

SOMETHING



HOLLY DENISE





SHE LOVED THE WAY HE KISSED HER. SO PASSIONATE AND FIERY. SO all-consuming.

And when he pulled his mouth from hers, panting those breaths she liked to think he breathed just for her, she was reminded of what else she loved. Maybe even more than kissing.

He rolled his hips on the next thrust and settled that once and for all. Yeah, definitely more than kissing.

“Buffy...”

Had she mentioned she also loved the way he said her name? *Especially* when it was all strangled and whimpery like that? Like even though he was super strong, this badass vampire who had lived more than a century, she—little ol’ Buffy—could make him sound like he was experiencing things he never had before. Spike was so open in everything he felt. It was there on his face and it always had been. Even earlier tonight when they had been regular enemies, she’d known exactly what he was thinking. No mystery there. No tension. No wondering if she’d done something wrong because he’d tell her.

Suddenly, the fact that he was inside of her but not kissing her struck her as completely unacceptable. Buffy linked her arms around his neck and tugged him down, moaning into his mouth when he moaned into hers. The cadence of his thrusts, so slow and soft and sweet—just to prove he could do soft and sweet, he’d said—began to pick up, and that was good too. No. Amazing. While she loved the soft and sweet, the fact that he wasn’t afraid to go harder, that he trusted her when she said she could take it, was just...

Well, Buffy couldn’t think of what it was. With Spike making with that hip-rolly thing and showing her just exactly what all he could do with that rather magnificent cock of his, thoughts were not high on the priority list.

“Unh...*Spike*...”

He hummed his response, trailing his lips down the column of her throat, across her collarbone, then lower. “So sweet,” he whispered against her breast before flicking his tongue over her nipple. “Fuck, the way you grip me. You feel so good.”

She groaned low and threaded her hands through his hair. It was criminal that it was as soft as it was. Even more criminal that she hadn’t

known this about his hair three hours ago. But then, three hours ago might as well have been three centuries ago for as much as had changed. How much she had learned.

Like, for instance, if she worked a certain set of muscles the second he slammed his cock back into her, she could get him to make all kinds of fun noises. Some of those begging.

“Tell me I feel good too, baby.” He teased her nipple with his teeth, then slowly began to make his way to the breast he’d neglected. Another thing to love about Spike—he was an equal opportunity worshipper of the body of Buffy. He didn’t want any part of her to feel left out.

“You do,” Buffy told him, her voice hoarse. “So good. Spike... Please...”

He grinned up at her. She’d never seen him grin so much before tonight. “Please what?”

“Please...” She blinked hard, searching for words that wouldn’t come. Words she was pretty sure weren’t even in her vocabulary. “I need... I need...so bad.”

“I know what you need.” He took her mouth again and she moan-melted into him, chasing his tongue with her own, whimpering when he gripped her under her knee and lifted her leg until he had it hooked over his shoulder. She felt stretched and full and he was still moving, still making those noises, lowering his hand to—*yes*—strum her clit in sync with his thrusts. Their bodies were slick and the air was loud and Spike groaned anew every time he speared into her pussy. Like he was discovering her all over again and surprised each time at what he found.

“Tell me you love me,” he said, his blue eyes so dark they damn near looked black.

“I love you,” she said, earnestly, meaning it with everything in her heart and then some. She hadn’t known it was possible to love ever again, and especially not like this. This wonderful, deep understanding that she was exactly where she was supposed to be and exactly who she was supposed to be with. For the rest of her life. “I love you so much, Spike. Do you love me?”

It was a silly question but he answered it like it was anything but. Nodding vigorously, swearing sweet nothings against her mouth, then

pulling back to say aloud, “It consumes me, how much I love you. Gonna bloody drown and I don’t care.”

Buffy giggled—or started to. It turned into a moan. “You...can’t drown. Don’t need to breathe.”

Spike winked at her. “Lucky you,” he said, and everything going on beneath the skin began to compress. The way he felt, like a missing piece she hadn’t known was missing until he’d slid inside of her.

In a thousand years, she would never have expected the night to have gone like this. Yet here they were. Together. Perfect. Matched. Not to mention, soon to be husband and wife. And though it seemed impossible, given that life was pretty darn wonderful now, the only direction to go was up.

That was, of course, until everything broke.



BUFFY WOULD NEVER TALK about it, the moment that her mind had been restored to her. There was no *need* to talk about it—no need for anyone to know what had happened or where she and Spike had been, never mind what they’d been doing together. She hadn’t come up with a story in the strictest sense but that much was understood. All she had to do was manage not to do anything to give the game away, like forget a detail or burst into tears. Those would be some pretty obvious tells.

She’d put all this together on the spot, having no choice in the matter. Her mind had been all blank canvassy during the walk back to Giles’s, trying to rationalize the scene she’d left behind. That something screwy had happened was, well, more than apparent, but she had been completely in the dark on the what. What in the world could have made her go from wanting to tear Spike limb from limb to agreeing to be his *wife*? And not only agreeing to be his wife but...*everything*.

She’d found Giles at the townhouse in a state of escalated panic, arming himself to the teeth and about to storm out in search of the others. The others, in that case, being Xander and Anya, who had swung by just long enough to complain about a never-ending string of demons that seemed to have one goal, that being Xander’s head on a pike. Through some back-and-forth, Xander and Giles had deduced that

Willow had performed a spell. Specifically, a spell to have her will done so she could wish away the ickier feelings associated with a breakup. But in classic Willow fashion, that spell had gone kablooeey—she'd succeeded in blinding Giles, siccing the demon population of southern California on Xander, and, well, they hadn't been sure about Buffy. All they'd known was that she was MIA, having last been seen heading out to round up Spike, who had capitalized on Giles's blindness by trying to make with the getaway.

But then a big lightbulb had gone off over Xander's head, and he'd remembered something Willow had said. Something that would account for Buffy and Spike's conspicuous absence.

*"Why doesn't she just go marry him?"*

Buffy had listened to all this without really hearing it, nodding at the right places and providing *uh-huhs* whenever prompted. Coasting the way she had in high school or when her mother gave her instructions she knew she wasn't going to be able to fulfill. All the pieces fit together and everything made sense. She'd been with Spike because he'd asked her to marry him and she'd said yes, and both of those things had only happened because Willow had performed magic she hadn't understood. Magic that had not only taken away Buffy's senses but her pain as well, the same pain she'd been carrying with her since Angel had decided to skip town. The pain she'd been trying to ignore, because if you ignored something long enough, it eventually went away. And it had. The second Spike had fallen to his knees and pulled that hideous ring off his finger, the pain had ended and she'd been about to embark on something better than whatever had come before—something she had yet to define but would have a hell of a time figuring out. And who better to do it with than Spike, her mortal enemy who she realized she only hated because she loved?

She'd loved him. He'd asked her and she'd said yes because she'd *loved* him.

And around this time in the explanation, the door had crashed open and Willow, Anya, and a thankfully demon-free Xander had stumbled into the place, all screaming her name at various octaves. Willow babbling a thousand apologies and Xander pulling her into a hug and Anya chastising Xander for hugging her too long before commenting

that it wasn't fair Buffy hadn't had to fight the demons, considering that was her job and everything. And then the questions—all at once, all harried, all wondering if she'd staked Spike. If Spike had done anything worth being staked over and please let the answer to that be no. And Buffy had stood there, her mind full of the last few hours, trying not to scream or cry or do anything that might make people think the right thing about how she had spent her time. About any of what had happened in that hotel room.

In the end, she'd forced a smile, said she and Spike had been busy trying to reserve venues and arguing over the sort of flowers they should order and what the ceremony would be like. Nothing to worry about, except he'd been a bit wigged when the spell had ended—they both had—and he'd gotten the slip on her. But no matter, she'd find him in due time. Her main priority had been figuring out what kind of mind-control spell had been set on the Slayer because, obviously, of way more importance than the whereabouts of recently neutered vampires.

And either because they'd wanted to or because she could be damn convincing when pressed, they had believed her. All of them. Even Giles.

Which was good. None of them needed to know what had happened, how she had really spent her night.

Or how hard it had been coming back to reality.



GILES WAS HAVING sight problems and Spike had escaped.

Of course Spike had escaped. *Of course*. Big blond pest comes to her, begs her for an invite, pleads for her protection and promises to repay her in her currency of choice—valuable information regarding the mystery of the hour. Except no, he can't talk because he's hungry. Or tired. Or *Passions* is on. And when he does talk, he gives her a bunch of useless crap that will get her precisely nowhere and then expects to be rewarded for it.

No. Buffy had had enough. And as bad a friend as she was for leaving Willow in the middle of yet another Oz-related crisis, Spike remained—annoyingly—the only lead she had on cracking the commando mystery, so she had to track him down. Even if it took all night.

Except it didn't because Spike couldn't even escape the right way.

"Thought that would take longer," Buffy said, giving her surroundings a quick look to verify. Yep. Just outside of Stevenson Hall. Spike had escaped and made a beeline for her. Maybe he had a bondage fetish she didn't know about—and would *never* ask about because way with the gross.

"Me too," he admitted. "Musta got turned around."

Or he was just a big dope. That seemed most likely. Occam's Razor.

"Hang—hang on," he said, looking around now as well, his brow all furrowy. "This...this is it." He broke into a jog and, after her normally scheduled eyeroll, Buffy followed. Not that he'd gone too far, just a few feet, his attention on the ground and the sparse landmarks. "Wait, no...yes."

"What are you talking about?"

Spike turned to her, breathing hard. She had no idea why he did that and wished he would stop. It was distracting. "The lab," he said. "Commando lab. The door was right here where I escaped."

Here being the ground, if his frenetic gesturing was anything to go by. The very grassy ground with no door to speak of.

"I don't think so," Buffy said, but he wasn't listening. Too busy falling to his knees and pawing at the lawn like a huge weirdo.

"Open up!" he screamed, clutching fistfuls of earth. "I'm gonna kill you!"

"Spike, there's nothing there."

"Let me in." The edge vanished from his voice. "Fix me."

Right. Because letting the homicidal and possibly delusional vampire *off* the leash was the next item on her to-do list. Not even Spike could be that stupid.

"Okay. Drop the act."

Buffy seized him by the arm and dragged him to his feet, but he growled and shoved her hard enough to jostle free. "Get off!"

"Okay, that's it—I'm gonna gag you."

Spike answered by popping her in the nose, which, insofar as plans went, wasn't the best given his particular ailment. He was still screaming about the pain in his head when she returned the punch and gave him something else to scream about.



“You’re a right bitch,” he said, dabbing at the blood seeping out of his nostrils. “You know that, Summers? How’d you like it if some buggering lot decided to muck with your head and the one person who could lend a hand insisted on dragging you back the second you got close to putting it to rights again?”

“I have no idea how you lived this long if *this* is how dumb you are,” she snapped back, again seizing him about the arm and tugging. She didn’t have much on hand that would be useful for restraining a vampire. Or *anything*, really. All she’d been able to find before leaving the dorm was a laughably wimpy length of rope. Not the best option but beggars couldn’t be choosers so she got to work fixing it around him. At the very least, she could use that to steer him without having to touch him too much.

“I’m tellin’ you, that’s where I got out,” he barked, but he wasn’t putting up much resistance anymore. Not that he could. One good thing about whatever the commandos had done—Spike had little choice about being manhandled if he didn’t want a migraine. “Could be standing on the sodding lab and you’re just gonna walk away without even going for a snoop? Some slayer you are.”

She spun him around and began frog-marching him toward Giles’s. With any luck, she could have him shackled in the tub and be back on best friend duty within half an hour. That ought to cheer Willow up. “I am the best Slayer,” she said, both to him and herself. And really, who could argue with her?

Apparently, Spike could. He actually had the audacity to scoff. “Right.”

“Are you telling me you’ve seen better?”

Even to her ears, she knew that was the sort of invitation that would, at best, get him punched in the nose again and, at worst, get him scattered to the wind in thousands of dusty particles. Either was a win in her book but she tensed all the same, wondering what path Spike would be idiot enough to choose. She could tell he knew it, too, for both the shine in his eyes and the tightening of his jaw. Working out just how much he wanted to live and how much he wanted her to hurt.

In the end, his survival instincts won the day, for he snickered and gave his head a shake. “You really make it too easy, Slayer.”

"You want me to believe that the door to a commando lab is smack dab in the middle of campus and you just happened to sneak out at a time where no one caught you bursting out of the ground?"

"Considerin' the world you live in, I gotta wonder how you can look down your nose at anything you're told. You expect me to believe *that's* the tallest tale you've ever heard?"

"I don't really care what you believe." Buffy gave him another shove just for the pleasure of watching him trip over his feet. They weren't far from the sidewalk now, and while she imagined there would likely be a bit of gawking from pedestrians the closer they got to downtown, she also knew that most pedestrians had short memories where anything unusual was concerned. Barring interruption, she would have everything back the way it needed to be within twenty minutes, and might actually have time to stop and grab some frozen and creamy reinforcements as an apology to Willow for having been forced to bail in the first place.

"Just admit it," Spike went on loudly. "You don't care about helpin' people unless they can pass some bloody purity test."

"You're not *people*."

"Thank you for provin' my point."

Buffy knew she shouldn't take the bait but jerked him around to face her anyway. "You're *not* people," she repeated through clenched teeth. "Helping you means hurting others. Do you really think that's where this is going? That we're going to knock nicely on the commandos' front door and ask them to pretty please make it so the serial killer can start serial killing again?"

"Oi—"

"You're a means to an end. There is one reason you're alive and that's because *unlike* you, I don't kill things that can't fight back."

"Neither do I!" He had the audacity to look insulted. "Ever ask yourself why it is I go after slayers in the first place?"

"Sheer stupidity?"

"I don't fancy easy fights. You wanna talk about someone who liked offin' the defenseless, that'd be your ex, not yours truly."

It was her own fault for even bringing up the whole serial killer thing, but Spike always knew how to make everything worse. And goddammit if mentioning Angel like this wasn't a surefire way to blank her mind

with rage. That was why he'd done it. Not because he thought he was making a point, rather he'd known it would get under her skin. The same as he had that day on the quad after he'd learned about the night she'd spent with Parker. His bite might be gone but Spike still knew how to land a blow that hurt.

"You know that's not the same," she said, fighting to hold onto her control. The last thing she needed was for some good Samaritan to spy them quarreling and decide to interject themselves into the situation. The rope Buffy had fastened around Spike would be hard enough to explain. "What Angel does without a soul—"

"Oh, here we bloody go..."

"It's not the same! So I don't know why you even bring it up." Buffy gave him an extra hard shove for good measure to get him moving again. "And it's not even true on your end."

He scoffed but thankfully didn't slow down. "Cause you know so much about me."

"You really expect me to believe that you never killed anyone who couldn't fight back?"

"When it was my choice? No bloody sport in hunts where you know the ending. Your dear sweet Angel didn't like that—me goin' out for nosh with a punch."

"I swear, you mention Angel one more time—"

Spike stopped abruptly and whirled around, flexing his arms with enough force that the rope split in two and fell uselessly to the pavement. "Not my fault you can't see the truth when it's right in front of you. What's the matter, love? Afraid you'll learn who it really was you let into your knickers?"

That was it. He was going to die right here. Right now. No more playing nice. No more holding back. No exceptions for information he didn't even have and wouldn't cough up anyway. He was a vampire and she was the Slayer and it was high time she got to slaying.

Then everything changed.

A switch flipped in her head, and it was like all her anger and frustration and pure loathing for Spike fell away. No, not fell. *Fell* implied it could be picked up, and though Buffy knew nothing in this world was certain, she also knew that hate was something she could never feel for Spike again.

Rather than falling, that anger and frustration and pure loathing transformed. She felt it, felt the windows in her mind realigning as certain truths that had always been there, scratching just beneath the surface, finally broke through the dam and she saw the thing she had been trying so hard *not* to see for years. Since the first moment he'd stepped out of the shadows and into her life, and everything had changed. Why it hadn't worked with Angel. Or Parker. Why no relationship would *ever* work with anyone else.

She was completely head-over-heels in love with Spike.

And just as suddenly, he was on his knees in front of her, there on the sidewalk for all to see, gazing up at her with open adoration.

"Buffy," he said, tugging off one of his rings. "Slayer. Should've done this the moment I first set eyes on you. Know I wanted to. Felt it then and knew I was a bloody goner, but I fought it just the same. I fought and fought and I can't fight anymore. You're all I've ever wanted. I love you with everything I am or ever could be. Would you please do me the great honor of becoming my wife?"

He held up the ring and all she could do was stare, the noise in her mind reaching a crescendo. The ring was... God, it was just perfection. Complete with the skullhead she'd always wanted. And even better, he'd taken it off his own finger. A piece of him that was now hers. Not a flashy diamond with all kinds of impractical embellishments that would make patrolling even more nerve-wracking than it was already, but something hardy, not to mention personal.

Something to show he really knew her. As though she'd ever had any doubt.

She looked at the ring and at him, her throat growing tight. "Spike..."

"Got me by the short hairs here, love. Whole bloody life is flashing before my eyes."

"It's just so sudden. I don't know what to say."

He swallowed, gazing so earnestly into her eyes. The tightness in her throat had started to spread, now reaching her chest. Pressing down against her heart and making it hard to breathe, she was so full of happiness. Bright, beautiful happiness she'd been silly enough to think she'd never experience again.

But he was here, right here, and he was offering her the world.

“Just say yes,” he said hoarsely, “and make me the happiest man on earth.”

“Oh Spike, of course it’s yes!”

She watched the light touch his eyes, his face stretching into the purest smile she’d ever seen. Then he was on his feet again and sweeping her into his arms, and his mouth was on hers for the first time, and the street lit up with applause. Not a polite golf clap but wild, enthusiastic cheering. The pedestrians had noticed after all, and they were celebrating with them, even throwing in a few wolf-whistles. Spike had declared his love for her in front of the world, not caring about the space or who saw or anything, and she loved him so much she thought she might burst with it.

But then she stopped listening to the cheers because they didn’t matter at all. Nothing mattered now that she was kissing Spike—her fiancé—for the first time. The very first time. It was crazy that she had gone this long without touching him like this, without knowing how it felt when he kissed or moaned into her, how he held her by the arms, then skated his fingers up her neck until they had nowhere to go but tangle through her hair. Crazier still when she considered just how *large* this feeling was—how bright and all-consuming, how it pressed along the inside of her skin in a way that almost hurt but only almost. That she could have gotten this far without tasting Spike’s kisses, knowing what sounds he made, how he felt while loving her rather than trying to kill her. All that raw strength, all that passion and life, everything he’d ever poured into any of their encounters made completely hers.

It was everything she’d never had and everything she’d ever deserved, and he was giving it to her.

“Oh my god,” Buffy breathed against his lips, grinning madly. “I can’t believe this has happened.”

Spike grinned too, and she loved that. “Me neither,” he said, running his hands up and down her arms. He glanced around to nod at the pedestrians who were catcalling and sending them their congratulations. “Fancy a walk? Got lots to sort out, you and me.”

That was true. God, so many plans to make. Plans she’d never

thought she'd *ever* make, given the whole slayer thing. How silly she'd been. "We should get back to Giles, right? Share the news with him?"

Spike's smile didn't fade but she could tell immediately that visiting the watcher was not on his list of priorities. "Could do that," he said, his eyebrows in full arch-mode. How had she never noticed how sexy arch-mode was? "Or..."

Buffy giggled and leaned into him to take a playful nibble of his lower lip. "Or...?"

"Or we could celebrate, just the two of us. You and me. Gonna be just us goin' forward, yeah?"

She hesitated, considering. The man did raise an awfully good point.

"How would we celebrate?" she asked, keeping her voice low, and with an inflection that could pass for innocent but was anything but.

He favored her with a sultry, suggestive smirk that accentuated the sharp curve of his cheekbones, his eyes all sexy and hooded. It was the sort of look that had her pressing her thighs together, white-hot electricity shooting through her veins. All the good, fluttery feelings that she hadn't thought she'd get to experience in earnest ever again after Angel had left, but god, that had been dumb. And *she* had been dumb. If Angel had still been in her life, she wouldn't be here now. Spike's fiancée. The woman wearing his ring. The woman who would be at his side forever, or however long she had.

"Wanna explore," he murmured, leaning in so when he spoke, his lips moved against hers. A soft not-kiss that was also totally a kiss. "Know what that body can do to me in a brawl, baby. Wanna know how good it'll bruise me in a real dance."

The way he said *dance* left very little to the imagination. "I think maybe we *should* celebrate," she agreed coyly.

"That's my girl." The smirk turned back into the grin, then he was kissing her again, hauling her up against his chest, holding her to him as his mouth made magic against hers.

And it was magic. Spike, *them*, and the wondrous turn her life had taken. There was so little in her world that gave her genuine, unbridled joy. The guilt-free kind where she left all her responsibilities and fears at the door, where she didn't have to worry about what came next or facing

the emptiness at the end of a long day. Her days would no longer be empty. They would be with him.

Everything was about to be absolutely perfect.



EVERYTHING ABSOLUTELY SUCKED.

What was worse, Buffy was pretty sure the others knew something was off. For one thing, she hadn't touched the forgiveness cookie Willow had practically shoved into her hands, and Buffy was not shy when it came to food. With as much exercise as she got on the daily, she could pack away the calories in ways that made her pretty much the least popular person with most diet-conscious girls.

She also hadn't answered Giles when he'd asked if she intended to go looking for Spike—that was, after all, the initial reason she'd come over, even if she had gotten sidetracked. And yes, being disoriented after a spell had been lifted was definitely to be expected. He did not blame her one itty bit for letting Spike take advantage of the situation. Prerogative of an evil vampire.

Maybe it had been her imagination, but Buffy could have sworn there had been an unnecessary emphasis on the *evil* part of *evil vampire*. Like Giles had an idea of what was going on inside her head and wanted to stop that nonsense right away before she let herself think things she knew she couldn't. Like how Spike's hand had felt around hers, their fingers entwined, his palm to her palm. They'd fit so effortlessly. Kind of the same way he'd always felt opposite her in a fight. Terrifying, yes, but also like he was the one who was supposed to be there. The one who made the most sense of anyone she'd ever faced down.

Then there was the look Spike had given her when she'd heard someone scream a couple of blocks down from the hotel he'd been leading her toward. She'd met his eyes, expecting... Well, she hadn't been sure. Maybe resignation or annoyance, knowing that she had to go do a slayer thing before they could celebrate the way he wanted. Instead, he'd leaned forward and pecked her lips, whispered, "Kill it extra good for me, love," and sent her on her way with an enthusiastic smack to her ass.

And don't get her started on the look in his eyes when she'd returned,

her hair slightly tousled, her clothes all icky and muddy, and a bruise forming on her cheek. Buffy had moped her way back to him, feeling the opposite of sexy and desirable. Fuming with herself for her inability to let even one teeny monster escape, and how that would always be her life, and her husband would probably find her all kinds of gross.

Instead, he'd come in close, dragged a twig out of her hair and down her face, before tilting her chin up so their eyes were locked.

"You are so gorgeous," he'd murmured, then kissed her. A soft kiss that had turned not-soft really fast. And it had struck her just how foolish she'd been before with Parker—like supremely out-of-her-mind dumb, attempting to force something with someone, convince herself that what she was feeling were butterflies and not misgivings or second thoughts. That she was doing something because she wanted to do it and not because she thought she needed to in order to move on, terrified that what she'd felt before was the sort of thing a girl only had one chance of finding. Wanting so badly to believe that love after Angel was possible if she were just willing to ignore all the internal screaming that warned her she was being reckless. Moving too fast. Trying too hard.

Kissing Spike had been a world apart from whatever she'd thought she'd been trying to find. And it had been easy. So easy to lose herself in the sensation of his lips and hands, the silky slide of his tongue and the soft little sounds he made, how every time he stroked his mouth over hers, he seemed to grow hungrier. Like he couldn't get enough. Like he never would but he wanted to keep trying, and god, so did she. So much it hadn't mattered where they were, just that they were together.

It was just...big. And painful. No soft landing from that feeling. She had loved him. Loved *everything* about him. The way he revealed all, no guessing at what he was thinking or feeling, no uncertainty about who he was or who they were as a couple. How expressive he was, all his emotions right there at the forefront, shining in his eyes, in the way he touched her.

And for one wild night, a handful of hours, he had been her future husband.

Her *husband*. The Mister to her Missus.

And now he wasn't. Now he was just Spike again. Mortal enemy. Thorn in her side. He who would have her head if he had his say.



He'd said they were something and always had been. And she'd believed him.

Part of her still did.

"Buffy!"

Buffy jolted, shaking her head to ground herself back in the present. The present where her watcher, her two best friends, and her friend's girlfriend were all staring at her with varying degrees of concern.

"Sorry," she said, trying for a smile. "Mind went somewhere that's away. What's the what?"

Willow and Xander exchanged a worried look. "Uhh, the whole Spike thing? I was all grouchy and caught up in my stuff earlier when I gave you grief for going out to find him. But...maybe we should? Find him? For information on the commando guys? Unless that's something that you've decided we don't need."

"No, we need." Buffy nodded, hoping she looked more together than she felt. "There were all kinds of questions we never got around to asking. And that truth spell. I think we still wanted to do that, right?"

Willow nodded back, brightening a bit. "Yeah. Absolutely can do. I'm your spell girl." She glanced at Giles as though to confirm this was indeed the case but seemed to catch herself—remember she was an adult now and these were her calls to make—and focused on Buffy again. "We just need the test subject."

"Do we think he's even still in town?" Xander asked. "I mean, Sunnydale's not that big. He might've decided to hit the road and not stop."

The thought made something in Buffy's chest twinge. Something that had no business twingeing where Spike was concerned. She started and shifted a few steps, hoping to shake the feeling free. Also that her need to move would look like normal Buffy antsiness and not anything close to heartbreak. "Well, I guess there's no time like the present to go look," she said, inching her way toward the door. She had to get out of there. Find some place to hole up until her frazzled emotions were under control—or she'd at least had time to compartmentalize everything that had happened. "I found him almost immediately the first time. Maybe—"

She was almost at the door when three sharp knocks cut her off. Buffy sucked in a deep breath and froze, her pulse starting to pound.

"Maybe he's just dumb enough to come back here on his own?" Xander said.

No. He couldn't be here. He could *not*. Not with her insides doing the conga and her head and heart still all twisted together.

But Spike had never once done the thing she needed him to do, and when she opened the door, she saw now was no different. He was there, looking much the same way he had in the hotel room after the spell had ended. Nothing like she would have expected—none of the jeering or the self-satisfied smirks or the comments that would leave her feeling scraped hollow, rather regarding her as though he were as lost as she was. It had been hard to look him in the eye then, but she forced herself to now. She had to if she wished to start putting this behind her.

"Well," she said, trying and hoping beyond herself that she sounded even halfway casual. "You made that easy."

Spike worked his throat without looking away from her, and there was too much going on behind his eyes. She had no choice. She had to blink.

"Wagered if you were gonna stake me, might be better to get it over with," he said, hesitated, then pushed forward as though to step inside. Buffy immediately skittered back a few paces to give him room, doing her best to ignore the sudden cacophony going on inside her head and the way her body immediately responded to his presence, *his voice*, like the traitor it was. If she tried hard enough, she could feel the whisper of his kisses along her belly, his fingers stroking up her arms, her neck, gripping her hair and holding her as he ravaged her mouth, stroking her tongue with his as he pushed harder, deeper, and—god, *stop it, stop it, stop it*.

Except she couldn't stop. It had just happened. Two hours ago, they had been engaged. He'd loved her and she'd loved him, and everything had been so good. Better than good. *Complete*.

"Not that I want to discourage any Spike stakeage," Xander said, breaking through her thoughts. "But why exactly would we be staking him now?"

"To keep him from sharing that I wanted 'The Wind Beneath My Wings' as our first dance," Buffy said, somehow managing to interject

some bite into her voice. "And that would be stake-worthy if it hadn't clearly been part of the spell."

Spike's eyebrows shot upward. He didn't look away from her. "So we're talkin' about this now? Thought we decided to keep that just between us."

"Well, as much as I would have liked my friends to *not* know that I spent valuable time shopping for wedding venues with my mortal enemy, turns out they already had an idea of what was going on." This she said slowly, carefully, making sure not to break her gaze from his. It was imperative that he understand, otherwise she might have to get out the stake for real, and Buffy didn't think she could stomach that. Not yet at least. "Willow did a spell."

He stared at her, and she could practically hear the questions firing in his head. "*Your chum did a spell that made us mad for each other? Made it so we couldn't stop snogging or shagging if we wanted? What about everythin' else. Slayer? Did the spell do that too?*"

Buffy's face went hot but still she forced herself to maintain eye contact. Willed him to follow what she *wasn't* saying.

Thankfully, Willow appeared at her side the next instant, holding a platter of forgiveness cookies. "Yeah," she said through a forced little smile, her voice an octave higher than usual. "I was, umm, *am* going through some stuff. Trying to magic away bad breakup feelings."

Spike had turned his thousand-yard stare onto Willow. Thank god. "And you thought the key to cheerin' up was me and the Slayer—"

"Getting *married*," Buffy interjected quickly, waving a hand. Her left hand, actually. The one on which still sat the ugly skullhead ring Spike had slid onto her finger in what had seemed like the most perfect, iconic moment of her life. Seeing it there, feeling its slight weight, had her throat threatening to close and sent a harsh stinging sensation behind her eyes. "And it wasn't just us," she went on. "She made Xander a demon magnet and Giles go blind."

He made a sound that was somewhere between a snort and a laugh. "She did what now?"

"That's not what was supposed to happen," Willow said, somewhat reproachfully. "It was supposed to be simple. My will be done."

"And I believe, as I told you, that doing magic while your focus is

askew could be dangerous,” Giles muttered. “Xander could have been killed. Buffy... Well, let’s all be thankful the most that happened was wedding planning of rather questionable taste.”

“Hey, I said I was sorry!” Willow turned to him, freshly stricken. She held up her baking tray. “I even made cookies!”

And that was all Buffy could take. It was too much—way too much. Standing here, this close to Spike, her body still tingling with memories she could never relive. Maybe she was a bad friend, but she didn’t think she could work herself up to telling Willow she’d done nothing wrong just yet. Not when the cost of easing one broken heart was to create another. And not that that even made sense because, hello, her heart was very much intact, thanks. Nothing broken here and certainly not over Spike. That was insane. She’d hated him at the start of the day after all, and it didn’t matter if she remembered what it had been like, the second she’d realized that hate was actually love. That had been magic at work—magic manipulating her into things she couldn’t actually think, feelings she didn’t actually have.

Tomorrow. Buffy would be a good friend tomorrow. She couldn’t be right now.

“I’m gonna head home,” she said, breaking into the exchange before it could rev up any further. At once, everyone was looking at her, all in varying states of concern. Or indifference, in Anya’s case, but the attention was still there. Still massive. And very unwanted. Buffy redirected her gaze to the floor. “It’s been a crazy night and hey, Spike’s back all... ready to be tied up again. We can make with the interrogation tomorrow. I’m all kinds of beat.”

“Buffy,” Willow started to say, but Buffy held up a hand.

“I’m not doing the blame game right now,” she said. “And maybe everyone else should cool it, too. I just... I need a night, okay?”

There was no response, which was probably a response in itself. Buffy waited a beat, then nodded and made her way to the door. She stopped to grab her canary-yellow jacket off the peg beside it, feeling a strange, bittersweet *déjà vu* as she slid it over her shoulders. Remembering how Spike’s hands had shaken as they’d pushed it off earlier. Remembering how hard it had been to pluck it up off the floor, knowing once it was on again, the transition back to the real world would be final.

Only she realized she'd kept one foot inside the world they'd created. A piece of the spell she'd brought with her to Giles's maybe by accident, maybe on purpose. It didn't matter. She had to let it go.

So Buffy stopped and turned back to Spike as she slid the ring off her finger. "Oh, here's this gross thing," she said, shoving the small scrap of metal at him in a hurry, trying to avoid touching him but there was nothing for it. Their skin brushed and electrified, and she jumped back as though scathed. "Maybe next time you propose to someone, do it with an *actual* ring. No woman would be caught dead wearing that."

It was an easy set-up, one that, on a normal day, Spike would have been rather relentless about. But this wasn't a normal day.

Instead, he looked at the ring for a second, toyed with it, then snorted. "I'll take that under advisement," he said before fitting it back where it belonged. Buffy tried not to, but she couldn't help but follow the movement with her eyes. "It was something though, wasn't it?"

*He was dropping kisses along her belly, making his way down. Again. He seemed to really love that part of her body. "We've always had it, Buffy," he whispered, slipping between her legs and spreading her open. "From the bloody start. It's always been there, that something. Something that was just ours. Too tired of fightin' it now. Dunno why I ever tried."*

Her heart skipped. She met his gaze, hating him and loving him in that moment.

"It was," she said.

Then she turned and walked out before that *something*, or anything else, had the chance to catch up with her.



BUFFY HAD it in her head, the way it would go. The second Spike ushered her over the threshold of their hotel room, he would do a growly sort of vampire thing and tackle her to the bed. There would be a lot of gasping and moaning and maybe some clothes ripping—she was on the fence whether she would be angry with him about that—and then the mattress would be at her back and Spike above her, tearing his lips down her throat while he worked to snap her bra open. Or, depending, maybe he would rip that too. Then his mouth would be on her breasts, and

she'd finally understand why women seemed to like that so much. And if she was really lucky, maybe she'd get to the other side of the sensation that had started to burn inside during her night with Parker but had ultimately fizzled out before it could go anywhere.

Not that it had been all that exciting, really. One serious boyfriend and one one-night stand later, and Buffy's track record with sex was way with the underwhelming. Like, she was still trying to figure out why sex was as important as Angel seemed to think it was. Their one time together, while very emotional and special and all the things she supposed it should be—sans the homicide that had followed—hadn't really done much for her physically. She'd always assumed she'd been so overloaded about the fact that it was happening that she hadn't gotten to actually focus on the sensation of sex itself. It had to be better than what she'd experienced, otherwise people wouldn't lose their minds over it.

She'd been a bit closer with Parker, if only because she *hadn't* been head-over-butts in love with him. Easier to focus on the physical sensation, even if it had left her wanting.

But this would be different. Spike would show her exactly what the fuss was about. It would be hot and wild and passionate—it would be everything she needed it to be and more. This wasn't some guy she'd just met or someone she had to worry about not hurting. They knew each other, probably better than any other two people on the planet knew each other. That meant something.

It meant everything.

Having all of this in her head was more than a little distracting, especially with as much space as Spike seemed to take up. How she felt him even when he wasn't touching her—just there at her back while she tried to get the room key to cooperate, breathing hard and making her hair rustle, and then finally taking the key from her so he could work the door open himself. Fingers trembling, all of him trembling, his hand on her shoulder and then his face in her hair as he inhaled like she, Buffy, was something worth breathing in and savoring.

Then the door was open, and he was pushing her inside, guiding her with a gentle touch at the small of her back. The light went on and the room became defined—nothing special, really, except for the fact that it was theirs for the night. There was a television, a small desk, a shared

nightstand, and scattered literature with everything from local hotspots for wayward travelers to a complete room service menu, available from six in the morning to eleven at night, seven days a week. Even the pillows on the bed had those little chocolates like she saw in the movies. Spike had insisted on the best place in town. Buffy hadn't even known Sunnydale had a luxury hotel, and maybe this didn't qualify, but it was still the nicest one she'd ever been in.

The door clicked shut behind her, and she braced herself. Here it came, the ravishing.

Spike closed his hands around her upper arms and pressed his mouth against the back of her head. "Always knew," he said softly, the words whispering along her skin. "Fuck, Buffy, I knew from the start. Scared the piss outta me."

She released a shaky breath. "What did?"

"You." He was nuzzling her hair once more, squeezing her softly where he gripped her. "I looked at you and knew you were gonna change everything. Who I was. Thought I could stamp it out if I killed you quick. Then you wouldn't haunt me the way you did. What a laugh, yeah?"

He squeezed her arms again, then started tugging down her jacket. She let it go without a fight, and it hit the floor with a soft sound that was somehow illicit. Maybe because it was real—one of those things the imagination didn't dream up when conjuring fantasy situations. Nor the way her legs started shaking or the electric pulse that seemed to live beneath her skin. There was a tightening in her belly that was both familiar and not, one that sizzled as it spread. Made her aware of her body in ways she rarely was anymore—like it belonged to a woman rather than a weapon.

"Always worried my heart wasn't in it," he went on, trailing his fingers down her now-bare arms. "Why I couldn't do it. You remember that bloody frat party Harm dragged me to? Where I saw you with what's-his-death?"

Buffy pressed her eyes closed. She didn't want to think about Parker now—she already had more than she wanted to.

"I hated him," Spike went on, fisting the material of her shirt at the hem. "I mean it, love. Wanted to rip out his insides right there just for

thinkin' about touching you. For standin' there next to you not knowing what he had. Drove me out of my sodding mind. Then after..."

"You said some not-nice things," she felt duty-bound to remind him.

"I know." He slipped the black shirt over her head, and then his hands were on her skin in places the hands-of-Spike had never been before. Ghosting a feather-light trail up her arms, gathering her hair together to push aside so his lips might follow suit. There at her back, fingering the clasp of her bra, then pushing the straps down her shoulders as the material went slack and fell away. She thought he might immediately palm her breasts—was convinced of it, in fact—and didn't know whether she was disappointed or not when, instead, he dropped his hands to her belly and started stroking the skin there. "I was furious," he went on, kissing the back of her neck. "Bloody livid. I needed it to hurt because it hurt to think about. Knew it could never be me, but I wanted it so badly, see. I wanted you to want me like this. Needed not to be alone. Not to be the only one."

Her breaths were coming more quickly, harsh against the quiet. "I felt something," she said. "I didn't know what it was."

"That's just it, love." He was stroking up and down her belly, just barely whispering against her breasts before pulling away again. "Hadn't the faintest idea, either. Just knew it was something. That *we* were something. Or that we could be. And tonight, can't bloody explain it, but I'm tired of fightin' this thing I feel. How much I love you."

At last, Spike didn't pause the upstroke but kept going, skating his palms across her nipples and making her shiver. Buffy sucked in a breath that might have also been a sob, needing more, needing everything, and his teeth clamped around her ear at the same time he finally took the soft weight of her breasts into his hands. She would have sworn on a stack of bibles that she was not the kind of girl who enjoyed her nipples being teased based on past experience, and she would have been dead wrong, because the second Spike pinched her between his fingers, something inside of her went off. Like all the way off; she lost contact with her legs and started to sag, but he was there against her, catching her with an arm around her waist and his lips still skating along her throat. Soft and teasing but full of such feeling she was practically vibrating with it. The crazy thing was it wasn't much. Maybe it didn't need to be. Maybe it just



needed to be this. Right. *Him*. Maybe this was what she'd been missing all along.

"We've always been this," he continued in a low rumble, rolling his hips, and then she felt him there against her, pressing into her ass, hard and thick and it *was* like it had been that day on the quad. She'd thought she'd imagined it—or maybe tried to convince herself she had—but he'd been at her back, snarling and angry, and hard, and she'd been too focused on the not-dying part of the fight to let that sink in the way it should have.

How easily that fight might have become something other than a fight if she had, though.

She turned then, needing, and he was there to catch her. Taking her mouth again in one of those intoxicating kisses, pulling her flush against him with a growl that seemed to reverberate all the way down to her toes.

And it was too much and not enough—the way he felt against her, his body familiar in unfamiliar ways. She pushed back his duster so that it slipped off his shoulders and puddled to the floor, then turned her attention to his shirt, suddenly desperate to feel his flesh pressed against hers. Spike obliged with a soft whimper, and then her hands were on his chest and *damn*, that was a good chest to have. Satiny skin pulled over tight muscle to the point he was almost ridiculously sculpted, though not in ways that made her feel suffocated. No, Spike's strength was compact and wiry, almost deceptive. She remembered thinking that the first time they'd faced off, how while he didn't have the physical size of some of the vampires she'd fought, he'd seemed somehow the more dangerous for it. Someone not to be underestimated.

And now he was pushing her back onto a king-sized bed in a room he'd rented to celebrate the life they were going to build together, watching hungrily as she bounced on the mattress. Waiting one beat, two before pouncing himself. Capturing her beneath him with a wicked grin that she hurried to cover with her mouth, melting when he melted, and then they were doing what they did best, only the prize of this fight would be something beyond anything she could have ever anticipated.

Spike won the first tussle, sitting back on his legs and taking her booted feet into those awesome hands of his. Plucking off her footwear

without breaking his gaze from hers, then turning his attention to her slacks. And then, before she could reach for the buckle of his belt, he was pushing her back again, growling low in the back of his throat and bracing a hand on either thigh to hold her open to him.

“Fuck.” Spike breathed out, and she loved that. It was stupid—something no one else would notice, something that surprised herself for noticing in the first place—but she loved it all the same. How alive he was while being dead. How he seemed like something other than a vampire in pretty much everything he did. “Fuck, Slayer, but you have the loveliest pussy I’ve ever seen.”

Heat rose to her cheeks—or maybe that heat had been there already and she was just now feeling it. Buffy dragged her teeth over her lower lip, fought the urge to close her legs because she knew he wouldn’t allow it. But it was strange, being this exposed before someone. Even if that someone was the man she loved beyond all reason. Vulnerability had never been easy for her, and the last time she’d tried, she’d been trampled. Crushed. But at the same time, she trusted where she had ended up. That this was right and good, and Spike would sooner fall on a stake than hurt her. And when he said she was lovely, he more than meant it.

“Look at you,” he said, scaling a hand up her ankle, dragging curled fingers along her inner thigh and lighting a series of fireworks along her skin. “So pink. So bloody wet. Know what that does to me, seeing how soaked you are? Smelling how much you want me?” He leaned into the crux of her spread legs and inhaled with a deep groan. “Always wanted a slayer of my very own. One I could take my time to eat properly.”

She shivered again. There would be things like this in their future—things he said that she knew should probably disgust her but didn’t. The hands that were sliding under her ass now had taken the lives of two slayers and that was the sort of thing that shouldn’t make her tremble with anything other than disgust, yet here she was. Waiting, watching, holding her breath as Spike lowered his mouth to her pussy, her heart thundering hard, wild, the rest of her not believing he meant to do what it looked like he was going to do until he’d taken that first long, indulgent lick up her slit and the fireworks from earlier intensified. Buffy gasped hard and sat up on reflex, but Spike was there, pressing her back as he licked her again, growling into her flesh, and god, was this what sex

was supposed to feel like? Was this what she'd been missing this whole time, because if it was, she got it now. She really, truly, finally understood.

"Christ, you taste so good," Spike whispered against her skin before dropping a kiss along her inner thigh. He rubbed his lips together, shiny with her, and grinned when he caught her staring. "Could do this all night."

Buffy whimpered and watched, her pulse pounding, as he lowered his head again. As he touched his tongue to her parted folds and worked it between them. Lapping softly at first, then taking long, indulgent licks up and down the seam before pushing into her. And then Spike was groaning and growling and performing outright sorcery with his mouth, and she was whimpering and wiggling and arching her hips and gasping at the vibrations when he chuckled. Somehow, her hand wound up in his hair, fingers funneling at first then grasping and twisting, needing something to hold onto as everything else spiraled out of orbit. Spike growled once more, or maybe he'd never stopped, and looked up at her again, met her eyes, and then he was talking. Low and harsh and fast. Telling her to squeeze her amazing thighs around his head as much as she wanted, it wouldn't hurt. He didn't need to breathe. He could stay there all night if she fancied. Sucking on her cunt, on her clit, and he hadn't gotten that far yet but he was looking forward to it because the sounds she made just from this were bloody exhilarating. If he hadn't already been a goner for her, listening to her whimpers and moans and the chorus of *Spike* tumbling off her lips would have done it. Then slipping a finger inside of her and groaning when she immediately clamped down around him, asking her to do *it* again, and she didn't know what *it* was, but she also did, because she'd worried about it before. That need to clench tight when someone was inside of her and the thought it would be too much. So much she could do wrong here, *bad* done wrong, only Spike whimpered that it was all good. That it, that *she*, was his.

And then he had to know, he said. Had to know what she sounded like, what she tasted like, how nicely she would squeeze him when she came. So he licked a path from her opening to her clit at last, drew a tight circle around it with his tongue, and pumped her with another finger, and another, and she arched and he growled some more, and finally his mouth fastened over and he was drawing her into him. Sucking

and laving at the same time, and the second she started to spasm, the second those fireworks stopped being fireworks and became an atomic explosion, he was moving, dragging himself up her body. There was the sound of a zipper being lowered, a shuffle of clothing, then he was rubbing the head of his cock against her slick flesh and plunging inside of her, her name on his lips dissolving into a hard moan—"Oh Buffy, *Buffy*"—as she clenched and squeezed and milked him with her orgasm. Spike pressed his brow to hers, panting, his eyes pressed shut, and when she started to come down at last, she didn't, for he started to move within her in hard, desperate strokes.

"Gotta feel that again," he said, and kissed her. "Again and again. Never stop."

Buffy tangled her arms around his neck, looking up into his face. Her enemy. Her lover. Her fiancé. The man she loved. And decided, with everything he was showing her, she had a few things to share with him too. Starting with the fact that slayers did not concede control to vampires.

So she flipped them over. And he groaned. And she smiled.

Nothing could ruin this.



EVERYTHING IN HER LIFE SUCKED. A lot.

On the plus side, there was plenty to busy her mind that had nothing to do with Spike. And that was good. Great, even, because every other second of the day was jam-packed full of memories and regrets and tangential *what ifs* that she knew better than to chase but chased anyway. Like, what if she hadn't left the hotel room as quickly as she had? What if she'd turned around and marched right back before the door had a chance to swing all the way closed? What if she'd said something else? Tried some other combination of words?

Yeah, those were the kind of thoughts that would drive anyone around the bend, so all the better for this to be a crazy busy time in the life of a college freshman. There were finals to prepare for, winter break arrangements to make, plus holiday preparations. Mom was talking about going to Aunt Arlene's again, as it turned out that Aunt Arlene and

Uncle Paul were having marital troubles—specifically, the sort of marital troubles Joyce had a lot of experience in navigating. Much as she didn't want to leave Buffy for another major holiday, Joyce was suffering from sister guilt and hated the idea of Arlene being alone and depressed during the most wonderful time of the year.

It would be weird, not having Christmas at home, but Buffy supposed that was life. She'd graduated high school and was living on her own, so she was now a grown-up and grown-ups did things like make their own holiday plans that sometimes involved leaving town. Granted, Joyce had been quick to assure Buffy that she was welcome to come along if she wanted, but somehow the idea of listening to her aunt bemoan all her uncle's faults over her holiday didn't exactly put her in the festive spirit.

Besides, there was other stuff to do here. Those commando guys were still slinking around campus, being all mysterious and doing weird experiments on the local demon population. And though Buffy had kinda given up on making significant headway on that before Christmas, they were still a handy-dandy get-out-of-Arlene's excuse that she wouldn't hesitate to use.

Though if she were going to Arlene's, she *wouldn't* have been available when Giles called and asked her to swing by his place to vamp-sit Spike while he ran some holiday errands of his own. What kind of errands, he didn't say, only he had things that needed doing and his first choice had been to pawn Spike off on Xander. Alas, Xander had family visiting, which meant every spare inch of the Harris household had been claimed. That left Buffy the Vampire Slayer as Buffy the Vampire Sitter. Spike was, after all, her responsibility.

Given the choice between the awkward family hell that would have been Arlene's and the more direct emotional hell that was facing the vampire she had been engaged to for a few brief hours, Buffy honestly wasn't sure that she had come out ahead. Except she would have to get used to being in the same room with Spike again at some point. The holidays weren't an ideal time to do this, but nothing in her life was ideal so she should stop acting surprised when life dealt her crappy hands.

Maybe this would be good. She and Spike had to get to the point where they could talk to each other like normal mortal enemies again, lest someone discover the truth of what had happened the night of

Willow's spell. Unpleasant as the task was, Buffy could look at this as an opportunity for growth. Or no, not growth. Balance. She and Spike needed to get back to where they'd been—where they *belonged*. The natural order of things. Then maybe her life could get all the way back on track. At least back to the place she'd been before her world had turned upside down over yet another vampire.

That was what she told herself, at least. And that bravado carried her through the door of Giles's place, got her through the inane small talk as her watcher gave her a quick rundown of how long he planned to be gone, and lasted a good five seconds after the front door closed behind him and trapped her inside a space with the man who might have been her husband for the first time since *that* time.

Bravado couldn't help her if she had no one to perform for.

Buffy wasn't sure how long she stood staring at the closed front door. Longer than she would have if, say, she didn't have intimate knowledge of what Spike's cock felt like in her hand. Or mouth. Or...other places. Everything she'd thought she might say to him had zipped out of her mind without fanfare, leaving her with nothing but the startling awareness of how the air caressed her skin and how loud her heartbeat must sound to him. Because that was what stupid human bodies like hers did—betrayed themselves to the predator in the room. Even if she was the predator's predator. Never had she thought she would be in a position where she didn't know what to say to *Spike*, of all non-people, but here she was, grasping.

Only there was nothing to grasp at. There was only *everything* they had already said. Already done to each other. However much of that had been a part of the spell and how much had been them was up for them to decide. Or pretend.

*"It was something though, wasn't it?"*

It was something. *They* had been something. And now they weren't. They had to talk about that.

When she did muster the nerve to turn around, it was to face an empty room.

"Spike?" she heard herself say before making the decision to speak. Then she winced. Damn, she sounded nowhere near as confident and bitchy as she should for any such discussion.

Too late, though. Spike poked his head out the window separating the kitchen from the living room. "All the same to you, Summers, I'm not really in a mood to chat. *Passions* is gonna be on here in a mo' and I'm not hurtin' to get another performance like the one you gave the other night."

Buffy arched her eyebrows and crossed her arms. "Performance?"

He rounded the corner back into the living room, a mug full of blood in one hand and a box of some British breakfast cereal tucked under his arm. "What, suppose I was to take that to heart?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

He held up his free hand, flashing her the gaudy skull ring that had been hers for several blissful hours. The sight of it had her throat going tight. Had *all* of her going tight, which made the sort of sense that didn't. "When you gave this back," he said, glaring. "You've had plenty of time to paint yourself a pretty picture of how the bad, evil vampire sullied your virtue. Never mind you were begging to be sullied—"

"Hey!"

"—and I didn't ask for it any more than you did. So, like I was sayin', reckon we're better off just ignorin' the whole thing."

"I am ignoring! Observe me, all with the ignoring," Buffy said, flushing now, her heart pounding even harder. It was everything she'd just told herself she wanted—everything that made sense, would let them both move on without losing face or worse. She knew that. Yet that didn't keep her stomach from knotting.

She stood for a long moment, unsure what to do with herself. Spike didn't seem to have the same problem—he plopped onto the couch and flipped on the television to find his program. Happy to pretend she wasn't there. No conflicting thoughts or feelings, no question of whether everything that had happened under the spell had in fact been the spell, no pangs of *what if* keeping him up at night.

It hadn't meant anything to him. Nothing of what they shared. And here she'd been all twisted up about it. Reliving those stolen moments on repeat. Wondering what might have happened if she'd been brave enough to turn around.

Well, guess she knew now.

Buffy pressed her lips together, blinking hard to stave off the stupid

tears she absolutely would *not* cry, thank you, and turned to busy herself with what she could control. Like the fact that Giles hadn't done a thing to get his place into the holiday spirit and that simply would not do. Not if she was hosting another group gathering here—and she was, though she hadn't exactly shared that with him yet, considering she'd just decided it herself. She knew he had some decorations around here from Halloween and being that Christmas wasn't an America-exclusive holiday, it stood to reason that he would at least have a wreath or some garland lying around.

God, she hoped. She could really do with a distraction.

For the next few minutes, that was exactly what she did. Leaped head-first into a distraction. Buffy threw open cabinets, looked in closets, and peered under various pieces of furniture—particularly those Spike wasn't currently using—though to no avail. Giles either had hiding places beyond the obvious or, more likely, owned not even a single stray strand of tinsel. Looked like she'd need to supply the décor in addition to the food, which was fine. She could deal. More to keep herself occupied. Focused on anything that wasn't a certain vampire whose mouth had been places on her body that she hadn't even known mouths could go before the other night. The same vampire who had made it clear what had happened between them hadn't meant anything. The same vampire who was currently seated in front of Giles's seldom-used television doing a very good job of pretending she didn't exist.

“Oi!” Spike barked sometime later, making her jump. “You *tryin'* to make as much bloody racket as you can?”

Buffy frowned and forced herself not to look at him. “No. I'm *trying* to find Christmas decorations, but I'm starting to think Giles is secretly the Grinch. It's like he doesn't care about the holiday at all.”

“Christmas?” There was a pause, then Spike wheezed a laugh—the kind with the ability to make her feel three feet tall. Insult, meet injury. “Mean to tell me you're ropin' Rupert into playin' house again. Don't you have your own sodding family to annoy? What about your mum?”

“Why do you care?”

“Don't recall sayin' I did.”

If he didn't care, why had he asked? Was he trying to screw with her head? “My mom is going to be out of town again,” she said, though she



wasn't sure why she was bothering. "Apparently that's the way she celebrates holidays now. So yes, I'm going to have Christmas here too. And you're not going to ruin it for me."

Spike snorted. "Wouldn't dream of it."

And that was it. Some inner switch had been flipped. A trip wire she hadn't realized she'd placed nice and triggered. Everything she was carrying inside, everything she'd been reliving but trying not to relive, all the second- and third-guessing she'd done since leaving that room, the empty place on her finger where his ring had sat until she'd taken it off, everything began to froth over the edges to the point she couldn't rein it back. Buffy was going to blow—damn her pride, damn goddamn everything. It had taken him two relentless years, but Spike had finally won, and she was done pretending she didn't feel it.

"Yeah, because you're *not* the kind of person to take something nice and break it," she said in a voice that shook with a mixture of heartbreak and anger. "Especially on big, important days that people have been looking forward to their whole life. No, that's not you at all. I'm sure you'll be on your best behavior. How dumb do you think I am?"

The smart thing for him to do would be not to answer, but god knows Spike had never done the smart thing once in all his life. In the next second, he was on his feet, his eyes flashing dangerously. Like he had any right. "You look forward to it so much, pet, here's a bit of advice, from me to you—your mates give you somethin', something that means a lot to them, don't throw it in their bloody face in front of a load of gits who can't stand them the first sodding chance you get."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I dunno. What the hell are *you* talkin' about?"

"I'm talking about having Christmas with the people I love!"

"And I'm talkin' about seein' what's right in front of you while you can. Dunno how long it'll be thick enough to stick around waitin' for you to open those doe eyes of yours."

None of what he was saying made sense. *She* wasn't the one who had pulled away. Yes, she'd closed the door behind her. Yes, she'd left the hotel. But only because... *Only* because—

Only because he hadn't been able to look at her. He'd taken the same chance as she had. It had been there, that moment. Spike over her, inside

of her, loving her with his hands and mouth and cock, but with his eyes most of all. Spike, the man who would be her husband, who had shared more of himself with her than anyone else in her life. Who had made her feel safe and seen for the first time ever.

Except none of it had been real. Not a second.

Buffy was moving before she realized it. She couldn't stay there. Not with him. Not when she was this exposed. Let him run again. Let him leave town. The state. The country, even. Let him get as far from her as possible, she couldn't do this with him. Giles would just have to deal.

And so would she.



IT BROKE.

The haze that had settled over her mind, that fluffy pink fog. It had swept in, taken over, made her Buffy but not Buffy, and now she was Buffy again. Buffy on a bed, staring up into the face of her mortal enemy. Buffy with her hands coiled around the bed posts above her, one of her legs hooked over his shoulder, her heart rabbiting, her pussy clenched tight around his cock and her body on fire as it never had been before. As she'd never known it could be.

And Spike was studying her with his mouth open, his eyes full of recognition. The same recognition. That somehow, someday, they had ended up here. Fighting one second and kissing the next, and now he was inside of her and whatever it was that had taken command had shattered. Spike was inside of her and they hated each other again.

But she was burning up, all of her screaming in need. Not an out-loud scream, at least she didn't think, except the next second Spike was moving again. A slow, exploratory thrust of his hips, his cock slipping out and dipping back where she needed it, and she moaned and he growled and that was it. Buffy releasing a bedpost to take a fistful of his hair, drag his mouth back to her, and melting when he answered with all the heat he'd given her before. Spike capturing her lower lip between his teeth and tugging, his thrusts now hard enough to knock the wind out of her lungs. And then she needed to breathe, and he let her, kissing her cheek, her brow, the hand that had been between them finding her clit again. It

was so wrong, all of it, but the rightest wrong she'd ever experienced. The flood of everything they had shared together hitting her anew—*this* her, the Buffy who was Buffy, and maybe she wasn't getting married anymore but she also wasn't alone. There was a thing to be said for bad boys after all—a reason she hadn't felt the flutters she was supposed to feel while setting up a date she hadn't wanted to go on. It was this, all this. It was Spike pounding into her, biting at her calf as he stroked her clit. It was everything he'd told her—those little moments between them that had always been something, however undefined. It was Spike telling her to do it again. One last time. If they were doing this, they were doing it right. His way. So he could remember when it was over.

And it was that word, *over*, that broke the illusion. Made her see what this was—a wild ride for him—and what it wasn't—the start of anything. It was an unfulfilled fantasy he'd never expected to be anything but. It *wasn't* revolutionary, it *wasn't* life-changing, it *wasn't* anything other than this moment right now. The last dregs of another wonky hellmouth story that had caught her up in its narrative to the point she hadn't been able to stop it, just hang on for the ride.

She felt her eyes fill and blinked hard to keep her tears from spilling. But there they were, tumbling down her cheeks as her body lit up from the inside, as Spike buried his face in her throat, shuddering and emptying himself into her, saying her name like a prayer. Like it meant something, and she knew it didn't. Not to him. Not like it did to her.

Because he was a vampire and she was a slayer, and they were supposed to hate each other, not love.

"Fuck," he breathed into her neck. "Fuck, Slayer, what have you done to me?"

Buffy didn't reply. She had no answer. Why should she?

It was all over.



IT TURNED out the thing Giles was off doing was gathering everything he'd need to host Christmas at his place.

"Your mother was rather, ahh, insistent that you have a good holiday," Giles had explained when he'd called to ask if she was all right. He'd been

a bit taken aback to discover Spike alone in his *flat*, to use his British word, and wanted to make sure nothing pressing had come up. Which made Buffy feel like a big rotten Failure—capital F and everything—for not being able to tolerate Spike’s company for more than an hour.

No explaining why, though. And Giles hadn’t asked. Maybe he already had an idea. God, she hoped he didn’t.

“That was nice of her,” Buffy had replied dully. In fact, it had taken every ounce of strength she possessed to keep from bursting into tears. That seemed to be her mood at the moment.

“Well, she knew you were distraught over Thanksgiving and loathed leaving you again. I assured her we would do everything we could to make the holiday a good one for you.”

“And...at your place.”

“Yes...” There had been a pause, an unspoken question that, in turn, answered one of hers. Giles did have an idea. Probably a good one. And because *he* was good, he wasn’t going to make her talk about it. Just let her know that he knew and it was all right.

“If you believe Spike has nothing more to offer us, then I don’t see the harm in letting him go,” he’d said. And oh, that had been tempting, but Buffy knew better. She wasn’t convinced Spike had given them all the goods on the commando guys—she *was* convinced getting him to cooperate would be like pulling teeth, but that was still her problem, and eventually, she would have to suck it up and be the Slayer. Like always.

Thankfully, she had a lot of practice.

That didn’t mean Buffy wouldn’t avoid Giles’s like the plague until it was time to get into celebration mode because, well, she would, though Willow and Xander were constantly over there getting things ready. Xander had gladly opted out of his family plans the second he’d learned another Scooby holiday shindig was in the works, and Willow had no plans to speak of, so they were helpful recruits in the task of making everything appropriately festive. Neither gave Buffy too hard a time for bailing, either. Maybe Giles had said something. Maybe they all just knew. Maybe, for once, they weren’t going to make her feel bad for feeling bad. They never said one way or another. All Buffy knew was that when she arrived at Giles’s on Christmas Day to make with the merry, it looked like a Hallmark store had thrown up all over the place. There

were miles of garland and twinkling Christmas lights, a fully decked-out tree, and sprigs of holly crammed into every nook and cranny.

“Guys, this looks amazing,” Buffy had said earnestly, unable to fix her gaze in one place too long. There was just so much to see.

“Yeah,” Xander had agreed, tossing an arm over Anya’s shoulder. “We give good Christmas.”

There had been no denying it. And because of the overload of seasonal cheer, Buffy had mostly been able to ignore the fact that Spike was there. But only mostly because, well, he was *very* there. Had a comment at the ready for everything, from the style of the décor to the ratio of alcohol used in the eggnog that he had *not* been invited to sample but had taken anyway. All the while, she had the feeling he was trying to catch her eyes, but Buffy refused to make herself an easy target. Her mom, Giles, and her friends had gone out of their way to create the perfect holiday. Spike couldn’t ruin that. Not if she didn’t let him.

He could watch her be happy and choke on it.

“Who’s this one from?” Buffy asked, selecting one of the final gifts that had been tucked under the tree late that afternoon. It had been a good holiday, as evidenced by the demolished wrapping paper strewn across the place, interspersed here and there with the debris from ripped-apart gift bags. Buffy had added a few new weapons to her arsenal along with a pair of earrings she’d been coveting for the last few months. The box she held now was on the small side, jewelry-sized, and bore her name but no *from* tag. It had also been wrapped with the sort of care that made her think the gifter had either been in a rush or a bad mood—paper sticking out at the ends and bent backward in at least one corner.

She glanced up, expecting to see Willow or Xander grinning at her expectantly, but both were studying the package with identical curious expressions. Giles, too, had his brow furrowed and shook his head when their eyes met.

Then, unable to help herself, Buffy glanced at Spike, and she knew. He held her gaze for a moment, parting his lips—those oh-so-kissable lips—before glancing at the package she held, rubbing a hand along the back of his neck.

Nervous. Spike was nervous.

“Riveting as all this is, think I’ll pop out for a smoke,” he said, still

looking at her, and rose to his feet. "Sun's gone down enough and god knows I gotta do somethin' to keep from dusting outta boredom."

"Feel free to stay outside until we're gone," Xander said, waving him off. "We won't mind."

It was either a testament to the group's belief that Spike wouldn't run or their uncertainty as to whether his running would be a good thing that no one tried to stop him. Buffy watched him go, every thought in her head clashing, the package in her hand growing heavy with the weight of expectation. What was this? What did it mean? *Did* it mean anything or was she being dumb? She wasn't sure she could take another blow to the heart and anything Spike had given her was bound to be heart-blowy.

"Don't leave us in suspense!" Willow said, edging closer to her. "Unwrap that puppy!"

She waited until the door closed, Spike on the other side, before tearing at the paper, feeling somewhat detached from her body. Her hands shook, all of her did, her mind still racing, at war with itself.

This didn't mean anything. Nothing he gave her would. Probably something to rub salt in the wound he'd made, knowingly or not.

The last of the wrapping paper fell away, revealing a small box. Not a jewelry box but comparable in size. Something slidey was inside it.

"Come on Buffy, what's in the box?" Xander asked, leaning forward. Then he seemed to catch himself, sheepish, and repeated more theatrically, "What's in the *box*?"

Buffy swallowed, lifted the lid, and looked.



HE HADN'T RUN. He was there when she stepped outside, standing just inside the shadow of the building, puffing away on a cigarette, his back to her. Every line of his body was rigid. She didn't know how she hadn't seen it before.

Though there was a lot she hadn't seen if the note tucked inside the box was even partly true.

"Hey," she said, closing the door behind her.

Spike hesitated then turned, his eyes round with vulnerability she'd only seen there once before. A few nights ago, when he'd sunk to one

knee and pulled that godawful ring off his finger. The one now dangling from a chain between her breasts. She watched him find it, watched something play out across his face.

"I didn't want to do it." Buffy took the ring between her fingers without really meaning to, just needing to feel its weight. Its realness. "I thought you wanted it back."

He shook his head, tossed his cigarette to the ground and stamped it out as he took a step toward her. "Was yours. The second I gave it to you, it was yours." Spike stopped just an inch away, still studying the ring with fixed intent. Then, slowly, he raised his eyes to hers, and everything was there. All the fear and the tension, the heartbreak and the yearning, the confusion and misgivings, and something else too. Something better. That knowledge, that hope, that maybe he hadn't been wrong after all. That neither of them had. Just two idiots who didn't know how to move forward once the decision was theirs to make.

Spike lifted a hand, traced a finger along the ring. "This mean what I think it does?"

"Depends. What do you think it means?"

He paused, his mouth twitching, but he didn't look up. "That we're still something, even if we don't know what it is."

There was the safe path and the not-safe path. The good call and the bad one. She didn't know which her decision was just yet, but if he was going to be brave, then so was she. They could find out together.

"We're something, Spike," Buffy said softly.

And kissed him.

