.

Joyce also met him with a silent look of welcome. It made him feel both valued and uncomfortable. After all, he was a vampire. And vampires should not feel like the Slayer's personal savior amongst her family and friends.

"Ah," she said, turning to Hank. "This is Spike. Buffy's...erm..."

"Boyfriend," Giles concluded with a note of satisfaction.

Spike snapped his head back to the Watcher in astonishment. Couldn't say he'd expected that.

"Boyfriend?" Hank repeated, staring at Spike's hair. "She certainly...erm...she's grown into a punk phase, I see."

The last lock fell into place. Spike hated this wanker.

"Nice to meet you, too," he all but snarled, setting the steaks on the table.

Joyce seemed annoyed, as well. "I'll have you know that Buffy has been seeing Spike for a year and a half now," she spat. "And they're very happy together."

"You honestly approve of our daughter dating a guy named Spike?"

"The name's William, mate," Spike growled, turning in time to greet the Slayer, who was carrying a glass of blood she had likely intended to disguise as red wine. "Spike's just somethin' I picked up over the years."

Buffy frowned and set the glass at Spike's presumed place. "What's going on?"

Hank gestured to Giles. "Rupert was just introducing me to your boyfriend."

The Slayer's eyes bulged and she shot a warning glance to Spike, who shrugged. "Rupert felt it'd be too bloody obvious," he said. "We've been outted, so to speak."

She looked at him for a long moment. "So Giles...told Dad...that we're dating?"

Her reaction wasn't exactly everything he'd wished for, but there was something reassuring in the fact that the revulsion he remembered so well from Willow's Will Be Done spell had been replaced instead with deer-in-headlights confusion. Maybe like she hadn't realized it was that obvious.

Hank glanced skeptically to the table. "You're having steak on Thanksgiving?"

"New tradition," Buffy said.

"I see."

"Well, we could always send you to the supermarket if you want to

have a more typical Thanksgiving,” she suggested sweetly, though Spike saw demons dancing in her eyes.

*You gorgeous little she-devil.*

“No, this looks fine.”

“I’m so glad it meets your expectations,” Joyce drawled, taking the seat next to Giles before Hank could claim it. “I know she had you in mind when she started cooking.”

He shot her a scathing look. “You seem to be enjoying your liquor.”

“I don’t see why we can’t be civil,” Giles said. “After all, your daughter did put in quite a bit of effort in putting this meal together.”

Hank glanced at the plates again and released a long sigh. “Very well. Is anyone going to say grace?”

Buffy smothered a laugh with a cough; Spike glanced down to hide his grin.

“Do you not pray in this house?”

“To which god?” Giles muttered. Spike reckoned he was the only one who heard it as he was the only one who laughed, which of course got him into trouble.

Hank sent Spike a scathing look. “Is there something funny about religion?”

“Mate, if you don’t see the funny in religion, you’re not paying attention.”

Buffy kicked him under the table.

“Ow! Love, do us a favor and watch the heels, yeah?”

Hank gestured at him. “This is the sort of young man you approve of for our daughter?” he asked Joyce.

“Buffy’s old enough to make her own mistakes,” Joyce said, reaching for the green beans. She then realized that she had misspoken and released an untimely giggle. “I know I was making my own mistakes at her age. You should know, right?”

Spike noticed she had placed the bottle of Scotch right beside her wine glass. Bugger all.

Buffy’s father sighed. “Joycie—”

“Don’t you ‘Joycie’ me, you—”

Giles met Spike’s eyes, then glanced to Buffy. Simultaneously, all three folded their hands and bowed their heads.

"Rub a dub dub, thanks for the grub," Buffy said under her breath.

"Amen," Spike and Giles murmured together.

Neither of Buffy's parents seemed to notice the exchange. Rather, her mother poured herself another Scotch and spewed some nasty, only halfway intelligible insult across the table.

"Nice mouth, Joyce."

"Thanks. Rupert certainly thought so."

Buffy's eyes went wide. "Mom!"

"Oh, honey, you knew about that," she retorted airily before taking another drink. "It's old news to everyone here."

Spike stared at the Watcher. "You shagged your slayer's mother?"

"Spike!"

"It was the band candy," Giles retorted, blushing.

"You old scamp."

Buffy dropped her head into her hands. "Please stop talking," she begged. "And pass the potatoes."

"You actually talk about sex in front of..." Hank gestured to the Slayer, and Spike had to fight a snicker. "Honestly..."

"Your daughter happens to be twenty years old," Spike said calmly. "Think it's a bit late for the fluttering virtue bit."

"What are you trying to tell me?"

"Nothin' that you can't figure out for yourself."

Buffy tried to kick him again and missed, hitting her mother instead.

"Ouch!"

A long, mortified pause. "Sorry, Mom."

Joyce, however, was less concerned with her pained leg than she was with the presence of her ex-husband. "You're the one who brought up sex in the first place. And anyway, since when did you become the spokesperson for family values?" she demanded. "Y-you're the o-one who blew off your daughter's birthday to boink your secretary. Honestly..." She giggled and handed Giles the Scotch. The Watcher indulged in a long swig straight from the bottle. "Someone's a little hypocritical."

Buffy passed Spike the steak platter, then reached for the gravy. "How's the stuffing?" she asked, her face burning.

“Better than it would’ve been without butter,” he replied.

“Well, at least I’m not setting a bad example for our daughter!” Hank retorted. “No wonder she’s ended up with some guy who calls himself Spike, of all the ridiculous things.”

“No, you haven’t been around to set any kind of example at all, have you?”

“This is a lovely brand,” Giles said, holding up the bottle. “Lovely. Could’ve sworn there was more of it. Don’t suppose you have anymore?”

“In the basement.”

“F-fantastic.”

Buffy leaped to her feet and tossed her napkin into her chair. “Don’t get up. You’ll fall down the stairs. I’ll get the booze.”

She waited for a long minute until it dawned on Spike that she wanted him to follow. He flashed the others a grin and followed suit. “I’ll, umm, help you carry it.”

“Oh, look,” Joyce said loudly. “Guess there goes the proof of my bad parenting. My daughter and her punk boyfriend are sneaking off for a quickie in the basement.”

Spike froze. As entertaining as this was, he didn’t want Buffy to completely fall apart at the seams. Her mother wasn’t paying too much attention to her reactions, and though he knew that his girl had to understand that on some level, the words themselves were bound to wound.

“Joyce...”

“Whups. I think I see the bottom of the glass.”

He exhaled as Buffy stormed off. “Bloody brilliant,” he muttered, turning to follow her.

As expected, he found her at the bottom of the basement stairs, pacing furiously. He couldn’t help but feel a stab of something. It wasn’t fair. It truly wasn’t. For all the trouble she’d gone to in order to pull off her ideal Thanksgiving, things had turned out worse than either of them or all the kitchen mishaps in the world could have predicted.

“Slayer—”

“Don’t say anything,” she said. “Just don’t say anything.”

Spike licked his lips. "If you didn't want me to say anythin', love, you shouldn't've asked me to come with you."

"I didn't ask."

"Yes, you did, and don't gimme that." He closed the space between them and released a long sigh. "It's not goin' so bad."

"So bad?" she echoed. "*So bad?* My father shows up, unannounced and definitely uninvited, dons the cap of the concerned parent, all but bible thumps me about being your girlfriend...which, by the way, what?"

Spike shrugged and reached for his cigarettes. "It was Rupert's idea," he said. "I just went along with it."

"I can't believe you."

"You really that bothered by bein' my girl?"

"No, but that's beside the point. My mom is drunk, my Watcher is getting drunk, my dad is suddenly *super* Republican, and they're up there talking about their icky sex lives, then passing judgment on the nonexistent sex between us!" She turned and kicked the dryer. "I am...I am going to kill Xander."

"Why? Not that I need a reason, but how does Harris—"

"This is all his fault. He said it'd be a new tradition. A new 'screw-up-Buffy's-holiday-tradition.'" She kicked the dryer again. Another one of those blows and he knew what Joyce would be shopping for on Black Friday. "He and his stupid jinxing of everything messed up my Thanksgiving!"

"I thought the tradition was supposed to be about the Indians attackin' to get their land back."

"It's not. Not after this."

Spike puffed on his cigarette and turned to search for the liquor. "Way I figure it," he said, "you maintain an air of sanity, love, an' your mum'll be so bloody in your debt that I bet she lets you have her plastic for the weekend."

That made her think. "Shopping...at the mall..."

"Yeah." He tossed his fag to the ground and stomped it out. "Buy yourself a bunch of pretties for havin' to put up with everythin' tonight."

"You're gonna pick that up, right?"

"If you like. I just want your mouth."

"Oh." She slid her hands up his arms. "I think I can handle that."

There was no way she didn't feel the electricity that sizzled between them the second their lips met. No way was the warmth that blazed his insides simply due to her warmth. There was completion in her kiss that he had never known before. Her tongue danced with his as he swallowed her small, lusty whimpers, and her arms went flying around his neck. Then she was pressed completely against him, her breasts flattened against his chest and her hot pussy riding his denim-clad cock.

She'd teased him with small kisses all day. Tasting her now, he was completely lost.

"Buffy," he whimpered, breaking away from her lips to lick at her throat. "Want you so much."

"Unh..."

He nibbled at her skin. "Wanna play hooky from the party?" He inhaled and drew his head back, sliding his hands down her sides and rubbing circles into her hips. "Give your pap somethin' to talk about?"

"I shouldn't." She cupped his cheeks and kissed him again, thrusting her hips against his. "We can't."

"Oh, I think we can." Spike shoved her against the dryer, hiking her legs around his waist before ravaging her mouth again. He couldn't get enough of her. "Let me..."

She shoved him back suddenly, and he would have objected had he not noted the heat flashing behind her eyes.

"Keep quiet," she murmured and pressed a kiss to the corner of his mouth.

"Buffy—"

She dropped her lips to his throat, tugging at the zipper of his jeans. The next thing he knew, his cock was in her hot little hand, and he'd released a loud moan.

"Oh Jesus, what are you..."

"Push your jeans down."

He wasn't daft enough to hesitate. Spike nodded and kissed her, shoving the material down his legs. He half-expected to wake up and find himself either at the beginning of the day or a universe away from



a Buffy that would let him touch her. But she wasn't going away, and neither was he. Her small hand was stroking him into oblivion and she was sucking at his throat, small moans of approval escaping her lips as though she could feel what she was doing to him. God, he wanted to lick her from head to toe.

"Oh god," he gasped. "Buffy, please..."

"What do you want, Spike?"

"You. Always you." He whimpered when she sank to her knees before him, thrusting his hips forward the minute that delectable mouth of hers surrounded his cock. "Oh, fucking hell."

She lapped at him, swirling her tongue around his sensitive head as she flexed her hand around his shaft. Then that hand was sliding down to cup his balls, rolling them in tempo to the warm sucks of her mouth.

"You're so gorgeous," he gasped, thrusting harder. "So gorgeous. Feels so good. Such a hot, luscious mouth. God, Buffy..."

"Mmmm." She drew her head back and released him, fisting his dick again and pumping hard. "You like that?"

He nodded with a whimper. "Buffy..."

She smiled up at him, and he about lost it. "I guess that 'I'm not ready' thing took a drastic leap forward," she murmured before lowering her head again and planting a series wet kisses along the underside of his length.

"Pity," he moaned. "I was ready to wait."

She released him completely and sat back on her legs, flashing him a coy glance. "Well, if this is ruining your plans for—"

"Buffy!"

"Shhh. I don't want to add any fuel to the fire." She nodded to the upstairs before taking him back into her mouth, squeezing his balls again as her lips slid all the way down his shaft until his head was brushing against the back of her throat. She swallowed around him once, then drew back again.

"Fuck me." Spike tossed his head back, threading his fingers through her golden hair. "You're so hot. Such a sweet little mouth. Suck me so nice."

"Bet you say that to all the girls," she whispered, then brushed a kiss against his cockhead.

"Buffy—"

She winked and pressed his cock against his stomach as her mouth dropped to his sac.

"Christ, pet." His grip around her hair tightened and he attempted to rein her in closer. She giggled, and the vibrations felt so damnably good that he couldn't help from whimpering. "You're incredible," he gasped. "So bloody incredible."

Buffy grinned and released him again with a wet plop. "I never thought..." She trailed off awkwardly and flushed as though she had caught herself saying something scandalous, a notion that charmed him, considering that he was pretty much her slave for eternity. "I..."

Spike swallowed and forced himself to focus. "Sweet?"

"Nothing," she replied. She licked at the side of his cock before brushing a tender kiss against his spongy head. "Nothing."

Then she swallowed him again, and all was lost. Spike screwed his eyes shut and tried to remind himself that he didn't need to breathe. Her tongue swirled around him, rubbing the dip at the tip as she squeezed him into the next life. She was magnificent. Absolutely magnificent. And when he brushed against the back of her throat again and felt those magical muscles of hers contracting around him, he couldn't help himself. He fisted her hair and came with a roar, his fangs slicing through his gums as he emptied himself into her hot mouth. And fuck if he didn't feel her swallowing every drop.

Hours later, it seemed, Spike came down, panting harshly. He was on his knees, his jeans bunched around his ankles and his bits dangling freely. He smelled her—how hot she was, how wet. How getting him off had affected her, and he wanted to bathe in it.

"Buffy...bloody hell..."

Buffy, still on her knees, ducked her head away and blushed.

"Slayer—"

"I...umm..." She cleared her throat and shook her head, tugging a hand through her hair. "I really didn't, um, come down here to do that."

A pang of fear struck his chest. No, no, no. He wasn't going to let her off that easily. Not now that he was so close to having her.

"Slayer..." Spike dropped a kiss across her mouth, relieved when she didn't pull away. "God, I don't even know where to begin...that was the most amazin' experience of my entire life, and I—"

"Really?"

"You're serious? Buffy—"

"I just don't want you to get the wrong idea."

The wrong idea? She sucks his cock and then thinks that maybe she gave him the wrong idea?

"Wrong... Bleeding hell, woman, I'm in love with you. If you haven't figured that out yet, then I don't know what the hell we're playin' at here. You can't just do somethin' like that and expect me to—?"

Buffy was slack-faced. She just stared at him.

"Oh, for Chrissake, now what'd I do?"

"You're...in love with me?"

Spike narrowed his eyes. "Tell me you didn't know that."

"Well, I thought...maybe...I hadn't really, okay, yes, I had my suspicions but...you're in love with me?"

He released a deep breath. "Yes. God, yes. I have been forever. I just never thought you'd ever..." He glanced down. "This is some holiday thing, is that what you're tellin' me? Scratchin' an itch or what all before—"

"No! No, no, no. It's not...no, I mean..." Buffy looked everywhere but at him. "I didn't want... God, I thought you'd think I was just meaninglessly throwing myself at you or something. Which, yeah, kinda doing that...when I said *wrong idea*, that's what I meant. It isn't me getting anything out of my system. And that kinda wigs me out, but I needed you to know that if this was just...whatever to you, then I had to stop before I got more emotionally invested. I can't be...but, you love me?"

Spike cupped her face tenderly, caressing her lips with his. "More than anything," he murmured.

"Ohhh..."

His erection was back with a vengeance, and her hot scent was

tempting him in ways that were most unbecoming, especially considering that he didn't want to take her on her basement floor. But he needed to show her how much she meant to him. Needed to let her know that this wasn't something he was going to walk away from. He wasn't the kind of bloke who loved only halfway. No, Buffy had consumed him whole. He wanted to devour her. Now. Right now. Forever.

She smiled and kissed his lips. "We better get back upstairs."

Spike pouted, dipping a disobedient hand between them to cup her pussy. "I'm not hungry for anythin' that's on that table," he growled.

Buffy blushed prettily. "Hey—"

"Let me make you come, baby. I'll make it so good for you."

She placed her hands on his chest and pushed him back. "We need to get upstairs," she said. "They're gonna come looking for us if we don't, and I don't really want my mom and Watcher to find out about us like that."

"Party-pooper."

"Well, sorry, but one of us has to keep a clear head." She stood with long sigh, then shuddered when he wrapped his arms around her waist and buried his face between her legs. "Ohhh, God."

"Buffy," he murmured against her. "Christ—"

"Sp-pike, you need to stand up, now."

"I don't think that's what you really want."

"It's not," she agreed, "but we really need to get back."

Spike released a long breath in defeat and clamored to his feet, tugging up his jeans. "Y'think they've missed us, love?" he asked. "I'm bloody well confident that your pap has either socked Rupert or joined in their little liquor party."

"We came down here for the liquor, remember?"

He grinned goofily. "Oh yeah."

Buffy met his eyes and offered a shy smile. "You really love me?"

"More than you'll ever know." He burned her with a look. "But I'll try to show you just how much after the circus has left town."

She beamed and kissed him. "Okay. I think I can live with that."

"You think?"

"Well...I won't know until tonight, will I?"

“Oh, you’re gonna get it, missy.”

“Promises, promises.”

She had no idea. None whatsoever. Now that he’d had his taste, he would never let her go.

Never.



THEY REENTERED THE ROOM JUST TO SEE GILES LAUNCH A SPOONFUL of mashed potatoes at Hank Summers before bursting into a fit of childish giggles.

Buffy just stopped and stared. “What. The. Hell?”

“He called me a sodding mother-shagging bastard,” Giles explained through his cackles. “Where the bleeding hell have you two been?”

There were now three empty liquor bottles on the table. Her father, aside being covered in projectile mashed potatoes, had a look on his face that she knew all too well. That of the stumbling drunk.

She set the bottle of Scotch on the table with a long sigh. “To get you lusher more booze,” she said. “Where the hell did you get this other stuff?”

“I was just looking for that,” Joyce said, snatching the new bottle with glee.

“Buffy, did you know your mother’s a whore?” Hank asked brightly. “She—she fucked the brains outta English here...on a cop car.”

Buffy felt Spike stiffen beside her. “You call her that again and you’ll be eatin’ your tongue for dinner.”

“Oooohhh...big scary vampire.” He wagged all ten fingers for effect. “Is that what you are? He told me about you. What kinda vampire dyes his hair that color? Are you Kiefer Sufferlan?”

“Dad, shut up.”

He just sneered. “Truth hurts, don’t it?”

“If you say one more thing like that, so help me god...” She turned to Giles. “You told him about the police car?”

“He called my parenting into question,” her Watcher explained drunkenly. God, he had to be the only person in the world that could form a coherent sentence with perfect grammar and manage to make it

sound as ridiculous as he did with that slur of his. "Told him I was a bloody good father. You told me you wanted me to give you away. Thass what I'm gonna do."

"What does boinking my mother have to do with—okay, you know what? I don't care." She threw up her hands. "You guys wanna ruin my day? Fine, go ahead. Have a good time acting like idiots."

"We're not the ones that went downstairs to shag," Giles countered, then burst into giggles again. It took him a minute to realize what he'd said. "Isshat what you did?"

"Bugger off, Rupert," Spike growled.

Buffy's face flamed. "You all can go to hell."

"Cause you know what happened the last time, right? Bloody hell, Hank, this is a good suit!"

She didn't stay to see the room dissolve in chaos after her father threw the gravy. Instead she released a deep breath, turned, and walked calmly up the stairs. She didn't even wait for Spike to follow her.

That he would was just a given. It was the sort of man he was.

And she loved him for it.



BUFFY RELEASED a deep sigh as Spike closed the bedroom door behind him. The look on his face was all sympathy, which would have freaked her out at one point. Not so much anymore. The racket sounding from downstairs was likely loud enough to have one of the neighbors call the cops, and the floor wasn't cooperating with her silent pleas to swallow her whole. At this point, Spike was her only link to sanity.

"I can't believe this is happening."

He smiled and leaned against the door. "Sorry the day didn't go like you planned, sweetheart."

She glanced down. "Of all the days, huh? My dad shows up, my mom gets plastered...even Giles, who is supposed to be the grown-up. Though he did drink a lot last year."

He grinned. "I'm surprised it took him that long to get sloshed on the regular," he said. "What with puttin' up with you, and all."

Buffy smirked. "Thanks."

"Just sayin', I think you need to leave the vampire slayers to the vampires." His eyes flickered. "One in particular."

Buffy closed her eyes and rubbed her temples. "I think we should just go away next Thanksgiving."

Spike perked a brow of interest. "You an' me?"

She nodded. "Somewhere far, far away where the turkey is pre-prepared and all we have to do is show up."

"I'm game if you are."

"You think we can just escape bad karma like that?"

"Honestly, love, I think people create their own karma. You were so bloody determined to have everythin' go right today that you did everythin'...well..."

"Wrong?"

"I didn't say that."

"You were thinking it."

"Well, I won't pretend to understand where your ideas for thawin' a turkey came from." He grinned. "You wanna go away now?"

"Little late, isn't it?"

"Never say never around me, Slayer."

"Why am I putting up with this again?" she asked. "Hell, why are you? You spent forever on that dinner, and they're throwing it around."

Spike shrugged. "Doesn't matter to me."

"Oh, come on. It has to matter."

He opened his mouth to object, then glanced down with a sheepish shrug. "Well," he said, "maybe a little. I'm more brassed at the fact that they ruined somethin' that you practically worried yourself sick over. They didn't seem to appreciate that at all."

"It's my dad's fault."

"Yeah. An' your mum's." When she shot him a warning glance, he shrugged and stepped forward. "She knew how important this dinner was to you."

"Not really."

"Buffy—"

"I didn't get all wiggy around her like I did with you," she said. "I didn't let her know how freaked out I was about everything. I didn't want her to step in and take care of everything. This was supposed to be me proving that I could do something on my own."

Spike arched an eyebrow. "Which is why you made me do everything?"

Buffy glanced down. "Shut up. I said I wanted to do it on my own... that didn't mean I could actually do it."



A smile flickered across his face. "Has it really been so terrible?"

Heat seared her skin and she cleared her throat. "No," she said. "Well, I...I ummm, would have liked my guests to have eaten, rather than wear the food. A-and my dad showing up was kind of a buzz kill. But there was that...that other thing."

God, he was so close. She wanted to reach for him but found she was super nervous and somewhat embarrassed about her wanton behavior downstairs. Honestly, she didn't know what had come over her. She knew she wanted Spike; hell, she could even concede to liking him a bit. Or, yes, okay—she acknowledged that the word *like* was a little loose. There was another l-word of the four-lettered variety that she was partial to. Still, big step. Very big step. Loving Spike meant something else for her entirely. It meant giving up the promises of Angel coming back into her life, telling her he was a moron for having left her, and whisking her off into the sunset.

And yes with the lame. The prospect didn't even appeal to her anymore. She had no idea when she had stopped pining for her former great love, but it had happened. Somewhere along the way, she had grown up.

Every girl went through this. There was the man that taught her to love, and the man she would love for the rest of her life. Angel had taught her to love, but he'd taught her more how to hurt. What she needed in a relationship, in a partner, for all the things he hadn't given her. And she couldn't see Spike ever hurting her the way Angel had—a huge acknowledgment, considering one of them was sans soul. And that much was hard to remember at times.

Thing was, should Angel burst through her door right now, open his arms and declare himself curse-free, Buffy didn't think she'd be inclined to rush past the vampire standing with her now. She had lost the girl and gained the woman in a course of a few years. Angel was never meant to be her forever. He had done what was needed: he had wizened her to the ways of the world when it came to love. He had taught her something valuable, and while she didn't regret their relationship—other than that whole evil thing—she certainly didn't pine for days of old.

She had loved Angel as a child, and now that she was older and

wiser, she could see how wrong he was for her. He was all responsibility, order, and discipline. He was the perpetual adult.

Buffy was reckless, carefree, hopelessly romantic, and yes, while she did occasionally carry the weight of the world on her shoulders, she didn't let herself get bogged down in detail work. Spike was the same. They were equals in every way. And they both had a tendency to crash headfirst into love and be no better for it afterward.

Perhaps that was because they had tried with the wrong people.

"What are you thinkin', love?"

She licked her lips and met his eyes, releasing a deep breath.

*He loves you. He said so. You heard him.*

"I'm thinking..." She slid her hands up his arms and smiled. "Spike..."

"Mmm?"

"I think I kinda love you."

Spike inhaled sharply, his eyes swallowing her. "What...what did you say?"

"I don't know when it happened, I just—"

"Say it again."

There was a desperate note in his voice that she had never heard before, and it occurred to her how serious this was for him. Their time together had revealed some unpleasant truths about his past, and while he'd never come out and said it, she knew that love was something he'd never actually had for keeps.

Buffy cupped his cheek and brushed her lips over his. "I love you, Spike," she whispered, wrapping her arms around his neck and hugging him.

He released a ragged breath against her throat. "Oh god," he murmured.

She felt her heart hammering against his chest, felt his erection pressing into her stomach. "Spike..."

"I love you," he gasped. "God, I love you so much. I just... I never thought..."

"Me, either."

His mouth found her throat, whispering soft kisses against her skin as he walked her backward toward the bed. "Need you."

“Mhmm...”

“Buffy, please...” His teeth gently scraped at her flesh, and she shivered in response. “I can’t...”

Buffy released a shuddering breath as her legs met the edge of the mattress, and she sat on instinct. Spike gazed down at her, his eyes raking her hungrily. “Need to touch you. All bloody over. That all right, sweet?”

*Actions are better than words, she thought. Which is good, because you seem to be running low on words.*

She fisted the hem cotton of her turtleneck.

“Buffy—”

There was a crash somewhere below them and an influx of swearing. Spike’s gaze remained glued to hers.

A grin twitched at her mouth. “They’re not gonna miss us anytime soon, are they?”

“Don’t reckon so, love.”

“And it’s pretty hot up here...” The room was actually fairly comfortable, but she didn’t think he’d object if she took her top off. Rather, his gaze followed the rising hemline of her shirt until her clad breasts were revealed, and she could’ve sworn she heard a whimper.

“Do vampires get hot?” she asked innocently.

Spike’s eyes were glued to her boobs. “Spike?”

He licked his lips. “Bloody gorgeous, you are.” He raised his gaze. “I’m sorry, love, must’ve zoned. Did you say somethin’?”

She shrugged, all innocence. “Guess it’s not important.”

“Does it involve ditchin’ the bra? ’Cause I’d say that’s important.”

“Well, I was trying to segue into you losing clothing...”

“All you have to do is ask.”

“I wasn’t asking. I was segueing. I was trying to be all with the seduction and you—”

“Jus’ flash those titties and I’m yours.”

She rolled her eyes. “Men.”

“Yep,” he agreed.

“Do vampires get hot?”

“Was that the segue?”

"Can't put anything past you, huh?" She glanced down. "Still no with the seduction?"

Spike grinned and peeled off his tee. "I dunno, love," he replied as though taking on a character. "Cold-blooded creatures tend to adapt to their surroundings. Guess it depends on how hot you are. And judgin' by the commotion in my trousers..."

Buffy dropped her gaze to his crotch. "Mmmm...any chance you can lose those, too?"

"I'll show you mine if you show me yours," he purred, nodding to her bra.

She smirked and reached behind her back. "And here I thought you'd wanna be the one to do this."

"I'd probably rip the bloody thing, I want you so much."

"I wouldn't mind." She paused awkwardly. "It's not... You know, I haven't been with anyone in over a year and I wasn't ready. Like I haven't been to Victoria's Secret in ages and—"

"Buffy—"

"I don't have sexy underwear. I-I never wore it well. It's all itchy and it gets stuck in places where no underwear should get stuck."

He smothered a grin. "You're gorgeous," he said, stripping his jeans down his legs as he kicked off his shoes. "And adorable. Like I give a fuck about sexy underthings. I'd rather you wear nothin' at all."

Her eyes widened as she watched his cock bob against his stomach. *Mmm. Yummy.* A fresh rush of lust surged through her body. "Huh's...what?"

"See anythin' you like?"

Buffy pointed. Spike burst out laughing.

"God, I love you."

She met his eyes, grinning. "I love you, too."

"And you still haven't shown me your goods."

"You sure you don't wanna rip it? If we're going to the mall tomorrow after Mom gives me her plastic, we might be able to stop by and get some sexy underwear."

"Aww, Slayer, I'm touched you'd suffer through physical discomfort to feed my sexual appetite."

She made a face. "Only on special occasions."

"With us, it's gonna be special all the time."

"Sap."

"You callin' me a liar?"

"No, I'm calling you a sap, deaf boy."

"I thought we'd already diminished the *boy* theory, love." He ran his hand over his cock. It really was perfect, she had to admit. The right length and width, curved slightly at the tip, which was slick with precum and peeking through the foreskin. His testicles hung heavy, the perfect size for her hands. "Or do you need to be reminded?"

*Stop drooling.* "Yes, remind me, please." Buffy sat back on the bed and thrust her breasts forward, still clad in her unsexy underwear. "Remind me until I can't walk."

"My pleasure." Spike knelt before her immediately, flickering the straps of her bra. "Slayer..."

"Off with it!"

"What would you wear to the mall?"

"I do have more than one bra, you know."

The flimsy garment concealing her from him snapped cleanly in two with a good tug. He palmed her breasts before lowering his mouth to cover her flesh with nipping kisses. "Guess I'll just have to destroy them all," he murmured.

Buffy grinned and ran her fingers through his hair. "I have absolutely no intention of letting you destroy all my underwear."

Spike wrapped his lips wrapped around one of her nipples and grinned when she threw her head back with a loud gasp. "I think," he mused, "under the circumstances...you might be willin' to never wear knickers again."

"Don't count on it."

He paused from where his unoccupied hand was prying at her slacks and glanced up at her. "Y'think so?"

There was something dangerous behind those devious eyes of his. A thrill raced down her spine and she squeaked. "Oh no. No, whatever you're thinking, stop."

"Nope. Don't think I'll be doin' that."

"Spike—"

"You smell delicious," he informed her, both hands now tugging on her slacks. "Good enough to eat."

He wagged his brows at that, and her body turned into a molten puddle of slayer-putty. The dominant part of her, though—the terrified amateur—screamed in protest and demanded that she put a stop to this before she embarrassed herself. "Spike, you don't..."

Damn, he really tore those panties clean off her body. There one second, gone the next. He could be a traveling magician with a trick like that. Well, okay, she wasn't a big fan of the print on those, anyway. And as long as she was buying new bras...

Buffy gasped aloud and bucked against his face when he licked up her slit. "Oh my god!"

"Mmm," he rumbled into her, "no, I really think I do."

"Oh my god...oh my god!"

That earned a chuckle. *Obb, vibratay*. "Pushover," he teased before nibbling at her outer folds. He slid his index and middle fingers inside her pussy and moaned as she squeezed around him. "Fuck, baby..."

"Oh...what are you..."

"So bloody tight."

"Unh..." She squeezed him again, her eyes falling shut as he wrapped his lips around her clit and sucked her into that magical mouth of his. "You..."

He chuckled again, tracing her wet flesh with his tongue. "See I've made you lose mastery of the English language...what little you had, anyway."

It occurred to her distantly that now was the appropriate time to be offended. "You... Oh my god! You asshole!"

"Hey, I'm just glad that I still got it. Been outta practice, y'know."

Jealously unlike anything she had ever before experienced overwhelmed her, sending sharp stabs of pain to her belly. Imaginary pain, yes, but real enough to hurt. Buffy fell completely against the mattress, her legs somehow ending up draped over his shoulders. "I don't wanna know about that," she spat, only the words were timed evenly with several long moans as he drew her clit into his mouth again. "I...Spike!"

"Never like this before, Buffy. Not with anyone." He drew circles

around her clit, thrusting his fingers steadily within her. “You taste so good.”

The irrational swell of anger was diminishing. “Really?”

“Mhmm...” He lapped another long path up her slit, rolling his eyes back. “So good.”

“Ohh.”

“You’re mine,” he growled before returning his tongue to her clit, flicking over her rapidly. “Mine now. You understand?”

“Yes—yes!”

“Say it.” He dragged his fingers out of her then and plunged his tongue inside her before she could hiss in complaint. And damn, he swallowed her whole and her body went up in flames. It didn’t last—it seemed he was intent on torturing her until she was nothing but Buffy the Vampire Sex Slave. He thrust his tongue in and out of her pussy until she was a writhing bundle of need, then kissed his way back to her clit. “Say you’re mine, baby.”

“Yours.”

Then, *yes*, his fingers were inside within her once more, driving harder this time. “Would you say that with my fangs inside you?” he asked.

“Yes! Oh, yes!”

“Would you let me bite you, love?”

“Oh...oh my god, Spike, oh my god.”

He seemed to take this as hesitation and not the fact that she was completely at his mercy, and responded by blowing a stream of cool air against her sensitive skin and spreading her pussy lips wide. Buffy cried out and arched off the bed, thrusting herself against his face.

“I’d make it so good for you,” he promised, then flattening his tongue against her exposed flesh and going to town. It was electric but not explosive, enough to tease her out of her head but not enough to get her where she wanted to go. After what felt like forever, he returned his attention to her clit, running over and around it, drawing tight circles that had her pushed as close to the edge as she’d ever gotten without falling off.

“Spike!”

He released her and rubbed his face against her pussy. “I want you

so bloody badly.” he murmured, running his hand over her and pressing his thumb against her clit as he dove his tongue inside her again.

There were no words for the sensations he unleashed. Nothing whatsoever. He was licking her from the inside out, whispering sweet nothings against her skin, telling her how good she tasted, how much he loved her, how this was it for him—how there would never be anything else. Every time his fingers swept over her or he pushed inside her. There was nothing but this feeling. She had never known it could be like this. Never.

He pinched her clit. “Would you?”

She arched into him, a small sob of pleasure bursting through her lips. “Would I...what?”

“Let me bite you. Let me taste that part of you.”

“Ohhh, yes.”

“Really?” Spike arched a brow. “You would?”

“Yes!”

“Would you let me...would you let me claim you?”

That question didn’t harbor his usual confident swagger, but it succeeded in catching her off guard. And perhaps that was why he abandoned it quickly, plundering her pussy with new intent, grunting his approval into her skin. He plunged his fingers back inside her tight, wet hole, and thrust inside her until the symphony building within her erupted. And when he closed his mouth over her clit a last time, that was it. She curved her back off the bed as the world disappeared around her. It was a sensory explosion, unlike anything she had ever experienced, wave after wave of pure *awesome*. And when she fell back to earth and found his arms curled around her waist, she had an answer for him.

Because what girl in her right mind would say no to more of this?

“My god...”

Spike stirred at that, resting his chin against her belly and meeting her eyes. “Did you like that?”

“I’m saying it again—I am your bitch for life.”

He chuckled, though the laugh didn’t quite reach his eyes. “That’s all a bloke can ask, baby,” he said.

“Not quite. You asked me something else.”



Spike drew back at that and shook his head. "No, I was caught up and didn't mean for that to come out. It just did. Watchin' you...tastin' you come...goes to a bloke's head, yeah?"

Buffy paused, her heart all but stopping. "So...you didn't mean it?"

"What?" He blinked dumbly. "Bloody hell, yes, I meant it! I just...you..."

"Ohhh...oh, good. Thank god. Yes."

"Yes?"

"Yes. Claim me."

He was looking at her as though she'd sprouted a second head. "You do know what a claim is, don't you?"

"Well, yes."

"It involves me biting you."

She nodded.

"And taking blood."

"Uh huh."

"And makin' you mine."

"Yes."

"Forever."

"Thanks. I thought we covered that by answering *yes* to the first question, but I appreciate the review."

He sighed. "Buffy, this is serious."

"I know. I'm serious girl."

"You don't know what you're sayin'."

"Funny, I don't seem to be speaking a different language."

"It's binding. It's marriage without divorce. It's—"

"Spike, please. Really, I am the Slayer. Give me a little credit." She cupped his face and smiled. "I know what a claim is. I do. I know what I agreed to when I said yes."

"You can't."

"Why are you trying to talk me out of this?"

"Because I don't want you to do this and then realize you made a big bloody mistake and hate me for the rest of eternity. I couldn't bear it." He shook his head. "We love each other. For somethin' this big, we can—"

"Are you even listening to yourself? There are a thousand reasons

to not do this, I'll admit, but they're all based on what-ifs. I love you. That's not going to change."

"How can you know?" he asked hoarsely, and for the first time, she saw how hard he was shaking. "You haven't loved me that long."

"Yes, I have. I just said the words today. The other part's been coming for a long time." She kissed him again, longer this time. "I don't leave the ones I love, Spike."

"You—"

"Even when I should. I should've left Angel long before he left me. I didn't."

"You can't know that—"

"But I do." She placed a hand over his chest. "I love you in ways that I never... This feels right. *We* feel right. And either way, Spike, my life doesn't allow for what-ifs. I love you. You make me happy. That won't change. It will never change."

"We've only been together for a half-hour, if that."

"We've been together for a long time...just without confessionals and earth-shattering orgasms."

He smirked a bit at that. "You're soundin' like Anyanka."

Buffy grinned. "Can't you believe that I love you enough to do this? If you notice, I haven't been wiggling out over the possibility that you could lose interest after a century or two and—"

"Never happen."

"I know. I know. With you, I know. I know the way you love...I know. I'm not as blind as some people think." She kissed him. "And hey, I'm Miss Insecure, so if I can admit that much, the least you can do is give me the benefit of a doubt."

There was a long silence as her words washed over him. As his protests and counters dulled to the higher reality of what she was saying. The change took him slowly. Disbelief faded to reason, reason to hope, and hope finally to amazement. "You really want this?" he asked, his voice slow and his tone cautious. "Really?"

"Hello! What have I only been trying to beat into that thick skull of yours for the past—"

"You really wanna be my mate?"

She was engulfed in warmth. There was no way any woman could

be at the receiving end of the love glowing from his eyes and not melt on cue. "Yes," she replied softly. "Yes. That's what I want."

He nearly choked. "You're an amazing woman, Buffy."

"Hey, I just know what I want."

"I'll never forgive myself if I bollocks this up."

"You won't."

Spike perked an eyebrow. "This is me, we're talkin' about here."

"Yes...and me. We screw up colossally all the time." She blushed.

"The holiday is a testament to that in itself."

He smirked.

"But we usually screw up together. And you're there to pace me when I get a little crazy. I'm here to help you when... Well, you need a place to hide when the debt collectors come to repossess your crypt."

Spike narrowed his eyes. "Oh, for Chrissake, one time, that happened. One time. Now I'm gonna be hearin' about it for the rest of eternity?"

She giggled. "Think you can handle it?"

A warm smile spread across his lips, and he leaned inward to taste hers. "Lookin' forward to it."

"Mmm...good."

She took him by surprise then, and completely threw him off his game. She latched onto his neck with her teeth and bit him.

"Fuck!" Spike roared and shoved her onto the bed, hands at her shoulders. "Fuck, Slayer."

She dug in deeper, not stopping until her mouth flooded with the coppery taste of his blood.

"Mine," she murmured, and something jolted through her body. So strange how that one little word could change so much. She would never understand it—she never had. Words were words, after all, and the only way they got their power was through the power she gave them. Yet that word did something to her. She felt her essence tugged around his, matching and trying to merge.

"Fuck me, I am so yours," Spike murmured, and the world around her dissolved in warmth.

"Oh my god," she gasped, throwing her head back as he coaxed her to scoot up the bed. Then he was on top of her, cradled between her

thighs, rubbing his cock along her slit as he played with her breasts. She felt as though a gate had opened somewhere and consumed her in pure light. There was nothing in the world like this. Nothing.

Ragged gasps wracked through him, his face buried in the crook of her throat. "Yours," he murmured again.

Then his fangs sliced into her skin as he sank his cock inside her pussy, and Buffy swore she saw stars.

"Oh god!"

"Mine," he growled lightly into her skin, licking the small wound closed as he began to move. "Mine! Say it."

"Yes! Yours! Oh, god!"

Spike met her eyes with awe, driving harder into her. "Oh, Buffy..."

"Unh..."

He pressed his brow to hers. "Are you okay?"

"Good!" she agreed, arching herself into him as he sucked one of her nipples between his lips. And then there was nothing, she decided. Nothing but Spike, moving inside her. Moving over her. The feel his abdomen brush against hers with every thrust. The slick glide of his length as he pumped into her, his skin on her skin; his body in hers. Small jolts of electricity claimed her nerves and she clutched at him, desperate for something she couldn't name.

"Not goin' anywhere," he murmured, then licked at her throat and tugged at her nipples. "Never. You're stuck with me, now."

"Ohhh..." His cock was striking her at an angle she hadn't thought possible, his balls slapping against her ass as his thrusts gained momentum. "Ohhh! Did...I...say that out loud?"

He chuckled, and damn if that didn't feel better with him moving inside her than it had when he licked between her legs. The movement sent rumbles through his body, claiming her own in small vibrations from the inside out.

"Oh my god!" she gasped.

"Claims have more perks than one, Slayer."

"I'm beginning to see that."

He chuckled again, then again when she moaned. "We've been claimed all of—"

"Shut up and kiss me."

“Bossy minx.”

“Arrogant...guy.”

Spike cooed in pleasure, one hand abandoning her breast to dip between their thrusting bodies, sliding over her sex. “Fuck, I love you,” he murmured before capturing her abandoned nipple and sucking her between his teeth.

“Gah!”

“You’re so tight, baby. So warm. So bloody perfect.”

“Spike...”

“You feel like sunshine.” He bit into her breast lightly, though she knew that her gasp wasn’t in pain. Rather, her pussy muscles tightened around him as he began thrusting harder, faster. “So good. So bloody good.”

His fingers played her like a harp, moving over her clit. She felt her stomach tighten, pinpricks of ecstasy blazing across her skin. Felt the symphony he had inspired through her blood just minutes ago rising again for a repeat and lost herself. His flesh molded her, sliding against hers as his mouth worshipped her skin. He found her mouth again as sensation tightened and threatened to erupt. She wanted to prolong it, wanted to sustain the feeling of Spike inside her, but god, he was massaging her clit and plunging his cock into her with increasing desperation. A slow crescendo took her by storm.

“I love you. I love you.”

“Yes!” she gasped, clutching at him desperately.

“Buffy—”

“Bite me.”

And he did, and she tumbled into euphoria. His fingers on her clit, his body crashing into hers, his fangs buried in her throat, and she was lost. Consumed in a fire they had created together. She tightened around him, digging her nails into his shoulders as he spilled himself inside her, thrusting desperately to grasp everything there was to take. The world could have ended then and she wouldn’t have cared. It would have been a hell of a way to go.

Hours later, she felt him slide his fangs out of her throat. Felt his warm kisses brush across her skin. Felt him tremble as he asked, “Are you all right?”

What a silly question.

"I'm perfect."

Spike met her eyes with a wary grin. "I'll say."

"I just...I've never..."

"You're amazin', is what you are." He nuzzled her throat, licking at her skin. "So amazing. I've never felt anythin' like that."

"Mmmm..."

"And you're mine, now."

The words made her positively hum. "Yes."

"God...I love you."

"I love you, too."

Spike grinned, the hand between them stirring as he slid his fingers over her clit again. "And I'm beginnin' to understand why Americans love this holiday."

"I know why I do."

"Next year, we gotta teach you some better songs."

"Next year, we're going away."

His grin turned roguish. "I can't wait."

"Me either," she agreed. Then paused, smiled slyly, and flexed her pussy around him, earning a long whimper. "Though if you wanna take me now, I'd be cool with that."

"Take you, huh?"

"Yes, please."

He smirked and shifted, his cock hardening. "Take you now, you say?"

Buffy moaned and nodded, rolling her hips. "No time like the present."

Spike lowered his mouth to her breast as he began moving within her again. "Truer words were never uttered."



"BUFFY'S GONNA...S'NOT GONNA BE HAPPY." JOYCE LIFTED HER HEAD. The dining room was an utter disaster; food was splattered on the wall, shards of broken dishes had scattered across the floor. "S'all..."

"You know, this stuffing's pretty good," Hank said from where he

was reclined against the wall, eating directly from the casserole dish. "It's very...buttery."

"Should try the steak," Giles mumbled. "How's come no one ever told me vampires can cook? I-i-it's not in my books, that's for bloody sure."

Something crashed on the floor above them.

"No, no, no, not again," Hank complained, covering his ears.

"Vampire stamina," Giles said, giggling. "She's in for quite a ride."

"That's my daughter you're talking about," the other man said indignantly.

Giles nodded. "Yeah, and she's getting her brains shagged out by a bloody bloodsucker. How about that for irony?" He laughed again, then promptly passed out on the table, landing face-first in what was left of the green-beans.

The walls were beginning to creak.

"Buffy screams like a banshee," Joyce muttered, pressing the bottle of Scotch to her forehead.

"She gets that from you," Hank replied. He was quiet for a minute, then said, almost reflectively, "At least she's happy."

The house all but trembled as the vampire above them roared in release. His scream was second only to their daughter's.

"Sounds like he is, too," Joyce agreed.

"We're drunk enough that we're not gonna remember any of this tomorrow, aren't we?" Hank asked, reaching for one of the discarded bottles next to his feet. "Don't wanna be scarred for life."

They fell to silence for a few seconds. Then the crashing sounds took the repeat and started from the beginning.

Joyce moaned. "Bit late for that," she said.

They met each other's eyes.

"Joycie?"

"Mmmm?"

"Happy Thanksgiving."

"You, too." A pause. "Assface."

"I deserve that."

"Yes, you do."

Hank smiled and nodded as though satisfied. He then turned his eyes to the ceiling and yelled, "Happy Thanksgiving, Buffy!"

A long, muffled moan answered him, but that was satisfactory. He turned to Joyce and raised his bottle. She smiled sleepily, found the drink nearest to her, and did the same.

"Cheers," they said together.

And, very predictably, drank.







“I’M LEAVIN’ you for just a minute. You think you can handle yourself?”

Buffy rolled her eyes, snatching the wooden ladle from her vampire’s hand. “You’re an ass.”

“Just sayin’, I don’t want you panicking and settin’ the kitchen on fire. ‘Cause you know who’d have to put that out.”

“Stop talking to me.”

“It might be two minutes, come to think of it.”

“Stop talking to me.”

“A hundred and twenty seconds alone in the kitchen...”

“You’re still talking to me.”

“I’m sure we have a ‘WARNING: Buffy Cooking’ alarm somewhere.”

“Stop talking to me.” Buffy turned without looking at him, casting a brief glance at the crockpot. “How long did you say we keep the wassail in there?”

Spike smiled and brushed a kiss across her cheek before he edged out of the kitchen. “Give it another five minutes or so, then turn it off. We wanna serve it hot, yeah?”

“Yeah. You know you’re gonna be the only one drinking it, right?”

“You youngsters have no taste.”

She seared him with a look. "Umm, excuse me? Does this sound familiar? 'Come on, love. *What's more festive than hearin' Sid sing 'Holidays in the Sun'?*'"

"You're just proving my point...though not with that accent."

Buffy rolled her eyes. "Freak."

"Whatever you say, kitten." A pause. "Now, keep calm. I'm just steppin' outta the kitchen now—"

"Stop talking to me."

Spike grinned and pinched her ass, evading her playful, answering slap as he bounded to the door of their relatively small apartment. They had moved in just two weeks before, but he already couldn't envision himself anywhere else. It was difficult enough attempting to reconcile what his life had been like before her. Granted, everything had happened fairly quickly—in just two days, he and Buffy had gone from friends to mated lovers. In just two days, his life had exploded with new meaning.

And surprisingly, everyone was fairly okay with it. Granted, the Watcher and Joyce hadn't much room to criticize, considering their less than orthodox behavior at Thanksgiving. It had taken the Slayer's mum three days to meet her eyes without blushing. Though she'd struck back with allegations of the raunchy sex she, Hank Summers, and Rupert had been forced to sit through after Spike and Buffy had given up on the holiday.

The Watcher had been less accepting of his Slayer's decision, though not by much. He'd done a decent amount of glaring before admitting that he had seen it coming for quite some time.

On the same note, Willow had shrugged, cast a warm glance to Tara, and said, "If it makes you happy." And Anya had effectively neutralized Xander by the time it was his turn at the plate. The revelation that he and Buffy loved each other had, it seemed, been long in the making. It was old news to everyone except the Slayer.

And here they were, hosting a Christmas Eve party for her friends at their apartment. The place where they lived together. He didn't even mind Xander pounding on the door with absolutely no consideration for those with hypersensitive hearing. Well, not as much as he would have a month ago, anyway.

“Bloody hell, Harris,” Spike growled, yanking the front door open. “You lookin’ to bust my eardrum?”

Xander just grinned, shoving a bottle of wine—a red bow around the neck—into his hands. “Merry Christmas, Chip-Boy.”

Spike blinked. “Niebaum-Coppola Rubicon? Harris, I’m impressed. Where’d you get this?”

“Giles had a shopping list. I jotted down the first wine I saw.”

“Aren’t you too young to be buyin’ liquor?” he asked.

“Yes, but not when you know the right demons.”

Anya popped up behind him with a brilliant smile. “I have potato salad,” she announced, thrusting a plastic serving bowl wrapped in cellophane into Spike’s free hand. “Seasonal greetings.”

Spike nodded numbly, his eyes still glued to the wine bottle. “Thanks. Come in. Slayer’s... Oh, fuck, I gotta get back to the kitchen.”

Xander’s eyes went wide. “You left Buffy alone in the kitchen?”

“Do us a favor; let Willow and Glinda in when they ring.” Spike turned and hurried back to the kitchen. “Sweet?”

“You know, you think you’re funny with all that ‘Buffy Plus Kitchen Equals Natural Disaster,’ but you’re really just making an ass out of yourself.”

He smirked and placed the wine on the counter before wrapping his arms around his girl’s waist and hooking his chin over her shoulder. “Come on, love,” he murmured and pressed his lips to her throat. “Y’know I didn’t mean that.”

“Yes you did,” she replied, stirring the ladle and pretending she wasn’t trembling all over.

“Kitten, I promise you...any disaster you make in here could be, in no way, natural.” Spike chuckled as she elbowed him, then nipped at the claim mark on her throat. “Just sayin’.”

“You, bub, are this close to not getting laid tonight.”

Spike smirked again and ran his hand down her arm. “Pity.”

“You think you’re real charming, don’t you?”

“Would you be here if I weren’t?” He snatched the ladle from her hand. “Go. See your friends.”

“Hey—”

“Lemme take care of this. You don’t like cookin’, anyway.”

Buffy sighed, though her eyes were dancing. “You really have absolutely no faith in me at all, do you?”

He grinned and dropped a kiss across her forehead. “Slayer, I have nothing but faith in you.”

“Liar.”

“Well, like I said, I don’t want the kitchen to burn down.”

She bristled. “Stop talking to me.”

“In all fairness, love, I have seen you cook before.”

“No, you haven’t! I didn’t cook at all on Thanksgiving...well, except the stuffing—”

“Which you made without butter,” Spike agreed with a nod. “Plus, you recruited me then so that you’d have a man slave to do all the work for you. I’m here so you can be out there. Go. Socialize. Make with the merry.”

Buffy grinned and kissed him. “‘Make with the merry’? You’ve been spending way too much time around me.”

“I assure you, that’s not possible.” Spike nodded at the bottle on the counter. “Look what Harris gave us. Good stuff.” He wagged his brows. “Stuff we’ll wanna pop tonight after the kids have run home.”

“You’re a naughty man.”

“You better believe it, baby.”

She giggled and kissed him again. “All right. Cook up a nummy, non-Buffy-sabotaged storm. Oh, and I turned the wassail off a couple minutes ago. It’s ready when you’re ready.”

He nodded. “Right. And supper should be ready here in a few.”

“I’ll go put on the Christmas music.”

“Finally got the right holiday, huh?”

Buffy made a face. “Stop talking to me,” she grumbled good-naturedly before turning to greet her friends in the living room.

Spike watched her saunter away with a sly smile before returning his attention to the potatoes.

Yes, it was safe to say that unlife simply didn’t get any better than this.



“YOU’RE BEING OBNOXIOUS. PUT THAT THING DOWN.”

Xander frowned from behind his camcorder. “You guys don’t want documentation of your first non-parental holiday?”

Buffy rolled her eyes. “You say that like you’re doing us a favor.”

“I am!”

“You are not. You’re playing with your new toy. Now put it away.”

He grumbled and lowered the camera completely, tossing Spike a pleading look as the vampire set the last of the Christmas dinner on the table. “Spike, your girlfriend’s a pain in the ass,” he whined.

“Hey!”

Spike quirked an eyebrow. “Well, yeah, mate. It’s part of her charm.”

Buffy scowled and whacked at him with her napkin. “You’re not supposed to agree, you know.”

“What can I say, love? The boy speaks the truth.”

“I’m just surprised to see Xander making with the male bonding,” Willow noted, casting Xander a smile as Tara took her seat next to her. “You’re really making an effort, aren’t you?”

“I am,” Xander agreed with a nod. “I am. Thank you for noticing.”

Anya nodded and rubbed his arm. “Xander and I have been going over the history of demons and vampires,” she said. “I reward him for eradicating prejudices with extra orgasms via fellatio.”

Everyone at the table froze and stared at her.

“And yet,” Buffy muttered, “still not as bad as my last dinner party.”

“Oh, love, I don’t think that party was bad,” Spike noted, winking. “Just didn’t go as you expected.”

Yeah, he wouldn’t think it was bad, considering they’d snuck off almost immediately for a little fellatio of their own.

“What is your mom doing for Christmas?” Tara asked, passing Willow the bread.

“She went to visit my aunt in Minneapolis. And Giles left this afternoon for England.”

“Leaving me in charge of the Magic Box,” Anya declared with a nod. “I wish Giles would visit his friend more often.”

Xander frowned. “Friend?”

“Olivia,” Willow replied. “You remember Olivia, right?”

“Oh, yeah. Yeah, I try to forget anything that associates Giles with sex.”

Buffy's eyes widened. “And so say all of us,” she noted before taking a sip of her cola, fidgeting. The topic of her Watcher was slightly sensitive, as she knew as well as Spike did that his acceptance of their relationship, while heartfelt, hadn't been easy to come by. The past month had contained as few meetings as possible to avoid any awkwardness, and while she would never admit it aloud, she was grateful that Giles had a reason to be in England.

Not that there was any real tension between them—just enough to make visits uncomfortable. It was the sort of thing that they would grow out of in time.

“What are you doing for Christmas, Will?” she asked.

Willow shrugged. “We're just staying in, I think,” she said quietly.

“Family get-togethers are hard,” Tara said. “Even with the nicer members of my family. But Willow was great. She didn't even mind the craziness.”

“How could I?” Willow replied. “That craziness, believe it or not, was a much-needed breath of fresh air from hellmouthy craziness.”

“What are your parents like, Tara?” Xander asked, taking a bite of his turkey before making an approving sound. “And, might I add, compliments to the chef.”

Spike smirked. “Thanks, mate.”

“You mean Buffy didn't cook?”

Buffy took a minute to glower at them. “I hate you all.”

“My dad doesn't approve of...well, anything,” Tara explained slowly, shifting.

“Is he opposed to lesbian sex?” Anya asked.

Xander scoffed. “And if so, does he actually breathe?”

Spike snickered into his napkin but declined to say anything—which was both good and uncharacteristic. From the mischief in his eyes, though, Buffy could tell he was making an effort to hold his tongue.

Tara and Willow exchanged a glance, the former's face turning a bright rouge. “Ummm...and there was that time that he wanted me to



think that I was a demon,” she said. “But we’re trying...to get through that.”

“Yeah, that had to be weird.”

“Are we still doing the thing tomorrow at your mom’s, Buffy?” Willow asked, visibly desperate to change the topic.

She nodded. “Sure. She has the better tree.”

“It does seem to be the most economic location,” Anya agreed.

Xander arched a brow. “And she won’t mind us barging in even if she’s not there to keep us crazy kids under her watch?”

“She’s probably just thrilled with the fact that I’ll have to clean it up.”

“Slayer’s mum can’t believe that she keeps up her own place,” Spike observed before tearing into a piece of toast. “I’m surprised she hasn’t started weekly inspections.”

“Well, it is just the second week, sweetie,” Buffy reminded him. “And hey, I kept up my dorm room.”

Willow coughed and glanced down.

“Will!”

“I didn’t say anything!” she protested. “Didn’t say a thing. Not a thing. And I certainly didn’t say that you never made your bed unless I asked you to...or you thought you might have a boy over.”

“I don’t understand this holiday,” Anya said wistfully, stirring her spoon in the wassail that only Spike seemed to be enjoying. “Unsolicited acts of purchasing for others when I am much better served applying my hard-earned money to much-needed goods and services for Xander and myself.”

There was an awkward pause.

“Honey,” Xander said cautiously. “We talked about this last year...remember?”

“That doesn’t mean it makes sense,” she argued. “It’s just another year of pointless ritual.”

Buffy and Spike exchanged a dry glance and tacitly agreed to say nothing.

Willow had no such tact. “Some people are kind to their friends out of the generosity in their hearts, and receive rewards in buying things for others.”

“Cash rewards?” Anya asked with interest.

Tara smothered a grin.

“And here you could’ve had this whole sordid affair on tape,” Xander said, tscking and shaking his head.

“For what? America’s Most Inappropriate Home Videos?” Willow demanded.

Spike smirked. “That was the last holiday, Red.”

At that, Willow snickered. “Yes, so I’ve heard.”

Buffy smiled and glanced down at her plate.

*Perv.*

Once they were alone, she was so going to let him have it.



WILLOW STARED ENVIOUSLY AT THE PIANO THAT BUFFY AND SPIKE had eventually decided to shove against the front wall in the living room, delicately running her fingers across the woodwork. “You know you’re outrageously spoiled, right?”

Buffy grinned as she took a seat on the arm of the nearest couch, sipping at her wine. “Yes.”

“I don’t even want to know how much he paid for this,” she continued. “And you don’t even play.”

“He does...on occasion.”

“But it’s your piano.”

“It’s my piece of furniture. It’s our piano.”

Actually, if Buffy related just how much she adored the piano, her friend would likely look at her as though she’d grown another head. She hadn’t known Spike intended to buy it for her when she’d stopped to gawk at the window of a downtown antique store before explaining, feeling rather foolish, that her grandmother had owned a duplicate model. After her grandmother’s death—years ago, before she’d moved to Sunnydale—her father had auctioned off most of her grandmother’s prized belongings to fund putting her widowed grandfather into a nursing home.

She remembered the day of the auction so clearly. Remembered tears stinging her eyes, her heart breaking just a bit more every time

something had sold. Watched her grandmother's legacy stripped away by people who would never understand why the blue dishes were so important to her, or why that old mirror had hung in her bedroom since her honeymoon.

Hence, seeing the piano had made her trip a bit. Spike had nodded and comforted her with a tender kiss but hadn't said a word. Not until that night when she came home from a movie with Willow and Tara, only to find her vampire seated at the piano, playing for her when she opened the door.

"What is this?" she'd whispered, stunned.

"Your mating present, sweet," he'd replied, smiling as his fingers began stroking the notes to an old Beatles tune. "You like?"

Buffy had burst into a brilliant grin, moved beyond belief. Just when she thought it was impossible to love him more, he went and pulled a stunt like this. "You're turning all Lestat on me with that."

"Bugger that. Wanker didn't know how to play."

"And you do?"

Spike had smiled a little smile and motioned for her to join him. "Why don't I let you be the judge, pet?"

Willow stood over the keys, beating out the chorus of Heart and Soul with one finger. "Three years of piano lessons and this is all I've retained," she said with a half-smile. "Tara plays beautifully, though."

"Tara plays?" Buffy repeated, glancing over her shoulder. "Tara, you play?"

"Not well."

"Yes you do," Willow insisted, frowning.

Buffy waved a dismissive hand. "Oh, well, if she doesn't wanna play, we won't make her." She shot a glance at Spike and grinned. "Besides..."

"Don't even think about it, kitten."

Xander stopped by his side, still a little dazed by the plethora of video consuls that Spike had just shown him in the rec room. As a suitable mating gift, and tacit thanks for the piano, Buffy had purchased her mate a PlayStation II. She'd found it rather ridiculous at first, but had eventually succumbed to the joy that was kicking his virtual ass across the screen. Their banter during such matches usually led to poking, which led to fondling, which led to calling the game so

they could work out their frustrations in a much more pleasurable manner.

But her friend didn't need to know that. She knew that Spike had been looking forward to bragging over the console ever since she'd given it to him.

"What?" Xander asked, a little dazed.

"Buffy's been bragging about Spike's musical talent," Anya answered from where she sat, entranced with the *Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer* special on the Family Channel. "I don't understand this. How is an abnormal animal that brings deformed presents to children supposed to instill American values? Why doesn't he charge them?"

Willow rolled her eyes. "And that would instill American values?"

"Yes. Capitalism is an American value. This reindeer is teaching children to be un-American."

"I always figured the bloody deer had a tumor," Spike reasoned, shrugging. "Why else would his nose glow?"

Buffy stifled a laugh and shook her head. "You kill the Christmas spirit, sweetie."

"Me? Bloody Anyanka just suggested that kiddies should pay for their Christmas presents!"

"I simply don't understand philanthropy. It's not natural."

Xander cleared his throat loudly and clapped his hands together. "Okay," he said. "Okay. So Spike can tickle the ivories. Are we gonna get a demo?"

Spike blinked. "Are you completely carrot-top?"

"Come on, Spike," Willow goaded. "It's the holidays."

"Why do people say that as though it excuses irrational behavior?" he retorted, casting a hand through his platinum locks. "All right. All bloody right, fine. Just...Harris has to put his bloody camcorder away. No usin' this for blackmail later, yeah?"

"Blackmail against who?" Buffy asked, arching an eyebrow. "Everyone you know is in this room."

"He means the demon community," Anya provided. "Though I don't understand why he thinks displaying his musical attributes would do any more harm to his reputation. He has mated the Slayer and is living with her. His reputation is pretty much shot."

Spike seared Buffy with a look. "You're gonna get it later."

"Hey! She said it, not me!"

His glare melted into a teasing smile, and he favored her with a wink. "Right," he said, sliding onto the piano bench, those magical fingers of his playing a quick scale. "All right. Let's get this over with. Any requests?"

"Do you need sheet music?" Willow asked.

"Nope."

Buffy patted his shoulder and pressed a kiss to the top of his head. "When Dru was sick, he learned to play by ear so that he could appease whatever loony request she made."

"Oftentimes to mimic how it sounded on the bloody radio," he added. "Crazy bint."

"Well, then how about White Christmas?" Tara asked. "It's the quintessential Christmas song, right? And, since we live in Sunnydale, dreaming of a white Christmas is the closest we'll get."

Spike shrugged and began the prelude. "Good enough for me."

"Wow." Xander blinked. "You weren't kidding, huh?"

Buffy frowned. "What?"

"He really can play by ear. Man, the crazy shit you did to make Dru happy."

Spike huffed. "You can say that again, mate." He tossed his mate a small smile as she took her seat beside him. "I'm a lucky bloke," he murmured to her as the group around them began singing at the musical cues that, by now, seemed ingrained. "And you've been very good."

"What?"

"Kitty keepin' her claws in order, even with the mention of the ex."

"*Where the treetops glisten,*" the others sang around them. "*And children listen...*"

"I'm learning that throwing things isn't productive. All that repressed jealousy will come out later tonight when I can inflict bodily damage."

Spike grinned. "I fancy bodily damage, sweetheart. Bruise me, use me, abuse me. Can't get enough."

There was an agitated huff from the sofa. "Could you two please

desist alluding to your planned post-party orgasms while your friends singing Christmas carols?” Anya demanded. “It’s rather distracting.”

*“With every Christmas card I...write...”*

“Hey, we’re whispering!” Buffy retorted.

“Yes. Loudly,” Anya shot back.

Spike rolled his eyes and began another carol. The others, not missing a beat, began right the off-key accompaniment.

*“City sidewalks, busy sidewalks, dressed in holiday style...”*

“Willow, I thought you were Jewish,” Anya observed. “Why are you singing Christmas songs?”

“There aren’t any good Jewish songs that everyone knows,” Willow retorted. “Besides the dreidel thing, and I don’t think anyone wants to sing about it, there’s—”

“Adam Sandler’s Hanukkah Song,” Xander ventured. When he received a sea of blank stares in reply, he smiled awkwardly. “You know. *Put on your yarmulka, here comes Hanukkah* ...okay, was I the only person watching SNL?”

Spike smirked and shook his head, finding the melody without struggle. “Very underrated cast,” he agreed. “Came up with some bloody brilliant stuff.”

Xander nudged the redhead. “Come on, Will. You have to know the Hanukkah Song.”

“I do,” she grumbled. “You burned it into my brain. That and the ‘It’s Hard To Be A Jew On Christmas’ song from South Park.”

Not catching the sarcasm, Xander’s eyes lit up. “Yeah, yeah! Man, that’s great.”

Willow shook her head, not amused. “No. If we’re singing inappropriate Hanukkah songs, let’s stick to the Hanukkah Song, okay?”

Spike perked his perked. “You sure, Red?”

She shrugged. “Adam Sandler’s better than South Park. And...I kinda like the Hanukkah Song.”

“Right then...” Spike turned back to the piano and played another intro. “Everyone who knows this bloody thing, get ready...”

In the end, it was only Xander and Willow, their arms wound around each other as they loudly listed off Hollywood’s Jewish population, leaving the room in stitches—though at the song itself or the

musical talent was anyone's guess. Spike forfeited his spot on the piano bench and followed Buffy into the kitchen at Anya's suggestion that they conclude the evening by watching a seasonally-appropriate movie.

Granted, a seasonally appropriate movie was not complete without popcorn, even though the meal itself had been so extensive that no one felt the need to eat again.

"It's going well," Buffy remarked as she poured the drinks, watching the carbonated liquid fizz as it climbed over ice and threatened to topple the glass. "Though I must admit, I'm a little jealous."

Spike tossed her a skeptical look as he battled with popcorn packaging. "Sweet, you know that I love you more than—"

"This isn't about Dru."

"Oh?"

She smirked, snatching the pre-popped bag from his grasp and opening it without struggle.

"Cheat," he pouted.

"Yes. It's my super strength. Oh, wait...vampires have super strength too, right?"

"You think you're funny, love."

Buffy simply grinned at him. "I was jealous that you let my friends listen to you play. Really, I thought you only did that for me."

"After you practically forced me to—"

She slammed the popcorn into the microwave and activated the instant-pop. "I didn't force you to do anything."

"You keep tellin' yourself that." He neared her, his voice dropping. "Honestly, pet, you oughta know just from experience how to tell the difference between things that we share with everyone and things that we keep to ourselves..."

"Maybe I need a demonstration?"

"Oh, and you'll get one."

"Now?"

"In front of your chums?"

"Well, they're not in here now..."

A note of warning edged into his voice. "Buffy..."

"What's the matter?" She dropped her gaze to his crotch. "Can't *rise* to the challenge?"

Passion stormed his eyes. "You're askin' for it, missy."

She cocked her head. "Am I?"

"You better make the popcorn, love, before I give you what you're beggin' for." He paused, a slow smirk playing across his lips. "Think you can handle it? Popcorn, that is. You've burned three bags this week."

Buffy stopped and glared at him. "Stop talking to me."

Spike nodded, pleased with himself as he collected the drinks. "Works every time."

"Irritating pig," she muttered.

"Whom you happen to adore."

"Do not."

"Do too."

"I adore you a lot more when you don't make fun of my cooking."

"Oh, but there's so much there to make fun of."

"Stop talking to me."

Then he was right behind her, the drinks evidently forgotten as he wrapped his arms around her middle and pressed his lips to her neck. "You adore me," he murmured.

"You wish."

"Don't have to wish. You tell me every night."

She bristled. "Stop talking to me."

"Sure, love. Whatever you say."



XANDER'S CHRISTMAS PICK WAS *DIE HARD*, AND BEING THAT BUFFY wasn't in the mood for anything too sentimental, it was the winner among the rest. Plus, she had never seen it, which was apparently a grave sin. Though by the end of the evening, Xander might have regretted his choice, given that she spent a good bulk of the movie detailing what she would have done to expedite the demise of Hans Gruber.

"Buff, you already kick demon ass. Leave terrorist bank robbers to John McClane."

Spike had snickered, Buffy had elbowed him, and life was good.



As much fun as it was playing hostess, though, she was glad when the night was over, and she was saying goodbye to her friends as Spike began the clean-up. To her delight, Xander made a point to thank her mate for the dinner and the company. For one crazy moment, she could pretend all was well and normal, and hope that things didn't return to the state of forced tolerance once the time of peace on earth was at an end.

She glanced at their Christmas tree, adorned with multi-color lights because she had always enjoyed them as a child. The floor around the base was littered with badly-wrapped presents, as she and Spike had evidently declared a tacit war to see who could bestow the other with the most gifts. She suspected it was a blessing that they couldn't have children.

"That was fun," Buffy said as she plopped onto the sofa. "But let's never have them over again. I thought they'd never leave."

Spike grinned and sat down at the piano. "What? Didn't like showing the place off?"

"I did, but...blarg."

"Come up here and sit with me."

Buffy quirked her head. "Huh?"

"You wanted a private demo, Slayer. You'll notice I played for your mates—I didn't sing. That, among a great many other things, is somethin' for you and you alone." He smiled. "Come up here and sit."

It was true. She remembered, not too long ago, blushing as he sang some Thanksgiving song in an effort to prove that Thanksgiving songs did indeed exist. It had taken some coaxing, but he'd caved, unable to deny her anything. And ever since he'd seen the reaction his singing voice earned him, he'd kept finding reasons to serenade her.

He kissed her when she took her seat beside him. "I love you," he murmured, and every cell in her body exploded with euphoria. He told her often, of course, but she never tired of the words. Never.

"I love you, too."

He beamed at her, kissed her again, then began to tickle the keys to one of her favorite Christmas classics. *"Chestnuts roasting on an open fire... Jack Frost nipping at your nose. Yuletide carols being sung by a choir, and folks*

*dressed up like Eskimos. Everybody knows...a turkey and some mistletoe...help to make the season bright."*

"Unless I thaw it," Buffy muttered, earning a snort.

Spike played the song through to completion, his low voice doing all the things it typically did to her—things she was certain Mel Tormé hadn't intended when he'd penned the lyrics. And after, as the last chords faded to the silence around them, Buffy let her head drop against her vampire's shoulder and released a long sigh, then another when he wrapped his arm around her. They sat like that for a few minutes, comfortable with the quiet, as long as it provided good company.

"When I was little, my mom used to let me open a Christmas Eve present," she said after a moment. "I have a couple of Christmas Eve prezzies for you."

Spike chuckled. "Just can't wait, huh?"

"Nope. Not at all."

She grinned and kissed him before scurrying off for the bedroom. She found her presents to Spike under the bed, where she had left them, untouched and seemingly untampered with. Though that didn't really mean anything. He was, after all, an evil villain.

When she returned, she found him standing in the middle of the living room with a small, wrapped box in his hand.

"Christmas Eve present," he said with a slight smile. "Joyce told me about this, love."

"She did?"

He nodded. "And she told me to have two ready, 'cause you would."

"Been conspiring with my mother, have you?"

"Yes."

"Okay then." Buffy dropped her gaze to the packages she held, and opted for the larger gift first. "I swear, if you already have this, my head's gonna spin around and explode. I searched through all of your things to make sure you didn't have it."

"All my things, eh?"

"Yes."

"Okay then." He winked, setting her present down on the coffee table. "Should I go first?"

*No! Gimmie*, the spoiled child within her cried. “Yes,” she, the adult, answered.

Spike smirked, picked up the package and handed it to her. “Merry Christmas, love.”

Buffy grinned and set the other present down, attempting to be delicate and patient with his rather clumsy wrapping job. It didn’t last. Her need to dig into get the good stuff was too empowering.

It was a jewelry box. Her heart swelled.

“Without wantin’ to appear predictable, love,” he said softly, watching her with a small smile as she opened the lid. “But you know what they say...”

“Oh Spike...”

“They are a girl’s best friend.”

Inside the box was a glittering necklace with two dangling pendants unlike anything she’d seen before. Buffy frowned and brought the box closer, then gave a little gasp when she realized what she was looking at. The design had to be custom because she couldn’t see any jeweler just having these on hand. One pendant was clearly a stake; the other...

“A railroad spike?”

Spike shuffled a bit in that cute way of his whenever he was nervous. “Couldn’t think of anything else. Know it’s not exactly what you wanna think about when you think of me, but—”

“Spike, it’s perfect.” And it was. Yes, there was a part of her that would always recoil at knowing what his life had been like before, but she couldn’t afford to forget it. If she did, she risked losing the knowledge of just how much he’d changed, how far he’d come, for her. To appreciate what she had now was to know what had been before.

She glanced up, her eyes stinging. “This must have cost you a fortune.”

“You’re worth it.” He stepped forward and took the necklace from her hands, encouraging her to turn. “Lift your hair, baby.”

“Spike, this is amazing.” She threw her arms around his neck when she turned again. “Thank you.”

“Didn’t know if you’d fancy it. Not much one for frills—”

“Every girl likes diamonds.” Buffy took a step back, glancing down at the sparkly resting against her chest. “And...it’s us. I love it.”

He cupped her cheek and kissed her softly. "Can I open a prezzie now?"

"Well yeah, now that you've raised the bar."

Spike grinned. "I gotta be a handful, what can I say?" He selected the larger gift that she had indicated earlier, and blew her a kiss as he tore into her equally crappy wrapping job.

Buffy watched closely, fingering her necklace as her heart pounded.

The expression that colored his face was unlike anything she'd ever seen before. He ran his hand over the cover once, as though verifying its authenticity, then looked up, eyes gaze wide and imploring. "Buffy... this is a first edition."

"Yes."

"How the bleeding hell did you get a first edition?"

"Well...Giles helped me find it."

"Slayer, you don't just find books like these. I don't care how much help you have."

"Okay, okay, so I bought it from him. He said a bunch of stuff about it being a family heirloom and...but you've always told me that Milton was one of your favorites, so I thought... You don't already have it, do you?"

His eyes widened. "Are you kiddin' me? This is amazin'. Rupert seriously just sold this to you?"

"It took some persuading...and haggling. He didn't give me the 'like a daughter' discount. Which honestly, if it was a family thing, I'm the closest thing he has to a child so you'd think he'd be of the generous."

Spike smiled wryly. "He knew it was comin' to me, pet. Bet you anythin'."

"What? I couldn't have wanted an old book?"

He arched an eyebrow.

"Well, fine, when you put it that way," she conceded. She paused then and glanced down. "So you like it?"

"I love it." He carefully set the book aside to draw her into his arms. "Thank you."

"You're not the easiest person to shop for, you know."

"What?"

"Well, I wanted to give you something special. These..." She

gestured to the book and to the unwrapped present. "These are special. Everything else was just... I didn't hunt for them like I did these. Speaking of which..." Buffy indicated his other package. "Open your prezzie."

He frowned. "I just did."

"The other one."

"Yeah...it's your turn, pet."

"I don't care. Open!"

For a second more, Spike looked like he was about to object, but then gave her a long look and his eyes softened. With a small nod, he grabbed the remaining present.

"I think next year, I'm gonna have the clerks gift wrap for me," Buffy observed, her nose wrinkling as he tore into the Christmas paper. "It just felt cold and impersonal."

Spike grinned. "Know what you mean," he said, popping off the lid of a small, department-store box. And for the second time in five minutes, he froze. "Buffy..."

"I never gave it back to you."

He nodded numbly. "I remember."

"I...I didn't want to." She blushed when he lifted the silver chain from its confines, a familiar ringing dangling at the bottom. "I remember...I still remember when I went home that night, you know, all with the grossed out and...Willow offered to do a forgetting spell a couple times, but I'd already had enough of her plus magic."

"I heard the part 'bout the memory spell, pet," Spike said softly. "I was sittin' there, you know."

"Yeah, well, that was more for your benefit than mine. I wanted you to think I wanted to forget it. But really? No. God, no. I wasn't about to let her wonky magic mess with my brain...again. I might've ended up with amnesia. Which I had to delicately explain to Will after we left Giles's and she offered." Buffy cleared her throat. "And though it took, well, falling for you to admit it, there was another reason a forgetting spell was out of the question."

"Cause you wanted my sexy bod?"

"Yes."

Spike grinned. "Bloody knew it."

“Yeah. Well, that’s well and good now, but I kept it.” She nodded at the ring. “And then we became friends, and it was... Well, I wanted you to know, now, that I never wanted to forget it. Not even when I thought I hated you.”

His eyes twinkled at her as he slipped the chain over his head, the horrible, gaudy ring he’d presented her with during their faux engagement rocking lightly against his chest. Then he stepped forward and cupped her cheeks, bringing her mouth to his. She swore his kisses were poetry.

“You’re amazing,” he murmured.

“Mmmm...”

“And I wanna cart you off to bed and do things to that delicious body of yours that would make the devil blush.”

Buffy’s heart leaped. “No one’s stopping you,” she whispered against his lips.

“One thing.”

“What?”

Spike pulled back and grinned, pointing at the entry closet door. “Two things, your mum said,” he replied. “Didn’t think I was gonna let you outdo me, did you?”

She smirked, dropping her hand to cup his erection through his jeans, enjoying the sharp gasp that hissed through his teeth at contact. It amazed her how much he’d liberated her, both emotionally and sexually. In the past, she had never felt brave enough to shamelessly grope her boyfriends. Well, all right, so there was just the one before him. He Who Shall Not Be Named Because He Is a Mood-Killer. Even her emotionless but hopeful one-night stand with Parker had seen her a fidgety, nervous wreck, and she’d only touched him when prompted.

Since she’d already decided that the former men in her life had been warm-up acts to get to the good stuff—a big test-drive on love to make sure her heart was ready for the real thing when it slammed into her—she supposed it should reflect little surprise that being open with Spike was as natural as breathing. He made her feel comfortable, and more so, powerful in her sexuality. For all his cocksure boasting, he was determined that she know they were equals. Equals in every fashion.

It did wonders for making her seize what she wanted.

"Oh, I dunno. I kinda thought this was my prezzie." Buffy grinned and squeezed him. "The gift that keeps on giving."

He favored her with a long look. "You're gonna get it."

"That's the idea."

"Right after you see what's behind door number one."

She kissed him before finally complying, rather proud of herself for the restraint she'd shown. When there was a present on the line, she typically became tunnel-visioned.

What she found inside the closet stormed past expectation.

"Spike—"

She felt him smiling without needing to turn around.

"You got me...weapons!"

"Not just any weapons, mind you," he said proudly, stalking forward. "Authentic and about as old as I am." He wrapped his fingers around one of the staves and drew it out. "It's for us, really. Both of us. So we can spar each other."

Suddenly, Buffy was overwhelmed. She was wearing a diamond necklace and staring at the two long staves he had purchased for them so they could fight each other. There was something unspeakably moving in his gifts, and it occurred to her, all over again, just how lucky she was. He'd given something to her that appealed to the woman, and something that appealed to the warrior. Not with anyone else, family or friends, did she feel so comfortable in being herself. Spike was her saving grace from chaos, and there were times, like now, when she felt so full of love she thought she'd burst.

There were also times, like now, when she did.

"Oh, god, I love you!"

Before he knew what hit him, Buffy had completely leaped into his arms, winding her legs around his waist and attacking his lips with hers. It didn't take much coaxing; he rumbled into her with a passionate growl, sliding his hands under her thighs as his mouth devoured her. And god, she loved kissing him. She loved doing everything, but kissing him was out-of-this-world phenomenal. How he tugged and growled and tasted and murmured her name and all the other things unique to Spike.

At last, he broke away. Good thing, too. Breathing was a thing she needed, not him.

"If I'd known buyin' you lethal weapons would have that sort've reaction," Spike murmured as he nibbled on her throat, "I'd've tried it long ago."

"Wish you had."

"You're just unpredictable."

"You like it."

"I like everythin' about you," he said, slipping his wandering hands under her shirt, caressing the skin he discovered. "Even the not-so-pleasant things."

"Hey!"

"What? I still like 'em." He grinned rakishly, his fingers coming to rest just beneath one of her breasts. "Wanna go sin rampantly?"

Boy, did she. "Uh huh."

Spike smiled and brushed a kiss across her brow. "And let's bring it."

Buffy paused and blinked at that. "What? The weapons? Spike, I'm all about trying new things, but—"

He snorted a laugh, his eyes dancing. "We'll save that for another night. Was thinkin' something else. Look at the sofa. Seems someone left something behind."

She did. There, nestled between the cushions, was Xander's camcorder. And one look at her mate clearly outlined what he had in mind.

"You're a bad man," she said matter-of-factly.

"The baddest, baby."

"And now I'll have documented evidence to prove it."

"Don't reckon this'll be the sort've thing we share with friends, yeh?"

"Don't tell me William the Bloody is shy."

"Not at all. But these tasty parts of yours..." He slipped a hand between them to cup her pussy through her pants, then sucked a nipple into his mouth. "Are all mine. And I don't like to share."

A shiver raced down her spine. "Me, either."

Spike leered and lowered her to the floor, then reached behind him



to grab the camcorder with his free hand. "I'm gonna fuck you raw all night."

In spite of herself, she giggled.

The leer vanished. "Pet?"

"I'm sorry. That was kinda adorable."

For a second, he didn't know whether to look amused or insulted.

"I mean, the bad boy thing...love it. But...it's just...with the funny."

He pouted, shoulders deflating. "Bugger. You went and ruined my moment."

"I did not!"

"Yeah, you did. I was bein' all—"

"Spike." She grabbed his wrist and guided his hand under the waistband of her slacks. "Feel my panties."

His nostrils flared and his eyes flickered. "Don't need to," he rasped, even as his fingers delved between her folds. "Naughty girl."

"Then stop acting like I sullied anything...and get to sullying me. All I wanted to say was I love you—the bad boy and the big softie that got me this lovely diamond necklace. I didn't mean to do anything other than...well...tell you that. That I love all of the above." She raised a hand to the chain. "All of it."

"Then all of it, my lady shall get."

The next thing she knew, she was over his shoulder and moving for the bedroom; camcorder and all.



"WONDER HOW MUCH OF THIS XANDER CHARGED UP BEFORE HE came over," Buffy said as she flicked the camera on. "So...to rewind and tape over everything he filmed today or to make tonight the grand finale?"

"Rewind," Spike growled, stripping his tee off his body, leaving his chiseled chest bare to her drooling pleasure. "No sense wastin' perfectly good film on anythin' else, yeah?"

She giggled and nodded, hitting the rewind button. "Think he'll mind?"

"Filling up his toy with amateur pornography?"

"We are not showing this to him."

"Of bloody course not. For our eyes and our eyes only."

She made a face. "I feel kinda dirty, doing this."

"Yeah?" His eyes flickered with interest as he turned his hands to his belt. "It's just us, sweetheart. Just you and me. Nothin' shameful in it."

"And yet, I feel dirty."

"Want me to help you *overcome*?"

She giggled. "Bad pun."

"Those are the best kind."

"Mhmm..." Buffy raised the camcorder to her eye and hit record. "We are in the bedroom. Sparsely furnished, but considering that we just moved in two weeks ago, I think we're on top of things. Spike?"

"Gonna be on top of you in a minute," he growled, prying open the buttons of his jeans. "Inside you. Devourin' you. Eatin' that delectable pussy of yours..."

"Spike!"

He smirked. "Can't blame a bloke for bein' honest."

"Perv."

"My bein' a perv always seems to work in your benefit."

Buffy flushed and scaled the lens down his body, landing at his crotch. "There's the beast," she murmured as though filming a documentary. "Dormant for now, but when he wakes up, no one in this house gets any rest."

Spike growled. "Dormant?" he demanded, cupping himself. "You call this dormant?"

She giggled. "Ohhh...looks like our boy's rising. I'll warn everyone at home—he's got a nasty, insatiable temper."

"You're one talk," he quipped, shoving his jeans down his legs. His cock bobbed against his stomach, fully erect and straining for attention.

And Buffy, naturally, had to make a production of it. She aimed the camera at his length and managed to exclaim, "He's awake!" between giggles, zooming in and out rapidly. "And on the prowl."

"Prowl my very bitable arse," Spike retorted, moving toward her

with a smirk. "This bloke knows what he wants. And she's far too dressed for the occasion."

"Watch the beast as he sizes up his conquest," Buffy instructed her nonexistent viewers, keeping her camera trained on his cock. "You can almost see the perspiration, the concentration, the attention to detail as he—ahh, Spike!"

She was flat on her back the next minute, the camera torn from her hands, placed on the mattress just a few inches away from her head. Though she would never say so aloud, there were times when Spike unknowingly endorsed the fables of vampiric speed as popularized by Anne Rice and other hack writers. One second, she had been by the door; the next, she was on the bed, her blouse and bra having vanished, and her slacks torn down her legs.

Watching him just made her hotter.

Spike whipped his head back, nuzzling her center through her panties. "So bloody wet for me."

"Mmm," she hummed. "Always."

"Now smile for the camera."

The panties were gone the next instant—another victim to his impatience. She'd at least gotten him to stop tearing the rest of her clothes, so there was a bit of progress, though he refused to show her underwear any mercy. Buffy suspected it was a part of the larger campaign to discourage her from wearing them in the first place.

Spike plunged his tongue deep inside her without warning, and she bucked against his mouth, tunneling her fingers through his hair. "You always taste so fucking good," he whispered into her skin.

"Guh..."

"And you're so bloody responsive." He pinched her clit before giving it a good suck and drawing a long whimper from her throat. "My gorgeous girl."

Buffy moaned again and tried to focus on something else. Anything else. Anything that would distract her from how good he felt, how he played her body like a harp. She arched again as he drove his tongue inside her again, her eyes landing on the camcorder that was capturing every second of her agony. The instant horror surged through her again, and she let go of herself, gasping loudly and clutching him

tighter. "Isn't this how Pam Anderson and what's-his-name got in trouble?"

"Mhmm," Spike agreed lazily, his teeth scraping her wet flesh as he caressed her clit. "Somethin' like this."

"Not...something..." she argued. "This is what got them in trouble. And Rob Lowe...made a sex tape...in the eighties, I think."

"Difference bein', pet. They're them. We're us."

"What if demons get a hold of this thing and sell bootleg copies all over town?"

"Most of them would just die of envy; I'm the only one that gets to eat this pussy."

He slid his tongue over her clit again, spreading her open with his fingers.

"Ooohhh..."

"Though I wouldn't mind sendin' a copy to Angel."

Buffy hummed at that, then her eyes shot open. "What? No!"

"Why not?"

"B-because...that's..."

"Afraid the wanker'll get a happy and turn into the great ponce again?"

"No, afraid he'll come down here and I'll have to kill him for trying to kill you."

Spike raised his head at that, his wet mouth stretching into a smile. "That settles it. Your ex is gettin' a belated Christmas present."

Before she could object, he wrapped his lips around her clit and gave it a good, hard suck and her body exploded into orgasm. She shattered on the mattress into a thousand satisfied pieces.

Some three hundred years later, when she returned to herself, Buffy blinked and attempted to sit up, but Spike's arms were around her middle and his head was resting on her stomach. She gave a contented little sigh and ran her fingers through his hair.

"I love the way you come," he murmured. "The way your body trembles. And that shine in your eyes, and that little sound you make."

She released a heady gasp but didn't say anything.

"And I love the way you do that." He smiled and pressed a kiss against her belly. "Make like you're surprised, every time, with what I

wanna do with you. To you. What I want you to do to me.” He began prowling up her body, rubbing his cock along her sodden folds, coaxing another half-gasp, half-moan rumble through her lips. She was still buzzing from the orgasm he’d given her, too sensitive to be teased.

“It got you hot, didn’t it?” he rumbled into her ear as he cupped her breast.

“What?” she managed to croak.

“The idea of anyone watchin’ us do this.”

Hot? No. Mortified was more like it. Except something within her did pulse at the thought.

Either way, she lost her chance to answer him. His mouth was out of range the next second, wrapped around one of her breasts as his fingers played with her neglected nipple. His hips were swirling above him, the tip of his cock nudging her pussy.

“Spike,” she sobbed.

“I love you, Buffy,” he said softly. He’d gone from planning Angel’s humiliation by way of homemade porn starring Buffy and Spike to murmuring sweet nothings in her ear as his body moved over hers. “I love you so much.”

Her heart clenched. Yeah, there was no way she’d ever tire of hearing that. “I love you, too,” she whispered, her nails tracing a light path down his back.

He abandoned her breast with a parting kiss, then raised his head to devour her mouth with his. Then he sank his cock inside her, and the world around them melted.

It had been a month, and the simple bliss of being one with him had never stopped surprising her. She didn’t know what she’d expected, actually, other than, perhaps the novelty of their explosive sex life to have settled. It hadn’t—she launched into a new wake every time he slid inside her, a new bout of self-discovery that left her dizzy with happiness. And of course, she knew that she shouldn’t be surprised. She and Spike weren’t exactly a mundane, everyday couple. They were meant to be explosive. They were meant to burn each other up with passion. She honestly couldn’t imagine a time where she wouldn’t want him like she did. Wouldn’t burn when he touched her like she did.

“Unh...”

“Mmmm?” Spike drew his head up, stirring her from her thoughts. He licked his lips and smiled, his hips swirling every time he entered her. “Fucking nymph, you are,” he decided lowly, his cock striking her at an angle that she decided the Powers had invented to drive her crazy. She clenched her muscles around him, reveling in the flash of eyes. He growled against her lips and began thrusting faster.

“Nymph, huh?”

He grinned, moving harder still. Faster. The world could be made and unmade in that grin. That rakish smirk of his that had entirely the wrong effect. Manly men think they can get anything just from flashing those pearly whites. It was true enough for Spike. That grin unwound her in ways that were downright humiliating.

“You know what you are,” he growled against her lips before licking at her diamond-heavy throat, tugging at her nipples. The mattress beneath her squeaked noisily, the headboard striking the wall in timely rhythm with the grunts, moans, and mewls that she couldn’t keep inside. “Fuck, you feel so good. So good.”

She tightened her muscles around his cock again and nipped at his shoulder. “You, too.”

Biting him during sex was possibly the easiest way to earn a spanking of the good kind. And true, while nipping didn’t technically constitute biting, his pace increased tenfold as a small but effective roar tore through his throat. His balls slapped her ass as his thrusts grew harder, and she felt his fangs trace the claim mark embedded in her skin.

“You little vixen,” he gasped. “You’re just askin’ for it.”

Buffy’s eyes fell shut. “Begging’s more like it,” she replied. “Oh god...oh god.”

“My saucy little slayer.”

“Shut up and fuck me raw.”

He chuckled, which had honestly been her intention, and the vibrations tickled that invisible erogenous zone buried somewhere in her body. She cooed and flexed, smashing her hips upward, chasing him every time he pulled away.

“You’re right,” he mused, his slick cock slipping out of her. “That is adorable.”

She moaned in protest. "Told you so." She felt his velvety head brush against her magic button and dug her nails deeper into his skin to keep from losing her head. "God, what are you doing?"

"Drivin' myself outta my mind," he replied, manipulating his cock so that the head was rubbing soft but tantalizing circles into her clit. "God, you're so gorgeous. I want you to stay like this forever. In fact, that's an order. Wear nothin' but that necklace ever again."

"Driving *you* out of your mind? Where do you get off giving me orders? Get back inside me!"

He had the audacity to look amused. "Is that an order?" he asked, sounding much more controlled than he had a second ago.

"Yes! Yes, dammit, stop teasing me!"

Once more, pure ardor stormed his gaze. He kissed her furiously, teasing her mouth with his tongue before abandoning his quest to incite her to madness by way of abandonment mid-coitus. Not that what he'd done hadn't felt damn good, because there weren't words enough for how good it'd felt, but she needed him inside her. There was nothing like the sensation of reaching that euphoric plane with him with her—in her—and feeling him tremble as he followed. And damn all if she was going to deny herself that.

Spike pushed inside her again, coaxing her hands to abandon the trenches she'd dug into his skin. He stretched her arms to the sides, then upward until her fingers were clasped around the bedposts. All the while, he moved slowly within her. So slowly she thought perhaps she had slipped into purgatory, and it was her punishment to remain in sexual limbo for the rest of eternity. A silly thought, but he had the ability to make logic fly out the window.

Finally, unable to stand it, Buffy bucked beneath him and cried out, "Spike!"

"Yes, kitten?"

"Please!"

"Please, what?"

"I'm so close. Please."

He grinned and nibbled at a breast. The slide of his wet flesh from hers touched every single nerve in her body, singeing her with want, burning her with need. The fire raging within her was growing unbear-

able; she would burst with it. She had to. The pleasure was so sweet and she needed release.

Then Spike's fingers slid over her clit and began to rub.

"Oh my god!"

"That's it, baby," he murmured. "That's it."

"Oh...Spike!"

"That's it." His incisors slid across her throat. "When you come, I want you to scream."

"Oh god!"

"Scream for me, baby. You'll scream for your Spike, won't you?"

The first scream was by far the best. All the rest were for show.

His fangs sliced into her skin, and she detonated, swallowed in a torrent of ecstasy. She clutched at him, riding out the volatile waves of her orgasm, and cried out again when she felt him explode within her. Felt him growl into her throat, thrusting like mad as he emptied himself inside her.

The symphony of screams that escaped her lips echoed throughout their small apartment for what felt like hours. Well after his hips had rocked to a still, after his fangs released her and left her to the care of his tongue.

"Oh...god."

Spike chuckled and raised his head. "You're amazing," he said. "So bloody amazing."

"The neighbors are gonna call the cops." Not a very romantic follow-up. Buffy: always the pragmatic.

He didn't mind. Rather, he chuckled again and licked at her claim mark. "Neighbors are used to it," he said reasonably. "Frank and Jill sent us a fruit-basket after that first night, remember? They were impressed."

"Yes, but that was two weeks ago and they've ceased being impressed."

He shrugged, unbothered. "Their bloody problem."

"Mhmm...tell that to the cops when they show up."

"I intend to." Spike favored her with a rakish grin, rolling over then and slipping out of her, much to her dismay. He tugged her close to his chest and kissed her brow, staring at the ceiling in wonder. "Bloody



hell,” he said after a long moment. “I don’t think I’ll ever get used to it.”

Buffy frowned. “Get used to what?”

“You. Bein’ here. With me. Loving me. Being my mate.” He smiled simply. “I’ve just... I’ve never been this happy, love. Never. This is the first Christmas in all my years that—”

“I know.”

“Do you?”

She nodded and sat up, smiling as she took his still-hard cock in her hand and began pumping him, enjoying the way he moaned and stretched beneath her. “Yes,” she said, “I do. And you’re reading my thoughts again.”

“Am I?”

“Yes.”

“Mates don’t have that luxury, luv.” Spike smirked. “And you better thank your lucky stars.”

“It’s X-Rated,” she said, reaching for the camcorder that was, thanks to their mattress aerobics, taking lovely video of their bedroom closet. She grinned and turned, placing it on the nightstand, facing them. “Just like yours.”

“I know. We’d never leave the bloody apartment.” He paused. “Not a bad thing, come to think of it.”

She grinned, flicking her thumb over his cockhead. “Mhmm,” she agreed, curling her body into an arch so that her mouth was at his dick. She pressed a series of wet kisses along the base, dipping a hand to cup his balls as her tongue came out to play.

“You’re sendin’ off vibes,” he gasped, thrusting forward involuntarily. “I’m just pickin’ up on them.”

“What are these vibes saying?”

“‘I wanna suck Spike’s big—”

Buffy pinched his inner thigh. “Stop that.”

“Stop what?”

“Making my vibes say nasty things.”

“Nasty? Put your mouth where your money is.”

“It’s the other way around, silly.”

“Yeah, well, in this particular case, wordin’ the saying correctly wouldn’t work out in my favor.”

She smiled and took him into her mouth, swirling her tongue around him in the way that drove him craziest. She loved doing this for him. Sharing it with him—something she would never have thought to share with anyone else. Her past experience notwithstanding, along with her temperamental shyness that showed up every now and then, doing this for him took trust that she had never given anyone. Trust she hadn’t thought herself capable of.

Spike erupted in her mouth before he could bark a warning. She didn’t mind. Rather, she murmured approvingly around his cock and swallowed everything he had to give her. Vibes again. He was feeding off her vibes tonight, and she knew that trust—the trust she gave him—was almost as precious as her love. Almost.

“Nope,” Buffy said, releasing him with a parting kiss and licking her lips. “Definitely not nasty.”

“Oh god.”

“In fact...”

“Get up here.”

“Hey Spikey, I think he likes it,” she quipped, turning to face him with twinkling eyes. His cock was hard again in seconds, and he tugged her up his body until her pussy was hovering just above him.

“I love you,” he sighed. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

An evil spark touched his eyes at that, making her blink, and he grinned at her. “Even enough to tolerate burned popcorn.”

Buffy scowled, sinking down. “Stop talking to me,” she said, mock-wounded.

“Never.”

And that small conviction had her busting with happiness. It was a reminder that they shared her soul. That despite their differences, they were so alike. They both loved with everything they had. They relished in the fight.

She flexed her muscles around his cock again before she began riding him at a slow, intent gallop, her diamond necklace bouncing along with her breasts with every bounce. “Okay then.”

“Never,” he said again, sliding his hands up her abdomen to tease her nipples. “God, I love you.”

He made a litany of that confession at times, and never did the words grow old. Such a simple phrase gave her so much. More than she felt she deserved at times, but then, she knew he felt the same way.

With them, at least, such would always be the case.



IT WAS TWO DAYS AFTER CHRISTMAS, AND AS THEY SO OFTEN DID when they did not want to be disturbed, they were screening phone calls.

“Hi, this is Buffy. Well, Spike lives here too, but no one ever calls him. Anyway, we’re out saving the world right now and can’t come to the phone. If you’d leave your name and number—”

“And an idea of why we should care that you rang—”

“We’ll get back to you. Thanks!”

Beep.

“Buffy? Spike? It’s Xander. Ummm...I’ve looked all over, and I think I remember where I left my camcorder. I think... Yeah, I think it’s at your place. So, umm, if you see it, just gimme a call or bring it the next time we get together. Thanks.”

*Click.*

Buffy arched an eyebrow and glanced up from her plate of spaghetti, directing her gaze across the kitchen table. Spike’s eyes were dancing.

“We’ll buy him a new one.”

