

# UNTIL THEN

*A Spike/Buffy Romance*



HOLLY DENISE







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He was going to kill the bitch. One day—one day soon when his bloody legs started working again. The Slayer might be a firecracker, one he'd underestimated at that, but she wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed. Seemed one needed to get a bit more living under their belt before they just accepted that a decent death scene was more than just flash and fire.

He'd tell her that, too. The second he was out of the sodding wheelchair, he'd corner her when she was making the rounds one night. Wait until she thought it was time to return to her sweet little beddy-bye, then send a few of his flunkies to their deaths just to get her nice and winded. Spike didn't care how many it took, how many he had to sacrifice. He had them to spare and never been a flunky sort really before all of this anyway. But the little twig would be overwhelmed and frustrated, wonder aloud just where the bleeding hell all of them were coming from, and then he'd make his grand entrance.

*"You really thought that was enough to do me in, Slayer? Lesson the first—don't gloat until you know for certain you've won."*

And then he'd leap into action, and it would be brilliant because even when she was out of breath and exhausted, the girl was still a

force of bloody nature. She'd throw punches and he'd dodge blows and she'd kick at his head and he'd grab her by the ankle and throw her face-first into the nearest mausoleum. He'd be able to smell her heat—he always did—and if he was in a giving sorta mood, he might even decide to give the girl a proper send-off before sinking his fangs into her throat.

Spike sighed, flicked his cigarette to the ground and reached into his duster pocket for another. It wouldn't do to linger out here too much longer. While sunrise was still a few hours away, he had to get back to the factory, which took a bit longer on wheels than it did on legs. And unwise as it was, Spike hadn't been able to abide being babysat, so he'd made out on his own, trusting his years and experience to get him back in one piece. If asked, he'd be hard-pressed to figure out what had sent him out here in the first place. All he knew was he'd been watching Dru dance with Dalton while singing about the massive dolly she was getting for her special day and going through one of his darker moods.

Bloody figured that the second Dru was back to herself, he wasn't in a position to celebrate with her. That he'd been forced to watch his dark princess flirt and fawn over the lackeys rather than enjoy those sinful rolls of her hips himself. It was the Slayer's fault—it all came back to the bloody Slayer. And while Spike couldn't control a lot about his situation at the moment, he could be sure he kept his senses sharp. Didn't lose her scent. Found out where she hung her stakes at the end of a long day's slay before tucking in and believing herself safe for yet another night.

Which was how he found himself here, sitting outside the place that had to be the Slayer's. The whole place stank of her—that lavender soap she scrubbed into her skin, the floral shampoo that teased his nose every time she whipped her ditzy little head. And there was a tree perfectly positioned for the neighborhood stalker and it had Angelus's scent all over it. The two of them probably got right cozy in her bedroom, just a stretch down from her mum. Her holier-than-thou mum who wouldn't *dare* think of coming after Angelus with a bloody ax because the big sod had a way of getting on any woman's good side.

"Wanker," Spike growled. Just wait until his legs were working

again. He'd climb up that tree himself and rap on her window, watch her rub the sleep from her eyes, her lips tugging into a grin as she pictured her hunk of vampflesh waiting to greet her. Odds were she'd be wide awake before she opened the window, of course, and then he'd see that flash of brilliant righteous fury before she leaped at him and they had themselves a right good dance.

He was just about to call it a night and start the long roll home—*bloody Slayer*—when the front door of the Slayer's house opened and a young girl stepped out. And though he wasn't proud to admit it, Spike's first reaction was panic. The last thing he needed was the bitch discovering he was alive when he was still too crippled to give her the death she deserved. But the panic faded almost instantly—the girl was little more than a child, maybe ten or eleven, and she didn't look like she was on a mission to stake anything.

No, from the bag over her shoulder and her red, puffy eyes, she looked like she was running away.

Well, here. The Slayer had a kid sis. How was it he hadn't known this?

The girl closed the door behind her, moving with the sort of sloppy grace universal among all children who thought they were getting away with something. For a moment, she stared at the door as though it would bite her, then stuck her little chin in the air, hoisted her getaway bag firmer across her narrow shoulder, then turned and made her way down the porch steps.

Spike could have let her go. There was no reason to stop her. Kids ran away all the time, and they were welcome to it. But this wasn't just any kid—it was the Slayer's sister, and that made her special.

So instead of letting her pass, he rolled the chair toward her. "Was just thinkin' I could go for a snack," he said, grinning when the girl started and whirled to face him, her eyes impossibly wide. "Slayer's little sis will do me just fine. Could be your blood's enough to get my legs workin'. What do you say, pidge?"

The girl arched an eyebrow at him. "So you know who my sister is and you think I'm dumb enough to walk over there? No wonder you're in a wheelchair."

A rush of anger ran hot alongside surprise and delight. "You're not afraid of me."

"My legs work. Why would I be afraid of you?"

"Still a vampire, aren't I? Got strength and speed and a lot more than that. If I wanted you dead—"

"You just said you did."

He snickered. "Was just my way of introducing myself, that was. What's your name then?"

The girl dropped her gaze—a rookie mistake. She was brave, sure, but a child through and through. Just naïve enough to get herself killed, especially with that mouth of hers.

"Dawn," she said. "I'm Dawn."

"Well, Dawn, I'm the bloke who's gonna be ripping out your sister's dainty neck once I get my legs working properly again."

"Whatever. Buffy probably put you in that chair which means she kicked your butt once. If she did it once, she'll do it again."

*Buffy.* Had he heard the girl's name before? Ordinarily, it would have been the first thing he'd track down about the Slayer he aimed to make his next conquest, but the Slayer hadn't been the selling point in coming to the Hellmouth. Just a perk.

Until she'd gone and dropped an organ on him, that was.

"You think so?" Spike replied coolly.

"Uhh, yeah. Buffy's, like, the best."

"Ah huh. And you're runnin' away because...?"

Dawn glanced down, then immediately straightened and met his eyes again. A miniature warrior in the making. "Who says I'm running away?"

Spike couldn't kill his smirk if he tried. Hell, he liked this kid. All bravado and no sense, but that didn't seem to matter a damn to her. "Right. You make a habit of goin' on midnight strolls with your bag all packed?"

She frowned and glanced at the bag in question—a bag that seemed to dwarf her in size. For a stretch, she studied the thing as though surprised to find it there, then sighed and let the strap slide off her shoulder so the whole bloody thing dropped to the ground. "Buffy's a

pain in the butt,” Dawn grouched, crossing her arms. “And she gets away with everything. Like killing my mom’s boyfriend.”

What was this? Spike perked his eyebrows. “The Slayer offed your mum’s fella? Seems a bit too prim and proper to—”

“Okay, so he was a killer robot or something.” Dawn rolled her eyes as though this were incidental. “But he made good cookies and he totally called Buffy out on her crap. Like sneaking in the house at all hours and being rude. She has a stupid boyfriend, you know, who’s *been in her room*. He’s all creepy and...older. Like way too old for Buffy. I think he could be our dad’s age.”

Spike covered his mouth to smother a chuckle. God, this was precious. “If you’re talkin’ about Angel, he could be your old man several times over, on account of havin’ no pulse and all that.”

Dawn stared at him, blinking. Then the lights went on behind her eyes. “Oh my *gross*, he’s a vampire? My sister, the *Vampire Slayer*, is macking on a *vampire*?”

“I am sittin’ right here, you know.”

“Yeah, but you’re not macking on my sister.”

Well, there was a pretty thought. One that Spike couldn’t say hadn’t occurred to him before, but also one he’d never entertained when in the presence of others. Buffy, if that was the girl’s name, was a young little thing, in that wondrous place between adolescence and womanhood. The way she moved on a dance floor made her age seem incidental, and she sure knew how to handle herself with a warrior’s grace. But there were times he’d caught her acting every bit the starry-eyed teenager.

The parts of him that were all man couldn’t help but respond to the parts of her that were all woman. That first night watching her dance with her chums... Yeah, he’d wanted to do more than take a bite out of her. The fact that she got hot and excited when fighting him didn’t help matters much, either. It was intoxicating, knowing what he did about her body and how it responded to him, knowing full bloody well she likely *didn’t* know, herself. Because that was the way Angel liked them. Sweet, young, and innocent, like his Dru had been.

The girl was still digesting the tragic news of her sister’s love life

when Spike clued back into the present. He found her with her little nose scrunched up, like she'd tasted something foul.

"I thought vampires were all..." Dawn made a grotesque face and somewhat slobbered all over herself in her attempt at a growl. Spike might have been offended if he weren't trying to keep from laughing. "So what makes *Angel* so special?"

"His own bloody ego, for starters," Spike replied. "Also, word has it he has a soul. Of all things bloody ridiculous."

"What does a soul have to do with anything?"

"Well, let's just say, if he didn't have one, I'd wager bitty Buffy would be six bloody feet under by now." He paused. "Course, the old sod wasn't much for seeking slayers out. Always wagered he was a bit skittish about them, 'specially after that business with Holtz. Hunting the Slayer down is more my taste."

If the proclamation that he was here in a predatory capacity at all bothered the girl, she didn't let it show. Instead, she favored the wheelchair with a pointed look and snickered. "Seems to be working out for you real good, huh?"

"Oh, I will be killin' her, pidge. Probably better you're runnin' off now. It'll be a bloody bloodbath."

Dawn wrinkled her nose before opening her mouth, undoubtedly ready to fire off yet another jab—and hell, this was the most fun Spike had had in weeks—when the girl's eyes went wide and the playful snark evaporated. He would have asked what was wrong, but then she was there, in his nose and throat. And for the first time since he'd laid eyes on her, Spike felt a shiver of something other than love and longing.

"My Spike found me a dolly," Dru cooed, dragging her nails down his arm. "Pretty little thing, isn't she? Are you looking for a home, dolly?" She hunched over and stretched out her arms. "I can be your new mummy."

Dawn was staring at Dru with wide eyes and trembling so hard Spike could damn near feel it through the ground. He'd seen this play out enough times to know what came next.

There was no accounting as to why his gut was knotted. Spike had more than a little blood on his hands, and while he didn't go out of his way to kill children, he certainly hadn't shied from it in the past. More



than once he'd come home to find Dru nursing her latest dolly—sometimes corpses, other times a child-sized fledgling with a monstrous appetite. It was the way of things, or had been before Prague, and now that his dark princess was again at full strength, it stood to reason she'd fall back into old habits, or at least those that gave her comfort.

But Dawn wasn't any girl. She was the Slayer's kid sis and, well, Spike didn't much care for going after families. Or targeting a family member as a means to torture the person he meant to hunt. That was more Angelus's thing. Hell, Spike didn't typically *hunt* like this at all. He set his sights, leaped into action, and sorted through the debris later. Maybe. If sorting was needed.

And there was something else—something he couldn't quite name.

"Spike, why is the dolly staring at me?"

Spike swallowed and wrapped his hand around Dru's wrist. "Spect she thinks you're pretty, ducks."

"Is that so?" Dru tilted her head. "I could make you pretty, dearie. Young and pretty forever. I think my boy likes you, too. You could join our happy family."

Dawn edged a step back, still trembling all over.

*Good girl.*

"I...I have a family," the girl said, her voice trembling. "A family I like just fine."

"Pet," Spike said, tugging on Dru again, "think we oughta head back. Sun'll be up before too long and I..." He scowled and glared down at the wheels the Slayer had forced onto him. "Reckon I could use a push or two to get goin', yeah?"

"You don't want to play with the dolly?" Dru turned her gaze to him, those large, enigmatic eyes he'd fallen into more than a century before and had never wanted to climb out of. "I thought you liked it when I play."

"I do, love. But the sun—"

"The sun's asleep, my sweet. All tucked up in her bed, visions of sugarplums dancing in her head. She doesn't know what the moon whispers."

Spike glanced at Dawn, who was slowly tracking her way back to

the house. Even if she broke into a run, though, there was no way she'd outpace Drusilla.

*Fuck.* Should he call for the Slayer? That'd sort of give the game away, wouldn't it? Far as he knew, the dizzy bitch had no idea he and Dru were still around. And he'd so been counting on the element of surprise for when he finally buried his fangs in the chalice that was her throat. It'd make everything so much sweeter.

While he knew perfectly well that Dru couldn't outright read minds, there were times when it seemed she could. This was one of them. As soon as the thought of calling for the Slayer danced through his head, Drusilla's floaty, happy smile melted away into the cold glare that had spelled the end of too many people to even try to count.

"You would save the dolly from Princess?" she asked in a soft, hurt voice.

"That's the Slayer's sister, there," Spike replied. "You know we'll be at the top of the bloody list if she goes missing."

But that hadn't been Dru's plan. Her plan had been to turn the girl—it was plain as bloody day on her face. The sort of psychological warfare she'd picked up from Angelus, whether she knew it or not. That was her thing—the whole family's, actually, except Spike's. While he hadn't been averse to turning the odd person here and there, there were very few people he could see wanting to keep around forever, and there was a certain amount of responsibility that came with being someone's sire. Responsibility had never been his thing—not after he'd been cut loose of the mortal coil. The only thing he wanted any responsibility for was looking at him now like he was the enemy.

"Darling, let's go get a nibble, yeah?" he asked. "Plenty of homeless to pluck off the streets. Let's leave the little girls for another night. Not sporting to kill her around Christmas, is it?"

Drusilla poked out her lower lip in that way she had, the one that typically made him melt. And Spike could feel it—the urge, the drive to do right by her. Give her what she wanted, no matter what it cost. He released a trembling breath, focusing on that lip, the controlled way she made it tremble. Imagined sucking it between his teeth as he dove a hand under her skirt and got her singing his praises with a

clever combination of fingers and words. His Dru loved it when he murmured into her ear. The pretty poetry, she called it.

Then he caught movement over her shoulder and for a second, his eyes clashed with the kid's. There was nothing overly remarkable about her—nothing aside from the fact that she was the Slayer's sis—and that ought not matter to him. Dru should have whatever she wanted. She was, after all, his black goddess.

But she couldn't have Dawn. Bugger if he knew why.

Spike seized Dru around the waist and tugged her into his lap. "Let her go, pigeon," he murmured, into her ear, prepared when she went from docile kitten to ferocious hellcat, thrashing and screaming and clawing to get free. Thankfully, the girl was clever enough to know the cue for what it was, and seconds later, the resounding slam of the front door punctuated the air. Between that and the wails tearing through Drusilla's throat, the Slayer was soon to be out.

"It's over," Spike rasped into her ear, not flinching when she sliced her nails into his cheek. "Dru, we gotta go. Now."

"Poisoned, you are," Drusilla cried, seconds from falling to pieces. "She's poisoned you. My pretty boy."

"Baby, we gotta—"

"No treats for princess."

A light on the second floor went on and a shadow moved across the window.

"Sweetheart, it's time to go. You gonna leave me here to face the Slayer or do you wanna go out for a nummy treat?"

For a long moment—a moment they didn't have to spare—Dru just glowered at him, and he thought there was a real possibility that this was the end of the road for him after all. So much for all those grand plans—Spike, William the Bloody, Slayer of Slayers, done in by a misplaced act of mercy even he didn't understand, betrayed by the woman he worshipped. There was probably some poetry in that, but he hadn't the time to butcher it. Just hoping that whatever Dru saw in that glower was enough to make her remember that for as much as she hated him right now, she loved him the rest of the time.

A second light flickered on. The muffled sound of raised voices reached his ears, and his panic kicked into overdrive.

But then he was moving—no, flying. The pavement racing beneath his wheelchair, the wind in his hair, and Drusilla cackling madly over his shoulder, laughing and squealing and carefree as a child.

Thank fuck for her turns.

“A midnight snack for my dearest?”

Closer to mid-morning, the way things were going, but the sun was still at least two hours away, and if it kept Dru happy, he’d agree to anything.

He thought of the girl he’d left behind.

Almost anything, then.

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He was going to kill her. Just in time for Christmas, too. No less than the bitch deserved.

Spike sneered up at the house, picture-perfect snapshot of suburbia that it was. The kind of house William would have fancied had he lived in the twentieth century. Home—downright cozy, point of fact—but full of life and love and a whole sodding list of things that were too good for the likes of him.

Definitely too good for the likes of her, though.

Once upon a time, he would have preferred spending Christmas somewhere it might actually snow. That had been his plan this year. Take Dru somewhere right nice, maybe eat an innkeeper or two, get the whole retro *Holiday Inn* vibe. She liked that movie, *Holiday Inn*—the dancing and the singing and the overly happy ending. She especially liked it when she had dollies she could have act out her favorite scenes. One memorable Christmas, she'd forced some poor sod to sing "White Christmas" at the piano as she'd stripped pieces of his wife's white skin away.

Good times, those.

But no more. Not even the best laid of plans could win over his

dark princess once she had her twisted little mind set on something. And she did.

*"I look at you, all I see is the Slayer."*

Yeah, well, he'd show her. Bring her a proper present to make everything right again. After all, what would look better at the top of a Christmas tree than the Slayer's head?

Nothing, that's what.

Spike snickered and tore his eyes away from the window he knew was hers. He wasn't exactly sure what his plan was—didn't seem to matter, since his plans had a way of going tits-up anyway. At the moment, he was torn between climbing through her window like her poncy soul-having git of a boyfriend and snapping her neck while she slept, or calling her out for a proper fight. The former would be the quickest, obviously, and if he didn't make a big production of the killing that might make it even more likely that he'd get back into Dru's good graces.

*See, sweetheart? Not even worth a warrior's death. Did her in her sleep. Satisfied?*

Yeah, that was the way to go.

Except...

He didn't think he could. Every time he saw himself hunched over Buffy's bed, staring at her sleeping face, it didn't go any further. The times he tried to force it, Buffy would snap awake and leap at him in a tangle of punches and kicks that'd rouse the whole household in record time.

A slayer like Buffy couldn't be knocked off in her sleep. And didn't that prove Drusilla's point? Spike shouldn't give a fig about how the girl kicked it—that she was dead and six bloody feet under ought to be enough. But it wouldn't be. She was too glorious to kill so quickly. Hers was a death worth savoring.

Fuck. Maybe Dru had the right of it. Everything in his life had turned on its arse since he'd first blown into Sunnyhell—since he'd first gotten a glimpse of that blonde nymph shaking her assets all over a bunch of children not fit to lick her boots.

He could have taken her in that alley. Hell, he could have gotten himself pressed up against her like any of the other tossers crowding

her that night. And yeah, she would've clued into his being a vampire right quick, but she'd been a slip of a thing, naïve in ways Angel hadn't had a chance to muck with just yet. He could have had her then.

Then he wouldn't be here.

Watching her house and thinking of all the ways he would kill her.

"Hey."

Spike started, whirled around and scowled into the pert face of the Slayer's kid sister. Perfect. Just bloody perfect.

"Oh," he said. "It's you."

Dawn crossed her arms, all bitty-Buffy style, and arched an eyebrow at him. "I thought Buffy ran you out of town."

"Is that the way the bitch is tellin' it?"

The girl shrugged a single shoulder. "You were here, you tried to be scary, and then you left. I got the gist."

"*Tried* to be scary?" Spike snarled, taking a step toward her—a good, menacing sort of step that ought to have the girl quivering where she stood. All Dawn did was grin. "You better run inside before I remind you just how scary I am, pigeon."

"Sorry," Dawn replied, not sorry at all, obviously. "It's just hard to get all trembly over a vampire who likes my mom's hot chocolate."

Yeah, he did fancy Joyce's hot chocolate. And her company. Point of fact, he'd had a right nice time the last time he'd been here, chatting with the less obnoxious Summers women about life, love, and Dru... Then Angel and his massive forehead had to show up and ruin everything. Him and his little *we're just friends* bodyguard.

"What are you doing outta your beddy-bye?" Spike asked, reaching into his duster pocket and drawing out a packet of fags. "Or have you decided to make runnin' away from home part of your holiday?"

Dawn smirked at him. "I came out here to see you, dummy."

"Knew I'd be here, did you?"

"No. I was watching to see if Buffy would sneak out to go check on *Angel*." The way she said *Angel* was somewhere between a yawn and a sneeze. Dramatic little chit. "Not sure what's going on there, but he's been even more of a creeper than usual."

"So they're not even pretending anymore?"

"Oh, they're not together." Dawn emphasized this with an eyeroll.

“Buffy was very clear that they were all with the split. And that she wasn’t going to be his friend anymore, either.”

Well, that was a mite surprising. Could it be the Slayer had grown a backbone after all? For reasons that had nothing to do with how he felt about the bitch, Spike found his mood lightening. Still going to kill her, of course, but he felt a bit better about it now.

But hold up, that didn’t check out.

“If they’re not together, why do you think she’s gonna pop off to see him?”

Dawn gave him the same look pre-teen girls had been giving blokes since man first walked out of the cave. Amazingly, it didn’t make him want to smack it off her—or snap her neck just to show her who was in charge. For whatever reason, Spike found he liked the kid. Liked her mum, too, just fine. Just couldn’t stand the sodding Slayer.

And sure, Joyce and the littlest Summers would mourn Buffy once she was in the ground—they were only human, after all—but that was just the cost of doing business. He couldn’t stop being Spike, the Slayer of Slayers, just because this particular Slayer’s family happened to be all right.

“She’s still totally hung up on him.” Dawn pulled a face. “And, like I said, he’s being a super creep right now. Came into her room and everything. Whatever. Maybe he’ll accidentally walk into a stream of sunshine or something and give us the greatest Christmas gift of all.”

Spike sputtered a laugh, stuck one of his cigs between his teeth then fished out his lighter. “God bless us, every one.”

“So...you’re back in town,” Dawn said. “Guessing the whole ‘torture-her-into-looooooove’ thing didn’t go as planned?”

He rolled his eyes, lighting up. “Was already tangled up with another bloke when I found her. Decided it was time to cut the bitch loose good and proper.”

From the look on Dawn’s face, she didn’t believe him. Fuck, how hopeless did he have to be that a bleeding twelve-year-old could see right through him?

Fine. He’d stick with the truth.

“Figured if I brought her your sister’s head, she might decide to make my holiday merry and bright, if you must know.”



Dawn snickered. "My sister could so kick your butt."

Yeah. Like he didn't know that. "I've done in two slayers, Nibblet. Your Buffy's no bloody different."

"Two other slayers that broke your back and got you stuck in a wheelchair?"

Well, that was a low bloody blow—the sort of blow that would ordinarily earn some tosser's spine being ripped right out. "You best watch it," Spike said in a low voice. "Creature of the night here. I've killed men for less."

To her credit, Dawn seemed to understand and appreciate her error in ways she hadn't before. Recognize, for the first time, that she was out in the open with a dangerous predator, and one she'd be better off not underestimating. Her eyes went wide and she backed up a step, turning her head in such a way he knew she was calculating the distance between where she stood and her front door, but also trying to keep an eye on him. "B-but you won't kill me," she said bravely, taking another step back. "You don't kill kids."

"Is that so? Know much about me, do you?"

"I know if you wanted me dead, I'd be dead."

"Bloody right." Long as the girl didn't forget it. Spike lit his fag, drew in a deep puff, and blew out a stream of smoke. He watched Dawn watch him, her little eyes trained on the cigarette with something between disgust and curiosity. And maybe if he wasn't actually going to do in the Slayer, he could settle for corrupting the youth. Spike took another drag, then stretched the cig toward her. "Fancy a try?"

Dawn's immediate reaction was that of all goody-good girls. She wrinkled her nose and shook her head. "Gross. That stuff'll kill you."

"One little puff won't."

"What if I become addicted?"

Spike shrugged. "Life's short for your lot anyway. Might as well have a few vices to enjoy. Not gonna get out of it alive, are you?" When the worry in her eyes didn't let up, he sighed and rolled his own. "You're not gonna get hooked from one little taste."

"You don't know that. This girl in my class, Penelope, said that her brother started smoking just because he liked the smell of it."

He didn't know what that had to do with anything but decided to humor her. "Do you like the smell?"

"Eww, no."

"Then I wager you don't have much to worry about." When she continued to look uncertain, Spike curled his lips into a smile, pulling on every evil impulse in his body. "Your sister fights monsters every night. You mean to tell me you're gonna let one little smoke get the best of you?"

That did it. A look of pure defiance flickered across Dawn's face. She straightened her shoulders and plucked the cigarette from between Spike's fingers. Then, holding his gaze, she brought the fag to her mouth and took a long drag. Too long a drag, to be honest, for the way her eyes went wide and the subsequent coughing fit she landed herself in. The cigarette went tumbling to the grassy ground, but Spike couldn't summon the strength to care all that much, laughing as he was at the girl, who was doubled over, hands braced on her knees, hacking up a lung.

"That," Dawn said between gasps, "tasted. Like. Butt."

"Well, there you go, then," Spike said, fishing out another cigarette and striking up again. "Now you know."

"How does *anyone* get addicted to that?"

"Askin' the wrong bloke, pidge."

"It's super gross and it kills you."

He smirked and blew out a stream of smoke. "Doesn't kill me."

"Were you a smoker before you were turned?"

"Didn't much fancy anythin' too exciting back then," Spike replied, snorting. "My idea of a thrill was walkin' through a bad neighborhood after dark."

Dawn frowned, looking downright adorable. "So why did you start?" She paused and gestured to his cigarette. "Smoking?"

"Added to the image, didn't it?" Plus, there had been the allure of danger. The challenge of balancing something that had the possibility of doing him in, though not in a way any human would understand. There were only so many ways a vampire could be killed and there was something intoxicating about flirting with that every day. Bringing a live flame close to him, then breathing it in. It was the same kind of

rush that he experienced when fighting a slayer, though muted several thousand times over by the degree of danger and habit.

"I don't think smoking is cool. I think the kids who smoke are stupid."

Spike shrugged. "Odds are you're right. Most kids are stupid."

"Hey!"

"Especially little girls who leave the safety of their homes to come chat with dangerous vampires in the dead of night."

Dawn raised her chin, crossing her arms. "I am *not* a little girl. I'm almost a teenager."

"*Almost* bein' the operative word there." Spike finished off his smoke, tossed it to the ground and stomped it out, then nodded at the house. "Run back inside before this vamp decides to turn you into a midnight snack."

She rolled her eyes but didn't object—miracle of miracles, considering she *was* on the brink of being a teenager. "Fine," she replied in a huff that was all child. "Hope my sister doesn't kill you."

"Don't you worry. She'd never get the chance."

Dawn just snickered as she turned and made her way back into the house.

Spike watched as she disappeared inside, then flicked his attention back to the room he knew to be the Slayer's. He didn't like this part—the part where he was left with nothing but his own bloody thoughts for company. The part after he'd done something he knew Dru wouldn't have approved of. Truth be told, he'd wondered on more than one occasion if the beginning of the end for them hadn't been the night she'd found him sitting outside the Summers residence, talking to the Slayer's sister with no intention of playing the role of monster. The night he'd instead donned the role of savior.

Fuck, no wonder Dru was through with him.

It was all the bloody Slayer's fault. If they hadn't come to this hell-hole, none of this would have happened. There had to have been other ways to restore Dru's health. Other cures out there he hadn't managed to track down. Hell, if he'd found the Gem of Amara in that tomb in Alexandria like had been advertised, there would have been no point in coming to southern California.

Spike paused. The Gem of Amara...

There was a prize worthy of his dark princess. He'd more or less shrugged it off after ditching Egypt—by that time, Dru's pixies had turned her onto the restorative powers of the Hellmouth, so he'd swallowed the taste of failure with the thrill of adventure and set off. Mad though she was, Dru's ramblings tended to yield results, and given that she hadn't had a helpful one about her own condition until then, he'd been hot to track it down. Getting Dru better was all that had mattered, after all.

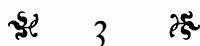
Except now she was better, and she was off living the high-unlife with whatever slime-covered antlered git crossed her path. Spike had something to prove to her now, and as much as his princess loved her jewels...

God, she'd look fierce in the sunlight. And maybe that would do it. Convince her that the only woman who could ever be *his* sun was the one he'd given the sun back to.

Spike rocked a bit on his heels, beaming now ear-to-ear. Coming here hadn't been a waste after all. He'd have to swing by, once the Gem was in hand, and thank Dawn for getting his head on the right path. Right before he killed her sister, of course.

This time next year, he'd be celebrating the holiday with his beloved and regaling her with as many retellings of the Slayer's death as she fancied.

He couldn't bloody wait.



*DECEMBER, 1999*

He honestly didn't know why he was here. Except, of course, where else exactly did he have to go? The Watcher had taken off for merry old England—something about visiting family that Spike was certain hadn't existed before November—and had flat out barred him from remaining unsupervised in his flat. The little meddling witch, the reason the flavor of *Buffy* still hinted around his mouth even three weeks later, had gone on holiday with her family. Harris and the former demon bird were shackled up in his basement and Spike would have to be dust before he'd drag himself there for abuse.

So he was here at the Summers residence.

Was only fitting, he supposed, seeing as this was where he landed every year. Spike wondered idly if Dawn had ever mentioned those past visits to big sis, but just as quickly reckoned the answer was no. Buffy would have a bloody conniption if she knew the Nibblet had packed up her things one time and nearly gotten her throat torn out because of it. He hadn't watched the two of them together too much, but enough to appreciate that the Slayer talked down to her sister quite a lot and Dawn repaid her by channeling the caricature of every rotten child that had ever bloody walked the earth.

Spike snickered and stuck a cigarette between his teeth, then reached for his lighter. He had almost touched it to the tip of the fag when the front door opened and the littlest Summers stepped onto the porch.

“Put that thing out.”

He arched an eyebrow, flicked the lighter closed and plucked the cigarette out of his mouth. “What’s it to you?”

“Gross. As has been established. And you’re so not allowed to smoke in our house.”

He made a show of looking around. “Seems I’m not in your house.”

Dawn rolled her eyes—oh yeah, this girl was full teenager now—and gestured at the door. “Not with that attitude, you aren’t.”

“What are you on about?”

“You’re coming to Christmas.”

Spike blinked rapidly. “I’m what, now?”

“Coming inside, doing the Christmas thing.”

“And why would I wanna do that?”

“Maybe for the same reason you show up here every year?” Dawn crossed her arms, fidgeting in that way of girls her age who desperately wanted to come off as older than they were, then rolled her eyes again and stomped her foot. “Mom told me to invite you for Christmas, so don’t make this weird.”

Well, there was a thought. Spike took a step forward, dropping his unlit cigarette into his pocket. “Joyce wants me over?”

“I may have let it drop that you probably didn’t have plans or anywhere to go on account of being defanged.”

“Oi!”

Dawn just grinned unapologetically, the little brat. “Well, it’s the truth. Anyway, you plus no plans equals special invite to the Christmas, Summers style. So come inside and make with the merry.”

It wasn’t that the offer wasn’t tempting—it was just so unexpected. Him, William the Bloody, seated at the Slayer’s table for the biggest holiday of the year and making something other than her his feast. Nice little picture that painted, one to go along with the eulogy that was his reputation. His whole sodding identity.

Was it just last year he'd decided to seek out the Gem of Amara? Thought it'd get him back in Dru's good graces, make things right, as though that were even possible where the crazy bitch was concerned? Now here he was, a year older and none the wiser for it. Worse off than he'd ever been, point of fact, which was a right feat considering the first Christmas he'd spent in Sunnyhell had been in a bloody wheelchair. A sensible bloke might read the writing on the wall, take his licks and call it quits before he could get any further behind than he already was.

Instead, Spike kept crawling back to Sunnydale. To the Slayer. To this bloody spot, even, with nothing but the whispered taunt that maybe, if he played his cards right, things might go his way this time around.

Except he knew better now.

Or so he'd thought.

"Right then," he said. "After you, pidge."



HE'D HAD HIS DOUBTS, but it turned out that accepting an invite to the Summers' Christmas celebration was bloody perfect.

Buffy had done all she could to avoid him ever since her chum's Will Be Done spell had misfired so spectacularly. The visits to the Watcher's flat had slowed to a crawl, and rather than feed him some of the delicious sass he'd come to crave, she more or less treated Spike the way she would a piece of furniture, only without the added benefit of sitting on him. At first, he'd found this amusing—the Slayer could take on the big bad world, but one little spell that had her cozying up to her enemy got her knickers in a bunch.

As time passed, though, his amusement had hardened, first into annoyance before solidifying into anger. Buffy's irritation toward Willow—the bitch who'd actually done the damage—seemed to have vanished the second the last cookie had been eaten, whereas her animosity toward Spike, the few times she bothered to acknowledge him, had grown for no bloody reason. He wasn't any more evil than he had been when he'd first shown up, after all, and he hadn't asked for

that stupid spell any more than she had. Still, he was the one she hadn't let off the hook.

So, if he was going to be on the receiving end of the Slayer's fury regardless, he would bloody well earn it.

"Spike!" Joyce said as he helped himself into the kitchen. Solo, mind. Dawn had scarpered off almost immediately after leading him inside. "So glad you could make it."

He made sure to favor her with a beaming smile, both because he genuinely liked the woman and because Buffy was sending him her best if-looks-could-stake glare from where she stood at the fridge.

"Thanks for the invite, Joyce," he replied in his smoothest voice. It might have been a minute, but old Spike still remembered how to turn on the charm. Those sodding Victorian sensibilities hadn't just up and vanished, so he might as well put them to use. "Mighty kind of you to open your home around the holidays to the likes of me."

Buffy pulled a face at him and slammed the refrigerator shut. He thought she might mouth off at him—hoped she would, in fact—but true to form as of late, she didn't rise to the occasion. Instead, she turned to her mum. "Did Dawn get all of the stuff down from the attic while she was busy inviting mass murderers to dinner?"

"There is no need to be rude, Buffy," Joyce chided, having re-focused on the feast of human goodies spread across the kitchen island. Turkey, cranberry sauce, stuffing, mashed potatoes and a whole host of other seasonal favorites. Hell, the woman even had wassail brewing on the stove. Seemed the Summers household went all out for the holiday. "This is a big house and Spike has nowhere else to spend Christmas."

"How tragic," Buffy deadpanned. "It's almost like no one wants him around."

He snickered. "'Cept your fam. Where'd kid sis run off to, anyway?"

"On the phone with Hank. She might be a minute," Joyce said, then aimed a scowl at her daughter. "And Buffy, I won't tell you again. Be nice to our guests."

At that, he couldn't help himself. Spike smirked and edged a step closer to her. "Don't fret, Mum," he said, keeping his gaze fixed on his lovely mortal enemy. "The Slayer's a bit sore I called off the nuptials."



"Yes, she can be like that," Joyce muttered. Then paused and whipped her head up, her eyes going wide. "Your...*what*?"

Yeah, the look Buffy was throwing him told him plainly this would be his last Christmas. Bloody worth it.

"I. Will. Kill. You," the Slayer snarled, reaching for a wooden mixing spoon and brandishing it like a stake. "Outside."

"Buffy, you didn't tell me that you and Spike were *dating*," Joyce said, and though he knew better, Spike couldn't help but smart inwardly at the disappointment that crossed the woman's face. Here he'd thought she liked him all right. "After everything with Angel, I'd thought you'd know better than to get mixed up with another vampire."

"I am so not *mixed up* with Spike," Buffy all but spat. "Gross, Mom!"

"Even if he's more responsible than—"

"Responsible?" The Slayer was hitting ear-splitting decibels now.

"It's still a bad idea. He's immortal; you're not. I know eternal love sounds romantic but—"

"MoOOoom!" Buffy waved her hands in front of her mother's face. "First, eww. Stop. Second, see above, re: eww. Believe me, I'm never getting involved with another vampire ever again. And the immortality thing? The *least* of the many reasons why."

"And no tellin' on that, anyway," Spike said with a shrug. When both women looked at him—well, one looked; the other glared—he brought his hands up. "Just sayin', the Slayer's a bit more than human, isn't she? Never got one to age enough to see if she does actually age."

Apparently, Buffy had never had such a thought, for the fury in her eyes turned into horror. At least she lowered the mixing spoon. "I... What?"

Well, now, things were looking up. If he couldn't spend the holiday tearing out her dainty throat, he'd settle for causing her to lose some sleep—turnabout being fair play and all. "Dunno either way," Spike replied, picking at a bit of turkey. "Not like your kind lasts all that long to begin with. Just seems it makes more sense in the great balancin' act if you're more like us. Not sure what good a geriatric slayer would do the world, if you managed to live that long."

Buffy just stared at him, her mouth agape. Then she looked at her

mother, who was likewise thunderstruck, but whatever she wanted to see, she didn't. Instead, she turned and walked out of the room—shaking a little, which made Spike downright giddy.

*Happy fucking Christmas to me.*

"Do you really think that?" Joyce asked in a hush. "I'd never considered the possibility. Goodness, it's still hard for me to wrap my mind around Buffy being the Slayer. I've gotten better, but this last year was difficult. I just want her to have a normal life."

"No such thing, sorry to say," Spike replied, not sorry at all, though also not without his sympathy for the woman. He did like Joyce just fine, Dawn as well, and didn't get any satisfaction at the thought of causing either one of them pain. Which, he supposed, Dru would call him weak for, and maybe he was. Worst still, he didn't think he could blame as much on his current fangless state. He'd had an invite to the Slayer's house for nearly two years now, in addition to multiple chances to off her kid sis. It simply didn't appeal to him.

Buffy herself, yeah, he wanted dead. More specifically—he wanted to be the one doing the killing. Wouldn't have it any other way and bloody hell, he'd earned the right, hadn't he?

"I suppose not," Joyce said, jarring him back to himself. Then she pressed her eyes closed and clenched her fists. "Oh, I could just give those...*whatever* made her the Slayer a piece of my mind. Who has the right to force this on a girl her age? On *anyone*?"

Bugger, he didn't know what to say to that. The whole cosmic circumstance of teenage girls being the bane of paranormal existence had always been a laugh to him—a laugh and a challenge, once he'd learned just how strong these girls allegedly were. Choice had never factored into his consideration, but now that he thought about it, he did reckon it was a bit unfair. Drusilla had at least given *him* the illusion of choice.

Though he wagered if she'd asked to kill him, he would have said no, attempted to shove her away, and made tracks for the mouth of the alley. Then, knowing her, she would have killed him proper—no second chance, no eternal life, no *Spike*. He would have died William the Bloody Awful Poet. His mum would have had to bury him, which would have been a kinder fate to her, all things considered.

"I'm sorry," Joyce said a moment later. "I didn't mean to take that out on you, Spike."

Why the bloody hell not? Of everyone in this house, he was the one most directly responsible for Buffy's being the Slayer. The two he'd done in had moved her on up the list.

But he didn't say that. Not on Christmas. Instead, he said, "Don't fret, Mum. I'll—ahh—go see if the Sla—if Buffy needs a hand in...things."

As much fun as this had sounded when the Slayer's kid sis had suggested it, the reality of spending the holiday with the Summerses might not be the reckoning he'd envisioned. Tormenting Buffy was one of the only genuine pleasures he had left in this world, but he hadn't considered the collateral damage—namely the Nibblet and Joyce. Was something that hadn't mattered back when his life had made sense, the hurt that came on the families of his victims. That his victim, in this case, was the Slayer's dainty feelings shouldn't matter much, but somehow it did. He didn't want the girl's mum or kid sis feeling the brunt of whatever he doled out on Buffy, which was a right ridiculous thing to think because there was no way around it. The way families worked, and all.

God, life had been so much easier before Sunnyhell. Before that shiny commando lab, even if he couldn't put too much of the blame on whatever those government wankers had done to him—not with the number of times he'd had the chance to do in the Little Bit and instead had let her go on her merry way. Even gone against the woman he loved, which had quite possibly cost him everything.

He found Buffy stomping around the living room, which somewhat bolstered his spirits. Knowing he'd done something to make her even slightly as miserable as she made him was something, at least. He couldn't get his jollies in all proper-like, he'd have to resort to the resources at his disposal.

"You can show yourself out anytime you like, you know," she snapped as she returned to a box overflowing with garland, lights, and an assortment of ornaments.

And it seemed so normal—something he'd see watching any of the holiday specials he caught on the telly—that it threw him from his

element for a moment. The Slayer in her natural habitat, being all human-like, was something he doubted he'd ever get used to, but fuck if there wasn't something addictive about it. About seeing her the way people inside her life got to see her. He'd never been this close to a slayer before. Never seen one beyond the mantle of *warrior* they had to assume every night.

Perhaps this buggery with his head had some virtues. *Perhaps.*

"Seem a mite rude, don't you think?" Spike replied, moving toward the box of assorted Christmas decorations and helping himself to a few baubles. "Got the invite and everything. And your mum seems sweet on me."

"My mother doesn't know you like I do," Buffy replied with a saccharine smile, snatching the ornament from his hands. "And don't touch my things."

Spike snickered and fished something else out—a big poofy-looking angel that no doubt doubled as a tree-topper. "Just tryin' to help, love. If we had it your way, this would be our first holiday together as a couple of married sods."

Buffy smacked his arm this time, and the tree-topper went toppling to the floor. "Do *not* mention that spell again," she hissed. "Or so help me, I'll make it snow."

"Snow?"

"You know. With your ashes."

Spike stared at her for a long second, then let out a titter a bit too close to a giggle for his taste, but fuck, he couldn't help it. "Know you're not exactly known for your wit, pet, but that was bloody pitiful," he said, snatching the angel up again. "And weren't you gonna hit Red up for some memory mojo? Or could you not stand the thought of not remembering just how much you like it when I—"

"Finish that sentence and die."

He smirked, rocking back on his heels. "You know your problem, Summers? You need to cut loose, get some fun in you. Joe College's not up for the job, is he? Where's he off to, anyway? One of those flat, boring states in the middle?"

"Riley is none of your damn business," Buffy snapped. Then she seemed to realize he had plundered something else from the ornament

box and sent him a glare that would have been right terrifying were he any other vamp. "Put the angel down."

Spike dropped his gaze to the poufy thing in his hands and gave it a toss. "Put Angel down? That what you want this year? Not in the habit of getting presents for girls whose throats I'd just as soon rip out, but between you and me, Slayer, I'm willin' to make an exception. LA's not too long a drive. We could make a weekend of it. Swing by, see the sights, do in your plonker of an ex, and be back before sunup."

"Spike, I swear—"

"Not rightly enough. Girl with your job oughta have a mouth like a bloody sailor. Know I would if my lot in life was to keep down the things that go bump in the night."

Buffy crossed her arms, fixing him with her deadliest stare. "Do you have a Christmas death wish? Because I have no problem dusting you before we open presents."

He grinned. "You know just what to say to get a bloke's motor running, baby."

"You are sick."

"I'm honest. Likely the most honest man in your sorry excuse for a life."

Buffy laughed aloud at that. "Yeah, you're a real saint."

"Name a time I told you a lie, then, or what you wanted to hear."

"You said we'd both burn if I took off the Gem of Amara."

Spike rolled his eyes—annoyed with her for finding perhaps the only exception to his point and himself for not catching that. "Well, didn't know that we wouldn't, did I? Didn't exactly set out to have the thing ripped off my hand."

"Yeah, I feel just terrible about that."

"You should," he shot back. "You sent it to bloody Angel, and what'd he do with it? Smash the sodding thing so no one can have it."

Buffy blinked, the fire leaving her eyes in favor of something that might have been...hurt. Or confusion.

Oh dear, had she not known?

"He—he smashed it?"

"You'd know, wouldn't you? Hopped up to LA right after your watcher spilled the beans about your ex's little Hellmouth rendezvous."

“I was there for like, three seconds, Spike. To tell him that he can’t just come back and expect people to lie for him in the future. It wasn’t what I’d call a good time.”

“Thank fuck, or we’d have another apocalypse on our hands, eh?”

For some stupid reason, it didn’t occur to him that Buffy would react to this by popping him in the nose until his nose was already well and popped, not to mention crunched and gushing blood. Spike howled out a series of curses and stumbled back, cupping his abused face and glaring at the Slayer over his hands.

“You’re disgusting,” Buffy snapped, positively seething—like she was the one who had been punched for no sodding reason. “And you’re outta here. I don’t know what my mother was thinking, inviting you in.”

“Maybe that her bitch of a daughter is wound a little tight and needs to uncork.” Spike twisted his lips into a sneer, wiping away the last of the blood dripping from his nose. “Haven’t been right since that day you spent wiggling in my lap. Shame your corn-fed human boy doesn’t know how to handle his equipment. But you know what I’m packing, baby, so as a special gift, between sworn enemies, I’ll do you just this once. Call it a holiday miracle.”

The next thing he knew, Buffy was dragging him by the collar of his duster toward the door and making a bloody loud ruckus in the process. Then the door was open, and he was on the other side of it—first through the air, then against the pavement.

If the bitch had scuffed the leather, he would snap her neck. No matter how much it hurt.

Spike drew himself up and surveyed the damage, heaving a long sigh. On the whole, nothing he hadn’t had before. Maybe the girl was losing her edge after all, and that would be a shame. Despite how much he hated her, he couldn’t deny that she was the best slayer he’d ever known. Worthy of the hunt, worthier of the kill, and god knows he would give it to her someday.

Still, as he headed down Revello Drive, he found himself cursing his bloody yap for having gone and gotten him kicked out of the house. It would have been nice, spending the holiday with someone else. Even if it was the girl he hated most in the world and her sodding family.

But that wasn't right either. No matter what those tin soldiers had done to his cranium, he was the bloody Big Bad. He didn't drink eggnog and cozy up with his sworn enemy. And seeing as he wasn't likely to leave Sunnyhell anytime soon, he had an image to keep. Couldn't rightly afford to let someone get the wrong idea. Bad enough that he'd almost walked the girl down the aisle.

Worse that he couldn't stop thinking about it.

Or keep himself from wishing that spell had gone on for just a little while longer.

DECEMBER, 2000

Odds were brilliant he was the last person the Slayer wanted to see. Not much had changed on that score, mind, but it still smarted more than it should. Everything pertaining to her did these days.

Do the girl a favor and get the cold shoulder. Save her the bloody embarrassment of it getting out that the Slayer's Teutonic bedmate had a yen for fangs and a death wish to boot. What, would she have preferred finding out the second she had to shove a stake through the sod's chest? Places like that, it was only a matter of time.

Though when he thought about it in those terms, Spike could stake *himself* for not having waited it out a bit more. Give Finn the chance to really glam on to the life. If he had turned vamp, at least Spike would have had the chance to do him in the way he deserved.

Had Buffy considered that? No. Of course not. Instead, she was hurting and crying her gorgeous little heart out over a bloke not fit to lick her boots. Blaming innocent parties like him for the white bread-shaped hole her soldier had left behind before he'd taken off.

Yeah, Spike still had a ways to go before he perfected the apology he'd drafted. He might need a new mannequin before all was said and done.



Still, it was Christmas, and for the first year since he'd plowed over the *Welcome to Sunnybell* sign, he knew exactly what would make his holiday merry and bright. If he were lucky, the Nibblet might spy him standing about, as she was wont to do this time of year, and he'd secure himself another invite to the Slayer's holiday table. One he wouldn't squander the way he had last Christmas.

God, what a dolt he'd been. There in Buffy's home, close to her like he had no right to be, but too bloody thick to realize something so obvious even Dru had been ahead of him.

He'd been thinking on that a lot over the last few months. Well, ever since he'd woken up with images of Buffy swimming in his head, whimpering and telling him she wanted him, his own confession of love stuck in his throat and his cock harder than it had any right to be when it came to Buffy. Fantasies about fucking her were fine, even normal—something he'd accepted about what she did to him from the second he'd set eyes on her. Fantasies about confessing his love for her as he prepared to give her the shag of a lifetime? Those were a bloody abomination and he was a traitor to his kind.

Thing was, he couldn't really tell when his feelings for her had changed. In all the ways that mattered, they felt the same, and that scared him more than anything. It meant this hadn't been a flip of the switch—he hadn't just up and decided he loved her one day. No, the change had started years ago. Before Angel had seduced Dru away from him, before he'd lit out of town the first time. Buffy had inspired any number of sensations in him, made him feel things no other slayer, or woman, ever had, and he'd been the dolt who had wagered it was more of the same hatred he'd felt for other annoyances who had crossed his path.

He should have seen it. Should have known himself enough to identify the signs. But the thing of it was, imagining himself with anyone but Dru had been sacrilegious. She was, after all, his black goddess, and he would have gone to the end of the world and back just to make her smile. Make her coo for him. Make her anything.

And that was it, wasn't it? Everything had been about her. Drusilla lifts a hand and Spike does a little dance, and Dru claps and everything is right again until she wants a repeat performance. Nothing with Buffy

was performative—she was refreshingly forthright in what she wanted, what she expected. Made the mystery of getting her notice a bit of a headache, but considering the number of headaches he'd had ever since those soldier boys had stuffed his skull full of chip, pain was a small price to pay for the larger reward that was having her.

Only he didn't have her. Never would, most likely, because he wasn't pathetic enough to fool himself into believing the alternative.

But bloody hell, that didn't mean he wouldn't try.

Spike wasn't entirely sure what he'd done those Christmases past to catch Dawn's attention. Hadn't been like he'd made his way to Revello Drive with an aim to be seen or anything, so it figured that now that he wanted to be caught, the girl wouldn't so much as glance outside. He parked himself where he knew damn well he'd be seen, paced a stretch up and back for a few minutes, and was just toying with the idea of throwing pebbles at her window like the pathetic git he was when the front door opened and Dawn, mercifully, slinked outside.

"You know she'll stake you if she sees you here," the Nibblet said, crossing her arms with full teenage attitude.

He cleared his throat, conflicted, then decided to go for nonchalant. It was possible she'd buy it. "Ahh, Little Bit. Didn't hear you up and about."

She didn't buy it. "Wow."

"What?"

"What do you think?"

"Think little girls like you oughta be smart enough to not brass off the wrong kinda bloke, yeah?"

Dawn narrowed her eyes. "She's not gonna let you in. Not after last year and *especially* not after Riley."

Yeah, he'd figured as much. Didn't make hearing it any more of a bloody picnic and he definitely wasn't going to show weakness in front of a bloody child, no matter if she was the Slayer's sister. So Spike puffed out his chest and fixed his best *who the fuck cares* sneer on his face. "Who said I want in?"

"Why else would you be here?"

"Free country, innit? I go where I want."

Now Dawn looked like she was fighting off a grin, of all things

emasculating. The girl had never been properly afraid of him. Then again, he'd never gone out of his way to make her so. Terrifying children wasn't exactly a favorite pastime—not that he hadn't done a right good amount of it, but it took so little, scaring sprogs, that it was downright unsportsmanlike. No thrill in that, no challenge. It was only fun once they grew old enough to not believe in the monster under the bed anymore. Let them think they had the world figured and then tear it out from under them.

"Look," Dawn said a moment later, casting a glance over her shoulder, "if you want to get your Festivus on, Mom and I usually watch *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* on Christmas Eve. There'll be wassail and cookies and stuff. You can come for that if you're desperate for company."

God, how pathetic was he that that sounded like a brilliant way to spend the night? Spike sighed and ran a hand through his hair, wondering how long he'd need to look disinterested and disaffected before he deigned to agree. Big Bads, after all, had better things to do than stand about outside the Slayer's home hoping for pity invites around the holidays.

But then, Buffy had made sure to knock him off the Big Bad throne well and good last year. Fancied herself above him now, even when she had to crawl to him for help or advice. He was good enough to talk to when she needed an ear to bend but not treat like an actual person with feelings and the like. Though he granted that he'd gone out of his way to disabuse her of the notion that he gave a fuck what she did or thought or felt.

"Will the Slayer be around?" he asked, going for nonchalant. He had the horrible feeling he didn't pull it off.

Indeed, the look Dawn gave him was most appraising. He didn't care for it.

"Buffy loves the Grinch," Dawn said carefully.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. She's kind of a sucker for bad-guys-turned-good."

Well, if that was true, maybe he could prove that there were more creatures out there whose hearts could grow three sizes in one day. And that other parts of his anatomy weren't too bad, either.

After all, the Slayer couldn't stay mad at him forever. And not over Christmas.



THE THOUGHT that he might have ever agonized over what to wear to the bloody Slayer's house would have, at a point not too long ago, made him laugh so hard he choked. Which, given that he didn't need to breathe, would have been a right feat in itself. There was no guarantee that Buffy would be there at all. Dawn had, at some point over the years, mastered the art of not answering questions directly, something he hadn't noticed until he'd been home, gloating at the prospect of having secured an invite for Christmas. But when he'd gone over the conversation, he'd realized that she'd omitted more than she'd shared, and if he weren't so proud of the tyke he might have a mind to wring her neck.

So what exactly did a Big Bad—one hoping to utilize the season of good cheer and all that rot to do some genuine romancing—wear to mark the occasion? He hadn't made any effort at all the year before, which seemed now a truly wasted opportunity. Then again, so much about that year did. How he might have pursued Buffy after that infernal spell, for one thing. Utilized what he'd learned about her—how she smelled when aroused, how she liked being touched and caressed, what got her to blush and what got her to swoon—to get her to realize that she was bloody well made for him and spared her a load of misery with Captain Cardboard.

Spike sighed, willing his wardrobe to become brilliant the longer he stared at it. He didn't want to look like he'd gone to too much trouble—that would tip off the whole bloody household—but the standard jeans and black T-shirt seemed downright disrespectful. He had that red over-shirt he was pretty sure he'd caught Buffy eyeing one time. Might be the best bet at making an impression.

God, when had he become such a sodding ninny?

Then there was the whole question about gifts. Should he bring Buffy something? His inclination was to shower the woman he loved with all the jewels and sparkly things she could ever desire, but Buffy

wasn't Dru and likely couldn't be won with baubles. Hell, she'd likely pitch whatever he brought her straight into the rubbish bin without bothering to open it. And then there was the fact that he hadn't the first idea what to get her—what would be suitable, coming from one mortal enemy to the next. What wouldn't betray the truth of what he was—a man desperately in love with a woman he'd never have. A woman who hated him, no less, and not without good reason.

He decided to play it safe—shoved one of his favorite blades into a box, fixed a rather pathetic bow on top, then slid the whole ensemble into his duster pocket. He'd leave it under the tree without a tag. There. Sodding done. Next.

On the walk to Revello Drive, he rehearsed the apology he'd started working on shortly after word had reached him that Captain Cardboard had literally flown the coop. The trial runs he'd done at the crypt weren't going well, though. If he couldn't convince a sodding mannequin that he was sorry, what chance did he have at braving the real thing? Never mind he always seemed to lose his temper halfway through the script, and the mannequin would end up across the room with its blond wig all askew. Wasn't his fault, was it, if he could fill in exactly what the Slayer would say to every line he came up with.

Bitch was insufferable enough in person. Wasn't right that she should hold that mantle even in his own head. Though it was also more than right—meant the Buffy in his mind was not watered-down or romanticized. It was actually her. That he could anticipate every annoying little quip only proved as much.

Spike shuffled up to the door, feeling ridiculous and also more nervous than he had since his William days. Wasn't often he knocked like a regular bloke, or did anything like a regular bloke. He bounced a bit on the balls of his feet as the sound of hurried footsteps echoed from the other side. But by the time the door opened, he let out a breath and tried not to deflate too much on account of not wanting to disappoint the Nibblet.

Buffy wasn't here.

"Spike, you made it!" Dawn favored him with a beaming smile and stepped aside, and he felt his chest give a little lurch that he couldn't immediately explain. Something between the girl's genuine thrill of

having him there and his guilt at only being there because he'd hoped he'd get the Slayer alone. He immediately wanted to ask if Buffy was expected but knew the light in Dawn's eyes would dim and couldn't bring himself to do it. Instead, he gave her a grin and a nod and helped himself across the threshold.

"Mom has eggnog going in the kitchen," Dawn said, bouncing around in that teenage way of hers. "Which, blech, but there's wassail too. And Christmas cookies. They should have cooled off enough for us to add the frosting."

Spike wasn't sure he much fancied the idea of him doing anything in the kitchen that didn't involve heating up a bag of blood, but again, he took in Dawn's earnest expression and found himself motioning in the appropriate direction. "Lead the way, pidge."

Truthfully, even after catching last year's Christmas feast, Spike had never considered Joyce much of a domestic goddess. Not a fault, from where he was standing. The woman was a working mum, devoting nearly all her days to that gallery of hers, and her nights worrying about the Slayer. That she'd managed all of this while balancing what he knew had been a decent medical scare just made her all the more admirable. So to see Joyce hovering over the oven and apparently cooking up a storm had him feeling more tender-hearted than usual. Whole family had a made a sucker of him, it looked like.

"Lo, Mum," Spike said, taking in the scene. The kitchen was as packed with food as he'd ever seen it, including the tray of Christmas cookies Dawn had indicated. A reindeer here, a Saint Nick there, a pine tree there. Tubes of dyed, processed sugar sat next to the tray in wait. "Looks like a right proper kitchen in here."

Joyce favored him with a soft smile before checking on something she had going on the stove. "We're having everyone over tomorrow," she said. "My house was, err, volunteered by Buffy. One of her more festive mood swings."

He nodded, unsure what to do—if there *was* anything to do. Though he was glad she'd mentioned Buffy. Made asking about her seem more casual. "And where is the Slayer? If she offered you up, seems only fitting she be here to lend a hand."

"You would think so," Joyce agreed before sucking something off a

finger. "And a point I will happily make to her once she gets home from the Christmas party at the Bronze."

Spike swore inwardly. Of bloody course, Buffy had opted to go to the Bronze.

"I don't suppose you would be open to decorating the cookies?" Joyce asked a moment later, nodding to the tubes of frosting. "I'd ask Dawn, but last year she decided to—"

"Mooom!" Dawn practically crashed into the room, her eyes wide and panicked. "Can we not tell *everyone* that story?"

A small, secretive smile crossed Joyce's face and she mimed zipping her lips. "Of course, dear."

"What, you shoot the stuff straight?" Spike asked, picking up one of the tubes and examining it. "Knew you had a bit of rebel in you."

"Don't encourage her," Joyce said in a tone that was half amusement, half scold. "Trust me, that's the last thing she needs. If you don't believe me, ask her dentist."

In his wildest, Spike hadn't pictured himself doing anything as bloody domestic as fixing up holiday cookies, but somehow that was exactly what happened. He made a right mess of things, of course, and his Santa Clauses looked a bit demonic even to him, but he found he enjoyed the process all the same. Even laughed aloud when Dawn accused him of making cross-eyed reindeer.

"Well," Joyce said, surveying their work, "these are appropriate for the Hellmouth, I suppose."

"We can have some tonight, right?" Dawn asked, already plucking a Christmas-tree shaped cookie off the tray. "I told Spike we could."

"Being that he is the artist, I was going to offer him a couple, of course. But we need to save the rest for tomorrow."

Spike cocked his head, staring down at the mess of green and red frosting, accented here with bits of white, gold, and black. For whatever reason, it hadn't occurred to him that the Slayer would be putting any of these in her mouth later, and he rather liked the thought.

"Oi," he said, snagging up one of the more miserable-looking cookies—a star that looked like it was melting under the weight of liquid sugar. "If you'd told me these were for the bloody Scoobies, I'd have included a lot more rat poison."

Joyce snickered and rolled her eyes almost fondly, which was perhaps the oddest response he'd ever gotten to a death threat. Though maybe that was because she knew the death threat was, much like himself, fangless.

"All right, elves," Joyce said, shooing them in the direction of the living room. "Let me get everything put away and then—"

"You're a mean one, Mr. Grinch!" Dawn said, beaming.

Spike grinned and bit into the cookie, his senses immediately flooded with enough sugar to send a regular bloke into a diabetic coma. For him, though, no complaints. He preferred spicy and savory to sugary, yeah, but *tis the season*, and all that.

He trailed the Bit into the living room, doing his best to catch the globs of icing that threatened to teeter off his cookie monstrosity at any second. It wasn't until he saw the twinkling lights from the Christmas tree that he remembered the present he'd stuffed into his pocket—the one absolutely no one could see him leaving.

"Mom and I have this thing we do," Dawn said, admiring the tree as well. "Every year, one of us asks Buffy if we think the angel should be on top."

He blinked at her.

"I mean, I guess it's funny to us. Buffy gets all fidgety and can't make eye contact with either of us for at least five minutes."

He stared at her a moment longer, then snickered appreciatively. He remembered thinking something similar the year before, holding the same angel, but then he was a soulless git, wasn't he? "And they call me evil."

"The first time it happened, it was an accident," Dawn went on, grinning like the mischievous little imp she was. "Just kinda popped out of Mom's mouth and Buffy got this deer-in-headlights look that was just priceless. I had to leave the room before I blew milk out my nose."

After she let this much slip, Dawn favored him with a deer-in-headlights look of her own, like she'd forgotten her audience and had accidentally reminded him that she was in fact a teenager. There were times, more than he'd like to admit, when the Bit reminded him so much of himself. Carefully composed around people she admired,



except for those brief moments where she let her true self shine through and then immediately felt exposed and vulnerable because of it.

"Th-then last year," she continued a moment later, her voice cracking just a smidge, "I started to lose it again when we started putting on the decorations. When Mom asked what was up, I figured it was safe to tell her. Enough time had passed that she thought it was hilarious, too. I asked the question then and Buffy was still all weirded out by having been engaged to you—and whatever you said to her before she tossed you out—that she went red all over. This year, we rock-paper-scissored who would get to do it."

Spike grinned, eyeing the angel in question. "You win?" he asked before stuffing another bite of cookie into his mouth.

"No." Dawn sighed. "Rock crushed my scissors."

"Always next year, yeah?"

"The triumphant comeback of scissors!"

"Or," Spike replied, arching his eyebrows, "you could just go paper."

"Paper's for wimps. How can it beat anything? Would *you* ever choose paper?"

"When I can smash or slice? No bloody way."

"Exactly."

Well, that at least proved the Nibblet had a good head on her shoulders. And that she was definitely the Slayer's sister, penchant for violence notwithstanding.

A comfortable silence settled between them—well, not entirely comfortable, considering he was itching for more Buffy-related dirt, particularly after the fallout of Finn's departure. Though he had to be careful about it, probing Dawn for information. She was at an age where it was easy to forget just how slow she *wasn't*, and the last thing he needed was her announcing to the world that he had a yen for Buffy. Part of him was still surprised Finn had taken off without alerting the presses, angry as he'd been.

"So big sis is still lickin' her wounds after Soldier Boy took off, eh?" he said in a carefully neutral tone, keeping his gaze on the Christmas tree. "Suppose that means she's the bloody fifth wheel at the party. Poor little twig."

Dawn huffed. “Yes, poor, poor Buffy. Though I’m pretty sure she dressed up hoping that Ben would be there.”

Ben? There was a Ben? Spike whipped his head around, his heart suddenly in his throat. “Who’s this Ben, then?”

“Doctor-guy who helped Mom when she was going through her thing,” Dawn replied. “He’s not bad. He sat with me this one time, before Glory showed up and scared him off or something.”

Spike snorted, rolling his eyes. “If the boy got run off, I doubt he’s the Slayer’s type. She needs a bloke who’ll throw in a good fight, not scarper away.”

“Someone like you, you mean,” Dawn said casually.

He had just shoved the last of the cookie in his mouth and promptly choked, which would have been all right if choking on sodding Christmas cookies was a thing that Big Bads did. It wasn’t. And it didn’t help matters when Dawn rushed to his side and started slamming her hand on his back, like that had ever done anyone any good, but she was trying so he supposed it was the thought that counted. Somehow, he managed to get to the other side of the ordeal by swallowing large, unchewed cookie chunks, which was only marginally better than spewing them out again, and then Joyce was in the room, all concerned and yelling at Dawn that slamming a bloke’s back was not the proper way to respond to a choking. Dawn shot back that she hadn’t been taught the Heimlich maneuver and *help please* before something bad happened.

Joyce had just rushed around, presumably to do the maneuver herself when Spike managed to unclog his windpipe and waved her off. “All’s good,” he said, his voice rougher than he would have liked. “Not dustin’ on you today, Mum.”

“Are you okay?” she asked, all concern. “What happened?”

*What happened is your youngest knows too much for her own bloody good.* He had the sneaking suspicion Dawn had dropped that suggestion hoping to get the reaction he’d given her. “Wrong pipe,” he said. It was something he’d heard humans say when they choked on something, and it did happen to him every now and again—the blood slipped down the wrong hole, though he rarely needed to cough as

much as he did to make things right again. “Right as rain now. On with the bloody show, yeah?”

Joyce eyed him as though worried he’d keel over and resume choking, and the concern there warmed him all over. There were times she reminded him of his own mum so much it was hard to look at her. Not necessarily because they were all that alike—they weren’t, not really—but he could imagine them as friends. Strong and independent, not to mention abandoned by the men in their life—though his old man had a better excuse than Hank Summers, by his understanding—and utterly devoted to their children.

“Yes,” Joyce said at last. “Dawn, get the video ready. And please don’t sing every word this time. We have a guest.”

Dawn rolled her eyes. “Mo-ooom!”

“Trust me,” Joyce told Spike with a conspiratorial little grin. “You’ll thank me later.”

Considering the number of times he’d heard Dawn belting out Hanson lyrics, he didn’t doubt it.



AFTER *HOW THE Grinch Stole Christmas*, Joyce begged off to bed and hinted rather strongly that Dawn should follow suit. Being that Buffy wasn’t home yet, Dawn had put up a right fight about it, claiming she was on holiday break and could stay up as long as she wanted. And seeing as Spike was keen to know when the Slayer came in—or if she’d ring in the holiday with a new human bloke he’d get to hate—he’d offered to stick around and keep the littlest Summers company.

“Are you *sure* this is a Christmas movie?” she asked for perhaps the eleventh time. Dawn had wanted something more *mature* than *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* and actual movie-length once Joyce had given her the green light, and being that no fewer than twelve cable stations played *It’s a Wonderful Life* during the holidays, finding the old classic had been as easy as going up a single channel. They’d come in near the start, when a teenage George Bailey was busy telling Mary Hatch what’s-what about his future travels and right before he got the tar smacked out of him by the druggist.

“What the bleeding hell do they teach you in that school of yours?” Spike asked, sinking deeper into the cushions. “It’s a sodding classic.”

“Seems a bit lame. Not the kinda thing you’d like.”

He threw her a scowl she’d more than earned but didn’t bother replying. The Nibblet didn’t need to know this film had hit him in the place William still lived, much to his chagrin, more times than he could count. Though if she continued to run her mouth throughout the whole thing, he’d have to rip out her tongue as a lesson.

As it was, he needn’t have worried. Dawn was more knackered than she’d let on, and by the time George was promising Mary the moon, she was sawing logs, her neck craned back at an angle that couldn’t be comfortable, her mouth open and a little line of drool leaking from the corner. For such a small thing she made a bloody awful racket—something he’d have to tease her about the next time she swung by his crypt.

Spike was debating whether he ought to brave carting the girl to her room or risk her waking up while Joyce was setting out the “Santa” presents—something she’d told him she’d do until the girls had girls of their own, mother’s prerogative—when he caught the familiar rhythm of a heartbeat he would know anywhere and straightened up right quick before the front door squeaked open and the Slayer came in.

She stopped short when she spied him on the couch, the smile that had lit up her face fading into the more familiar scowl. Though honestly, Spike could give a damn at the moment, because she was a bloody vision. Sleek black slacks, a red frilly number up top, wrapped inside her red leather coat, which she removed slowly, never taking her eyes off him. Her eyes, the brilliant green orbs that they were, made even more magnificent by the artful curls of green ribbon she had tastefully worked into her hair. Like a Christmas package, all wrapped up just for him.

“What are you doing here?” Buffy asked in her I-hate-you voice as she fixed her coat on the coatrack.

“Hello to you too.”

“Spike, I am tired, cranky, and *so* not in the mood for your crap tonight.” She marched forward, planted her feet right in the line of sight to the telly, and crossed her arms. “*What* are you doing here?”

God, she was beautiful when brassed.

"Well," he replied, drawing out the word and rising to his feet, "I was invited, wasn't I? Anyone ever tell you that Christmas is a time to spend with family? Think it really hurt your mum's feelings that you'd rather spend the holiday chattin' up bloody doctors than bein' with her after the ordeal she's been through."

That was a low blow and he knew it. Still, he forced himself not to react when the Slayer blanched. He *was* an evil bugger, after all. Even if he was in love with her.

"I am going to close my eyes and count to five," she said a moment later through her teeth. "If you're not gone by the time I get to *four*, prepare for one dusty Christmas."

Spike snickered. "That the way you treat all your mum's houseguests?"

"I mean it, go or the stake comes out."

"Of your arse? Might be worth dustin' to see you manage that."

She took a step forward, her eyes widening and her nostrils flaring and *yes*, she looked like she wanted to lay into him good and proper. Give him what he knew he had coming. Now that soldier boy had booked it out of this hemisphere, she didn't have the option of trying to work out all that frustration in the bedroom. Not that it ever did her any good, if her nighttime jaunts through the cemeteries were anything to judge by. Buffy wanted to have at him and he wanted to let her. *Christ*, how he wanted to let her.

It would be so good, fighting her again. All those sweet little scenarios that had gone into his mental wank bank involving her giving him a good thrashing before realizing what she really wanted was to stake herself on his cock. Fuck, even reliving that one glorious fight in the sun... He had he known it was the last, he would have made it count. Drawn it out. Ground up on her a bit more.

"I'm done," Buffy practically snarled.

Yeah, she'd said that in his dream, too. Right before snogging his lips right off. Maybe Christmas wishes *did* come true.

Spike grinned and spread his arms. "Take your best shot, Slayer."

"Oh my *god*, will you two just kiss already?"

He froze at that. So did the Slayer, though with a less-than-flat-

tering look on her face. As one, they turned to the couch, where Dawn was sitting up, stretching big and yawning bigger.

“Dawn,” Buffy said, now using her restrained big-sister voice, “I scraped demon guts out of my hair earlier and that is still somehow *not* grosser than what you just said.”

Dawn rolled her eyes, standing. “Whatever. You two have a total Sam and Diane thing going on. It’s, like, super obvious.”

Spike blinked, somewhat impressed that Dawn knew that reference and beyond tickled that she’d used it, but also smart enough not to let Buffy in on either one of those things. Instead, he did his best to mirror the Slayer’s disgust while also not taking it too personally.

“You.” Buffy pointed at her sister, her nose still wrinkled like she had smelled something foul. “Go upstairs and get to bed. You know Santa doesn’t come unless everyone is in their rooms.”

“Whatever,” Dawn said, moving at a bloody snail’s pace toward the staircase. She paused to throw Spike a small wave and a grin. “Have a good Christmas, Spike.”

“No. No talking. Just going.”

Dawn rolled her eyes but didn’t say anything else—nothing Big Sis could hear, at least. Spike caught a few of the more colorful curses as the girl slogged her way up the stairs and did everything he could to swallow his grin. He was in enough trouble as it was for the crime of existing in the Slayer’s space, though perhaps he could get her to manhandle him again—toss him out good and proper.

Seemed like he might get his wish. The second Dawn rounded the corner upstairs, Buffy seized Spike by the arm with one hand and dragged him into the entry-hall, presumably to boot his arse out the door herself.

She paused, though, and fixed him with that ruthless glare of hers. “I never want to come home and find you here again,” Buffy snapped. “Do you understand me?”

Well, that was rude. Spike raised his chin. “Or you’ll what?”

“Should I answer with words or would a stake do the trick?”

“What, you’ll do me in?”

“Give me one reason not to.”

"Didn't know catchin' a bloody flick with the fam was a slayin' offense."

"Because it's *not* just a movie with you, Spike. Whatever this is, whatever beef you have with me, you take it up with *me*. You do not get my family involved."

Oh, that was a low bloody blow. Suddenly the situation was a whole lot less hilarious. He took a step forward, the urge to throttle her racing in tandem with the desire to kiss that scowl right off her magnificent mouth.

"You think I'd do that?" he demanded in a low tone the bitch was either too daft or too hot to realize was dangerous. "Use the Bit or your mum as a way to get to you?"

"Yes, because you'd never go through my friends and family to get what you want."

Spike gritted his teeth. Times like this, he really resented himself for loving her. "That's not me you're thinkin' of, sweetheart. Right family. Wrong vampire. If I worked that way, you and yours woulda been dead a long bloody time ago."

There were few people who could pull off the well-and-truly-brassed look in perfect concert with tomato-red embarrassment, but Buffy did so with aplomb. Her lips pursed, her brow furrowed, her nostrils flared and her eyes wished him dust even if the rest of her didn't lift a finger to make it so. And through it all, she was gorgeous. Almost too painfully so to look at, knowing looking was all he could do. As close as he would ever get.

"Get out of here, Spike," Buffy practically snarled. "Now."

He raised his hands and took a step back toward the door, even if every natural instinct screamed at him to push forward. His instincts were for rot these days, anyway, not aided by a mind plagued with thoughts of her and a heart sick with love he didn't want.

"Happy Christmas, Slayer," he said, putting another space between them, then another, and not turning until the door was at his back. "Enjoy the biscuits. Helped make 'em myself."

And before she could register that comment, he had made his escape, out of the comforts of home and into the solitude of night.

It wasn't until he was most of the way back to the crypt that he

realized he'd never sneaked his gift for her under the tree. He stopped short, pulled the pathetic package out and gave it a good glare, hating it and what it represented and her, always her. Only not hating her, not really, and hating *that* most of all.

Merry fucking Christmas, indeed.





*Someday soon, we all will be together*

*If the fates allow*

*Until then, we'll have to muddle through somehow*

*DECEMBER, 2001*

Bugger it, he wouldn't go. That settled the matter.

Spike crashed back against his sofa, dragged down by a combination of relief and regret. Relief that he'd arrived at the decision, that it was final and meant he wouldn't have to put himself through the emotional wringer any more than he already had. Regret because it didn't feel right—not that anything of late had felt right—and every part of him ached anyway for missing her.

Missing all of it.

Then there was the knowledge that the Nibblet would be disappointed when he didn't show. He hated that, but there was nothing to be done for it. Being around Buffy hurt too much—not that he had anyone to blame but himself. He was the one who had gone and made things awkward. Chased her away good and proper, forced her to listen to things she'd been trying to ignore in such a way that ignoring it hadn't been an option.

And though it wasn't like he was the one who had gone and summoned a demon with aspirations of bloody Rogers and Hammerstein, he had made a right arse of himself.

Buffy had been honest with him up until that point—as honest as she could be, he expected, given the circumstances. Hell, having her here was a miracle in itself, wasn't it? For a hundred and forty-seven nights, he'd been a shadow of himself, caught in a pattern that might resemble living to anyone who didn't know better, but had been little more than doing what he could to survive. Get through the day without giving up, knowing that tomorrow would bring the same. All tomorrows for the rest of forever, point of fact, because Buffy was gone and it was his fault.

But then she had been there. She'd walked down those stairs like something out of a dream, her eyes haunted but *hers*, and it had been the best bloody moment of his life. And if that hadn't been enough, she'd started popping up at his crypt, for the first time ever to do something other than pound in his face or threaten him for kicks. One night had become two, then three, and after a week he'd reckoned they had something of a pattern going on. Buffy visiting him, sometimes talking and other times not. Other times just sitting in the quiet, staring at one of the walls like she saw something he didn't and needed the company to get through whatever it was unscathed. He'd suggest they'd patrol and she'd say all right—not disagreeable at all, the Slayer. Not anymore. Once or twice she'd mentioned something about Heaven, dropped it in a conversation or announced it to the quiet, and he'd ask if she needed anything and she'd say no, meaning yes but not knowing what the yes entailed.

It had been a blissful sort of torture, having her here. Having her treat him like something other than what he was. Relying on him as he'd never allowed himself to believe she could. Throwing back shots and making adorable faces and letting him take her on what could only be called a date, even if the night hadn't ended all that well. And he'd gone and bugged it up by singing about how much being around her hurt, as though it had been his pain that mattered.

The visits had stopped after that—the big sing-off he'd managed to tear himself from before he could get carried away with the rest of

them. After all, it had been over, hadn't it? Buffy had sung her poor little heart out about Heaven, and everything had been out there. No more need to come around his crypt and sit in the quiet, steal nips of his hooch or take him up on offers to patrol. There had been a minute there, as he'd stalked away from the Bronze that he'd almost convinced himself she'd come after him, the way the girl would in an actual musical. Follow the bloke she had a yen for so they could share some big cinematic snog before the curtain closed. But she hadn't, because he'd been fooling himself about what all the time they spent together now meant.

Wasn't just him, Dawn had been good enough to tell him when she swung by a couple of days later, asking where he'd been and scolding him for leaving Buffy high and dry when she needed him. Apparently, the witch had gone and meddled with more magic as a means of putting things right with Buffy and the lot of them had spent an evening without a sodding clue who they were. Would have been a right treat to see in person had Spike not been busy with his own problems, namely a debt he owed to a certain shark-faced git who fancied himself the big noise in these parts.

But the Nibblet had it wrong—Buffy didn't need him. If she did, she knew where to find him, and god knows she'd never let anything like his own feelings get in the way of grabbing what she wanted. The only time she had swung by, point of fact, had been because she needed him. Not him Spike, but him the human-shaped bloodhound who could help her find her wayward sister, who was out with Willow and couldn't be found. The excuse had sounded weak at the time—weak enough for a stupid bloke to think it might actually be an excuse because she couldn't suss out how to tell him she liked hanging around him after all—but it turned out that Dawn had actually been in a spot of trouble thanks to the witch.

Since then, nothing. Spike had helped the Slayer escort her sister to urgent care and that had been that. She hadn't even swung by to thank him. Hell, that entire night, she'd barely looked at him at all. And aside from knowing when she was near—patrolling, of course—he hadn't gotten a whiff of her.

Buffy had her proper support team back. No need to lean on Spike anymore.

Granted, that wasn't the story Dawn had told. During her visit, she'd spilled a bunch of rot about how Buffy was miserable and how it was up to the two of them to get her in the Christmas spirit. The Bit had been watching one too many holiday specials, it seemed, or was still young and naïve enough to think that was how these things worked. Spike could just show up in one of those bloody awful Christmas jumpers, string up some tinsel, and Buffy would magically be ready to ring in a holiday that would be brutal even if she wasn't nursing the hangover from Heaven. Milestone dates after the loss of a parent were a bitch to get through—this he knew intimately.

Spike had told Dawn he'd swing by, and he'd meant it at the time. The prospect of seeing Buffy, breathing her air again, had been too much, and he was weak. But after the girl had taken off, he'd let himself walk through what would likely happen if he darkened the Summers' doorway, and his resolve had waned. It was already going to be a miserable holiday—no need to make it more so by putting himself out there.

So, for the first time since coming to Sunnyhell, for the first time since knowing Buffy and Dawn, he vowed to stay as far away from Revello Drive as possible during the month of December. True, he'd tried to talk himself out of it—or into it—every few days or so, the need and urgency intensifying the closer it got to the holiday itself. And when he'd awakened that afternoon, Christmas Day, he'd gotten dressed with a fixed sense of determination—one that had carried him as far as the door to his crypt before reality had crashed in again.

Dawn wanting him there wasn't enough. Buffy needed to want him too.

Which was why he was on his couch, staring at a television set too bloody old to have a remote and not trusting himself to get up to turn it on, lest his legs take him somewhere he wasn't welcome. Eventually, he'd need to pour himself a glass of blood, with a healthy side of bourbon, and maybe take to patrol to see if he could give the Slayer a quiet holiday even if she didn't appreciate it. But for now, right now, he'd stay put.

And that was where he was when the door to his crypt slammed open and Buffy made her way inside.

Spike was on his feet before his brain could make heads or tails of what he was seeing. For a moment, he thought he'd nodded off and was having one of those brilliantly vivid dreams—the ones sweet enough to exist but cruel enough to not be real. But then he blinked and she was still there, a bit flushed as though she'd run here and all bundled up the way she got whenever the temperature dipped below sixty degrees. She looked at him and he gaped at her, and questions bombarded his head at a pace he couldn't keep up with, with an underlying of something he didn't want to call hope.

At last, Buffy broke her gaze from his and started pulling off her gloves. "Umm, hi."

He didn't say anything—couldn't.

"Dawn, umm, thought you were coming over. For Christmas. She actually waited for you last night." Buffy's cheeks went a bit pink. "I couldn't get her to come inside until after midnight."

"Oh." *Ob.* So that was why she was here. The hope that he'd known better than to entertain took a nosedive. "Didn't mean to disappoint her. Just reckoned you wouldn't fancy it if yours truly turned up."

"She says you come by every year." This Buffy got out in a rush. "I remember last year—catching you guys watching the movie. A-and the year before, when I..."

Escorted him out by the scruff of his neck? Yeah, he remembered that too.

"But she said you came by the year before that. And the year before that." She was speaking faster now, the blush deepening and her gaze bouncing all over the place without landing anywhere in particular. "Which, I gotta say, is majorly weird."

Yeah, he would have thought so too, once upon a time. But there were a load of things that made sense to him that hadn't before—that he'd been drawn back to Sunnyhell, drawn to *her*, such that he'd risk life and limb to be near her any way he could... The mystery there was gone. Fuck, he'd rolled himself right to Revello Drive that first year, hadn't he? Just hadn't been able to stay away, even after the bitch had broken his back and robbed him of his dignity.

“Yeah, well,” he said after a beat, “never been one much for convention.”

“That’s not what’s weird.” Buffy pressed her lips together and met his eyes again. “You know that’s not how it happened—whatever you remember. Or what Dawn remembers. Because Dawn...wasn’t there.”

Spike hesitated, frowning. That was perfectly true, though it seemed bloody impossible with the memories as crystal bloody clear as they were. How Dawn had looked the first time he’d seen her, a miniature burglar intent on stealing away in the dead of night. Or when she’d caught him loitering the following year, then commiserated over the fact that Buffy was in a state over Angel, who seemed to be in the process of losing his bloody head. Then the next year when she’d come outside to invite him in. All of that hadn’t happened, at least not the way he remembered it.

“Strange, huh?” Buffy said. When he looked up, she seemed closer than she had been a moment ago. “The monks that made our memories made it so you were there for her pretty much since we moved here.”

The beat of hope he’d tried to smother flared to life again, though he wasn’t sure what to make of it. Or her. Or what she was trying to say. “Had a bit of mojo on their side, yeah?” he replied. “Wager they could make us believe just about anything.”

“Yeah, I had that thought, too.”

This time he saw it—she definitely moved closer. He wasn’t sure if she knew she was doing it, shuffling forward every few seconds. Somehow, the movement looked both subconscious and deliberate.

“But we had to believe it,” Buffy said. “We all had to believe it—everything they built. They thought you were important when they made those memories, and they were right. I mean, look what you did for her last year and this last summer...”

Last summer meaning when she’d been gone. Even now, standing there, looking at Buffy, the thought of those long weeks was unbearable.

Buffy swallowed, the sound almost deafening in the otherwise still crypt. She fixed her gaze on the stone floor again. “That’s not all I

wanted to say, though Dawn's gonna be plenty pissed if I show back up at Casa de Summers absent one vampire."

"Plannin' on draggin' me out, then?"

"Planning on asking you to come back with me."

"All nice like? You gonna say *please* and everythin'?" Spike tilted his head, evil enough to admit he enjoyed the way her heart kicked up. He could milk it, he knew. Play upon Dawn's affection for him and tag along back to Revello Drive, the Slayer's faithful lapdog, but bugger, she already had him where she wanted him. Knew she could come and bat her eyes and say her pretty things to get him to do whatever she fancied. And yeah, he'd asked for this too—sung a whole bloody song about how she shouldn't look if she wasn't going to touch, and while he'd meant that in some ways, he hadn't in others.

Knowing Buffy was in this world and, in some way, needing him was more than he'd ever thought to have. Only truly selfish gits would ask for more.

But he was a truly selfish git.

"You were right," Buffy said in a rush, surprising him. "What you sang that night. I feel like I've been playing chicken with myself."

Spike stared at her. Whatever else, he hadn't expected that. "Right. Well." Fuck. "Didn't mean to make a big thing out of it and scare you off, pet. Keep playin' all you like."

"No, it was good." Buffy's gaze was still fixed on the floor. "I needed to think about things. I mean really think, Spike. What I'm going through, what it meant that...being here was the only thing that kept my head quiet."

He sighed some of that righteousness right on out of him. "Slayer, you're in a world of hurt and no matter how you spin it, I made it worse by chasin' you off. If hanging 'round here makes living any easier for you—"

"It did. It does."

"Then bugger anything I said, yeah? Or sang."

Buffy flicked her eyes up to him, all uncertainty, and he felt even worse. "I don't want to forget it, though," she said. "It means something, doesn't it? The past couple of weeks have been all with the...bad.

Giles taking off, Willow finally admitting she has a magic problem, and they know now, about Heaven. I could talk to them if I wanted to, but I don't want. Do you know I never even told Angel about the Heaven thing?"

Spike's throat tightened. "No?"

"No."

She looked like she might elaborate but she didn't, and he wasn't sure he wanted her to. Knowing he had a little piece of her, something Angel hadn't touched, was a prize in itself. And yeah, that piece was communal now—all her mates knew, but he was the only one she'd told willingly. The only one she'd trusted with that.

"I'm not okay," Buffy said, stepping forward, and now she brought the scent of tears with her. Fresh and hot and hers, and he felt everything in him wilt. She sniffed and gave him a smile he knew he didn't deserve. "I've tried to tell myself it's a thousand things, and it is. Nothing is right right now, you know?"

"Buffy, don't—"

"But the things that *are* right...are *right*. There aren't many and I'm so tired of pretending you're not one of them." She dragged her hand across either cheek, laughing somehow, like any of this was funny.

And he didn't know how to respond—to her or what she was saying, her tears or that little laugh. He knew what it sounded like but Spike had lived too long on assumptions, or more accurately, taking things he heard and twisting them to his fancy. Convincing himself that if he just pushed a little harder, he'd get what he wanted.

"Sorry, pet," he said. "Fraid you're gonna have to spell it out for me."

She laughed again, which had him downright terrified. But she didn't respond, not at first. Instead, she reached into her coat pocket and drew out something loosely wrapped in familiar-looking paper, and his throat tightened.

"Dawn says you gave this to her to give to me," she said, gaze fixed on the things she held. "Along with that knife you gave her?"

"Bit said she wanted to learn how to take care of herself."

"So you gave her something that will absolutely lead to at least one ER visit."



He shrugged. "Was actually for you, the knife. Had it with me last year, when your mum invited me over. Never found a good time to leave it." A beat. "Reckoned she could use it more, all told. Girl's gonna grow up fightin' monsters whether you give your blessing or not."

"I know." Buffy glanced up. "You really thought I'd throw these away?"

God, she was gonna make him cry like a sodding ninny, wasn't she? The bitch.

"Didn't know," Spike replied, somewhat choked. "If you knew they were from me. Wagered I was the last person—"

"I wouldn't have."

"Wouldn't know that, would I?"

Again, Buffy flushed. He'd never seen her do that around him—not like this, at least. Because she was shy or self-aware or what all, not brassed outta her head.

He'd been at a loss this year, what to get her. Knowing she probably wouldn't take anything from him but needing to do it anyway, because she was Buffy, the woman he loved—the woman he'd loved every bloody Christmas since he'd first blasted into Sunnydale, whether or not he'd known it—and gift-giving was one of those things Spike enjoyed doing. This year had been different, though. The rules undefined following the big sing-off, knowing Buffy was hurting and unable to do anything about it, even more so after he'd chased her off. A weapon might have served her the year before, when she'd been fighting something outside herself, but it wouldn't do this year. So he'd taken to the collection of trinkets he'd kept with him for more than a century to find something that might have some meaning to her. Might let her know, no matter what, he was hers through and through.

Ultimately, he'd come down on two pieces that had once been his mum's. When he couldn't choose which one was better, he'd gone with both, written a note to explain what they were, and wrapped everything up in a clumsy, misshapen package that he'd thrust into Dawn's hands before she'd left. And because he had a writer's brain if not the talent, he remembered more or less what he'd scribbled.

*Buffy,*

*These were my mum's. If you decide you don't want them, please don't toss them out. Just leave them on the porch or what all, and I'll pick them up.*

*First thing's called a lachrymatory. It's thought the Romans used them to catch tears, though that's probably rubbish. But my mum always liked the idea, a place to tuck away sadness. Know you have too much to tuck away, but wagered this might be a decent start.*

*The second you know, of course. Probably wondering why a vamp would keep a mirror for over a century. Turns out old Spike's a sentimental sod. The last lady who looked in it often doubted her strength, even if she was one of the strongest people I knew. Can think of no one worthier to carry that on. It's there in case you need to find a bit of strength, yourself. All you need to do is look.*

*Happy Christmas, Slayer.*

*- Spike*

Truthfully, Spike hadn't thought through what came next. If she opted to keep the gift, it had seemed likely she'd never acknowledge it. He'd been more prepared to find both the lachrymatory and his mum's small mirror outside his crypt, perhaps rewrapped in the shoddy packaging he'd chosen. Antiques weren't the sort of thing he gathered meant much to Buffy, and the mirror especially was in rather sorry shape. The glass needed to be replaced, having grown a bit cloudy with age and neglect. After all, he hadn't kept it for its practical use, rather the sentimental value. Nothing that Buffy would find important, at least.

"I can't take these," Buffy said at length, her voice hoarse, still studying the items she held. "Not because I don't... I think this might be the best gift I've ever gotten. And I really, really mean that. But Spike, I can't take something that belonged to your mom."

He released something between a laugh and a sigh, staggering forward on legs that were suddenly shaking. "Sure you can, love."

"I didn't even know you...kept stuff that belonged to her."

"Not much, mind. Just what I could nab—things that made me think of her."

"You didn't kill her."

It wasn't a question. She spoke with such certainty that she managed to both resurrect and ease the pain of memories more than a century old now. Where she got this conviction, he didn't know, but

she was firm on it. So much so that he knew shattering that belief would almost be worse than losing his mum all over again, but also knowing he wouldn't lie, much as he'd like to.

"You don't think?" Spike asked.

"Not if you kept her things," Buffy said, frowning. "And how you wrote about her... Am I wrong?"

He blinked wildly and looked down. "Yeah, sorry to spoil the rosy picture you're paintin' of yours truly, but I did. But if intentions are worth anythin' to you, meant it as a cure."

"What?"

Spike rubbed the back of his neck, for the first time that he could remember wanting Buffy to be somewhere else—far away from him. Wanting to not tell this story but knowing he had to, and that he had no one to blame but himself. Give the girl a bauble from yesteryear and it was only right she'd wonder after it, especially if he added its history.

"She was sickly. Consumption," he heard himself say as though from a distance. "Thought I'd have to watch her wither away—was what happened in those days. Then suddenly I had this new strength. A way to cheat death. It was bloody remarkable."

He saw the moment it clicked for her—the moment confusion became knowledge. Buffy's mouth went slack and her eyes wide, brimming with that awful understanding.

"You turned her."

Spike sniffed, looking down. "Yeah."

"To save her."

"That was the plan."

"And it... What happened?"

He swung his head back up, his mouth twitching. "Simple, Slayer. Just because yours truly came back from the grave wantin' to cling to his mum like an overgrown toddler didn't mean the lady was keen to be clung to. She spoke a nasty piece to me and I did what I had to."

"Oh, Spike..."

He backed up when she stepped toward him, raising a hand. "Don't. While back now, wasn't it? Had me more than enough time to come to terms that she didn't love me—"

"Spike, she loved you."

“No, she didn’t. Believe me, she made that clear.”

“Believe *me*, that wasn’t—”

“It *was* her.” He pinched the bridge of his nose, trembling. “Know what rot they feed you. Easier to do your job, right, if you can think of a vamp as somethin’ other than what he was before. Take it from a bloke who’s lived on both sides, that’s a bunch of shite.”

Buffy looked stricken at that, and fuck, he didn’t blame her. Hadn’t exactly meant to lose his head like a complete wanker, yell at her for things she couldn’t understand. But then, he’d been the thick git who had thought hocking up his mum’s old possessions would make a nice right gesture, and that if the Slayer decided she didn’t want anything from him it’d be because it was from *him*—not because she had a full heart and firsthand knowledge of what it was to lose someone. No matter which way he sliced it, he was a dolt.

And this was something Buffy would never want to believe, anyway. Aside from making her job harder, it would mean confronting a truth he bloody well knew she wasn’t ready to confront.

“Spike,” she said in a tempered tone that surprised him. He’d more than earned a sassy comment and a punch to the nose. “I... You’re right. I don’t know what it’s like. I don’t know... Well, a lot of things. And a lot of that is your fault.”

He stared at her. “*My* fault?”

“Yes, you. You and your...being all not-evil—”

“Oi!”

“Well, face it, you’re not.” Now she had some bite to her, some fire in her eyes. That was good—better. Familiar. He knew how to handle a pissed off slayer. “Keeping my sister safe all summer? Not evil. Fighting to save the world? Not evil. Giving me this? Writing what you did? That’s not evil. Your whole not being evil screws with my head, because I know you are under there. Those instincts are still there, aren’t they? They didn’t just go *poof* when you decided you were in love with me.”

He barked out a flat laugh. “Decided?”

“You know what I mean!”

“Hardly ever.”

"But you're the only one who's been like that," Buffy went on, working herself up to a mighty fine rant, from the look of things. "Whatever your mother told you after she was changed, she did so while being evil. The intent was to hurt—just like everything Angel said to me when he was bad was meant to hurt."

He rolled his eyes at that. "Here it comes."

"Here what comes?"

"Don't compare the way she was to him. That's bloody—"

"Well, it's true," Buffy snapped, her eyes alight. "Angel came after me for a reason then—because I made him feel human. Because he loved me and that sickened him. He didn't want to. Your mom... Whatever she told you, she loved you. I can't believe I'm standing here on *Christmas* trying to convince you that your mother—"

"Why the bloody hell are you here, then? Why even bother?"

"Because Dawn—"

"Can learn to live with disappointment. I don't need your bloody charity, Slayer, or your pity. You don't want the trinkets? Fine. I'll have them back."

"It's not about not wanting!"

"Then what the hell else—"

Several things happened at once. The lachrymatory and the mirror hitting the stone floor, cushioned still in the wrapping, which spared them full impact. He thought his heart might fly right out of his ribcage when he saw them drop, but he only had a second to savor the lack of shattering glass before he was bloody well barreled over by an armful of Slayer. Not just any Slayer—hot, fiery, angry Slayer, who seized his face and dragged his mouth down until she was tearing at it with her teeth. Spike was still for a second—a very long second, suspended as though time itself had stopped moving—just focused on a combination of shock and sensation, the reality that was Buffy in his arms, against his lips, her breasts pressed to his chest, this living dream made reality before the rest of him was able to catch up and fall into her.

"Fuck," Spike gasped into her mouth, seizing her by the hips as she did her bloody best to climb into him. He lost sight of his surround-

ings, this crypt he knew so well, and was almost surprised when his legs hit something and sent him tumbling back. But it was the couch, the green one he'd shown off after she'd come back from the dead. When she'd been here and he'd been making bloody small talk to try and fill the loudest silence of his life, babbling about anything and everything, hoping something would stick. And now she was here, in his lap, moaning into his mouth as she shucked off her coat and he realized with a start just what was about to happen.

Spike tore his mouth from hers, digging his fingers into the firmness of her hips to hold her there against his swelling cock, whimpering when she ground against him. "Buffy," he managed, not sure what he intended to say but needing to say something. Or better yet, hear her say it. Hear her tell him that she wanted him, wanted this, that she'd come over here to drive him out of his bloody gourd because she felt it as strongly as he did.

He must have waited too long, for she pulled back just a hair to whisper a faint, "Spike," against his lips, her fingers wandering under the hem of his T-shirt. "I came here to tell you something."

He grinned dopily, couldn't help it. "Yeah? What's stopping you?" It was settling, the reality that she was in his lap, rubbing herself against his erection—that she wasn't bolting for the door. If this was a dream, let him never wake up.

"You make things so hard sometimes."

This time he chuckled and nipped at her lower lip. "Think that's you, sweetheart." Spike grabbed one of her hands and scaled it between them, his chest tightening with unneeded breath the second her palm was pressed against his denim-clad cock. "You make me this hard all the time."

Buffy released the sweetest gasp he'd ever heard, like she was surprised, like she hadn't been writhing against him just now. Then her hand was moving, stroking him with intent.

"I do?"

He laughed again and nodded. "Since the start, pet. Loved you even when I hated you. Just didn't know it."

"That's either very sweet or very twisted." She cocked her head, considering. "Though it's you, so I guess it can be both."

Spike trailed his hands up her thighs and to the fuzzy hem of her sweater—a hunter green number that made her eyes positively shimmer. Eyes that were fixed on him, seeing *him*, and full of warmth. “What’d you wanna tell me?” he asked, dipping beneath the sweater and nearly groaning at the flash of hot skin that met his fingers. “I’m all ears.”

“This,” she said, squeezing him through his jeans, “doesn’t feel like an ear.”

“Buffy...”

“But maybe telling it will get the message across, since you didn’t hear me a minute ago.” The grin she gave him was shy and sweet, lighting him up so bright he thought he might combust. Then she was pulling back, moving with liquid grace and taking all that blessed warmth with her. He released a sound that was half-growl, half-whine, and tried to grab her, but she was too quick, his Slayer, settling on her knees between his legs the next second.

“So here I go again,” Buffy said, once more dancing her fingers over the ridge his cock made against the denim. “Try to pay attention.”

She deftly undid the button of his jeans before dragging down the zipper to his fly, the sound harsh and metallic and offsetting the hard gasps tearing from his mouth as all of him rushed to reconcile what was happening. Typically, by this point, the dream would make a wild turn into fantastical territory—more fantastical than Buffy sitting on her knees before him, even—but this felt real. Smelled real, too. Smelled like her—and scents were a bloody hard thing to get right in dreams.

But Buffy reaching into his jeans to pull his cock into her lethal little hand was something beyond just fantasy. It was everything.

More than everything.

“This you misbehavin’, then?” he asked thickly, trying and failing not to whimper when she started to stroke. It hadn’t occurred to him, somehow, that she would be so bloody warm. Humans were all warmth, of course, which was what made them so delicious—all that vibrant, hot life pumping through their veins and keeping them in motion. He’d been pressed against Buffy enough times to appreciate her own brand of warmth, along with everything else about her, but for some

odd reason he hadn't known to expect this. How it would feel to get her hand around his prick, how her skin alone would burn in all the right ways. How she would be hot all over.

"Behaving hasn't done much for me. Though I guess you gotta think this is wrong for that to apply." She wet her lips because she was bloody merciless, then blinked up at him, expression earnest. "Do you think it's wrong?"

Fuck, yes, it was wrong. Everything about her—about them—had been wrong from the start, though the sort of wrong he had long since lost interest in fighting. "Don't you?" he managed instead, because he knew the answer to that. No matter what she might be trying to prove, there was only one way this ended for him and the Slayer.

But Buffy wouldn't be Buffy if she weren't constantly knocking him for a six.

"Do you love me?" she asked.

"You know I do."

"Yeah, I do." Her mouth neared his cock, and he felt a puff of breath caress the head and fuck, he somehow kept himself from losing it just at the sight. At the sensation. "Like I said, Spike, I'm tired of pretending."

Then she flicked her tongue against him and he couldn't hold the whimper in this time. Didn't fucking care, either, transfixed as he was at the sight of her there. She met his eyes and licked him once more, now with slow deliberation. And it occurred to him *again* that this was real—she was here, right here, on her knees before him, her lips parting and her tongue peeking and *oh god*, she had him in her mouth, and it was perfect. She was perfect. That heat he'd chased was better than he could have ever imagined, blistering him from the inside out in a burn so sweet he could bloody cry.

"Oh, fuck. Buffy." He threaded his fingers through her hair, needing, desperate to touch her, ground himself in her presence. Then came the exquisite pressure of her mouth around him, the swirls she took with her tongue, and the sight of those lips sliding further down his shaft. She didn't make it all the way, not the first time, and he got to experience it all over again. Watch as she pulled back, still looking at him, until she was nearly at the tip once more, which she favored with



a soft suck. His throat seized, more of those declarations she'd once loathed so much lodged inside, but too fast and jumbled for him to let loose. Instead, he watched as her skin went pink, as her eyes grew wide and dark, tasted the air that was filled with her and what he knew was her excitement, and latched into that piece of intoxicating knowledge. Buffy was wet. Buffy was wet and on her knees and sucking him off, her blonde head bobbing, her lips inching down his length and back, then again, and again, quicker and quicker until she had a rhythm she liked. Her hands—glorious weapons that they were—sliding up his legs to cup his balls against one palm and as her other hand took to stroking his prick in accord with her mouth.

It was going to be over far too fast and he didn't want that. Didn't think he could take it, the way she'd pull away from him, or what might happen in the minutes that followed. Not after the pretty words she'd filled his head with. And though he knew it likely he'd regret it, bloody kick himself more like, he somehow found the wherewithal to use his grip on her and ease her back until his cock slipped free of those plump, swollen lips.

"What?" she breathed out, blinking eyes that had gone round. "Spike... I thought you wanted... Was this not what you want?"

Something in him seized, bursting the happy bubble that had been swelling and bringing him back down. Was that all this was? Giving him what she thought he wanted? A sodding thank you? The thought had his jaw tightening damn near to the point of pain, and he looked away before she could see any of what was going on inside on his face. He'd already bled enough for this girl.

"Spike, this is what you want, isn't it?"

He worked his throat, trying to sort through the clash of contradictory sensations, not sure what to make of them or her or what had just happened. Hell, he was sitting here on bloody Christmas Day with his dick hard and wet from her mouth, and he had no sodding idea what any of it meant. "Askin' if I want you?" he managed a second later. "Always. But all of you, Slayer."

"I...thought that's what I was giving you."

"Was it?"

"I guess I should have had this conversation with your ear rather

than your penis,” Buffy muttered, sitting back on her legs. “I said I’m tired of pretending you’re not... I’m tired of *pretending*. I’m tired of you not being in my life when... I’m just *tired*, Spike. And I want you.”

That was all it took—those simple words. The defenses he’d reared up fell just as easily, that sense of righteous indignation that had felt empty even as he’d seized it, knowing he wouldn’t be able to turn her away if he tried. Not after all these years, wanting her as he had, loving her as he did. Not now. But Buffy saying she wanted him back—that was something else.

“You do?”

“That’s what I came here to tell you, you big dummy.” She slapped his shin. “You’re the guy. The guy who saved me every night for a hundred and however-many days and looked after my sister and has been the one... The *one* since I got back. It’s Christmas and what I want is you.”

It was a damn good thing she chose that moment to bloody launch herself at him otherwise he might have dissolved into a mess. But then she was in his arms, pulling kisses off his lips and tearing at his clothes, and he was a goner. Always had been when it came to her. He’d always been *this*. There were the things he knew and the things he didn’t and though it might take his brain a minute to catch up with his heart, it always got there in the end.

And here they were—she was with him. In his lap, on his cock, her hands everywhere, trailing fire over his skin, lighting him up from the inside. He tugged at her sweater as she ripped at his T-shirt with the sort of wild fervor he only experienced in his fantasies. The rest was instinct—kicking off his jeans, fumbling and fighting her to get her out of hers, running his hands up her arms as she cast herself astride his hips, rubbing the damp crotch of her panties against his shaft so he could feel just how hot she really was. But then she’d reached between them and the sound of tearing fabric rent the air and, *bleeding hell*, the Slayer had ripped off her own knickers. And she was there, hovering over him, slicking the head of his cock with her wet cunt, teasing him and herself for a short eternity until he was pressed against her opening.

He’d been here before—a thousand times, a thousand thousand

times, all in the square foot of real estate located between his ears. The different ways it might happen, how she might give in, how she would seduce and entrance, or play soft and coy, or just decide *fuck it* during a patrol or after he'd done something to brass her off. It had never been this, though. Buffy kissing him as she slowly eased her way down his shaft, Buffy smiling against his lips, Buffy looking at him the way she was—like she wanted this as much as he did. And god, she was fire in human form, and if he were to dust as a result of this that would be okay because he'd had it.

"This, Spike," Buffy whispered as she started rocking her hips, inching her way up his cock and down again. And again, and again until he thought his eyes might cross and stay that way, how good she felt. All that heat squeezing him tight, pulling him into her at a rhythm that was both agonizingly slow and much too fast. "This is what I want."

A strangled sob tore itself from his throat. He gripped her hips, threw his head back, and lost himself in sensation. Wanting so desperately to believe that the things she'd said—or danced around saying—were true, and there was any part of her that could be his. It just seemed too good, too bloody timely. Buffy wasn't just his Christmas wish, she was his every wish, and Spike wasn't used to getting what he wished for. Not without strings, at least—not when it came to the women he loved. That she was here, pumping him in slow, decadent strokes, skating her lips up his throat, along his jaw and the underside of his chin, touching him like she might love him—that was more than holiday magic. It was pure bloody fantasy.

But fantasy had never been so hot or felt so good. He should know—he'd had the fantasy. Wires and circuits and bright smiles that had been programmed for him and no one else, and that had been fun but it hadn't been real and *god*, this was. Buffy around him, over him, kissing him, squeezing him with her molten pussy as she bucked and bounced and all the while, kept her emerald gaze locked on him. Telling him without saying a bloody thing that she was in the moment with him.

And when she did speak, it was to say, "Spike," as no one ever had,

her voice cracking, breathy and urgent, his name almost a question but not quite.

“What’s it you need, pet?” Spike heard himself asking, the words a gasp as she clenched her cunt around him, riding him harder now, as though chasing something down. The couch whined beneath their movements, adding to the mixed symphony of gasps and fleshy slaps as he pistoned up into her. These were the details no dream could capture. His fingers digging into her hips, her breasts swaying with her movements, her skin slick with sweat, her hair plastered to her face. He wanted to touch her everywhere, explore her everywhere, and watch—just watch—as Buffy galloped him to oblivion.

“Say you understand,” she whispered. Had he not been a vampire, he wasn’t sure he’d have heard her above the wet smacks of their bodies colliding. “Please.”

“Understand—”

“How much I want...” Buffy shook her head and kissed him, whimpering against his mouth. “How much...”

But she didn’t finish the thought and he wouldn’t lie to her. There were, though, things he *did* understand. The way a woman felt when she was close to the edge—that was one of them. What the desperate rolls of her hips meant, that he was about to feel Buffy come apart around his cock and *that* was real, even if he didn’t know how he’d ended up here. And it was something he could give, perhaps better than the mementos from the life he’d once led, as it was entirely hers as nothing else could be. He slipped a hand between them, swallowed a moan at the feel of her wet flesh clamping around him, and flattened his hand against her lower belly so that his thumb grazed her clit.

It took so little to get her there, so bloody little. Buffy released a tortured sound he’d spend forever hunting down, spasming and squeezing and he fell after her, a roar tearing itself free of his throat as his fangs burst into his mouth. Ruined him, that was what she’d done. Ruined his heart first and his body second, because there was no bloody way anything else could ever feel this good. Nothing to compare to the sensation of Buffy grasping at him, panting his name as her pussy trembled and squeezed his cock, as he bucked and emptied himself into her, as she pressed her hot to his cold and

nuzzled into his shoulder. As she muttered words without meaning, though with enough weight he suspected they actually meant the world.

Spike didn't know what had happened here, except that it had been everything. All he could do was hope she'd explain it to him before she broke him for good.

They sat in the quiet together for what felt like a long stretch, Buffy tucked up against him, breathing hard and holding onto him like he was the one in danger of pulling a vanishing act. At last, though, she did shift and pull back, looking up at him with one of her signature unreadable expressions—the sort that could mean anything.

Then a weak smile split her face.

“Hey.”

Spike blinked, feeling a bit drunk. “Hey yourself.”

“So...” She pressed her lips together, somehow managing to look shy, which had him bloody enchanted. “Do you...get what I was trying to tell you?”

At that, he grinned. Couldn't much help it. Truth was he wasn't sure he understood any of what had just happened, much less whatever she'd been trying to tell him. But she was here, on his lap with his cock hardening inside of her, and looking at him through clear eyes.

“That's a no, isn't it?”

“I'll answer in whatever way will have you shagging me again.” He began kissing a line down her throat. “That'll keep you here.”

“That was not the plan.” But Buffy didn't pull back when he covered her mouth. Not at first, at least. Instead, she sank into him, stroked his tongue with hers, and gave her hips a little rock that had thought fast abandoning his head. “Once more from the top,” she whispered when she broke away, his name now a sigh. “I'm not okay. But you make me feel like I can be. Some day.”

He tightened his arms around her and kissed her again. “Is that all?”

“If you're asking if I love you, the answer is...I want to. I think maybe I do. I just don't know yet. It's been so long.”

That hadn't been what he'd been asking—hell, he didn't know what he'd been asking. And it didn't matter. His heart seized and his eyes

filled and *want* and *maybe* were more than enough. More than he'd ever thought he'd have, and perfect because of it.

Buffy nudged her brow with his as she began to move again, hot and sweet and perfect. "Will you stick around until I know?"

"I'll stick around for eternity, love."

"I'll hold you to it."

## EPILOGUE

THERE WAS A CREAK IN THE FLOORBOARD INSIDE, FOLLOWED BY A muffled teenage curse, and he couldn't help but grin. Not exactly stealthy, the Nibblet. Or subtle.

Spike lowered his cigarette from his lips and tapped it against the ashtray. *His* ashtray. He hadn't expected to find anything under the tree for him, especially since he'd already gotten the best bloody present a man could ask for, but it had been there, clumsily wrapped and bearing his name. Art class, she'd said. Their teacher had checked out sometime toward the beginning of the month and given the lot of them free reign on whatever they wanted to make. So Dawn had made him an ashtray, hoping that he'd have occasion to use it more.

Buffy, of course, had been quick to pipe up, remind them both that under no circumstances was there to be smoking in the house. Not that Spike was thick enough to press his luck, not when he was sharing the Slayer's bed.

They hadn't talked much since the crypt, when she'd groaned and mentioned something about making it back to the house for Christmas dinner and pulled away from him before he could roll her under him again. She'd promised Dawn that Spike would be in attendance—tradition, and all—and part of her determination to start living

in this world again involved keeping up to those promises. Something Spike could appreciate, especially seeing as he was fairly certain he owed his newfound happiness to the Bit. So they'd dressed, all the while exchanging long, heated looks he knew would lead somewhere, then headed off toward Revello Drive, hand-in-hand.

Now here he was, sitting on the back porch of his lady's house, making use out of the second-best gift he'd ever gotten—even if it was a misshapen, ugly thing, that ashtray—and waiting for his standing Christmas date. He might be a day late but at least he'd shown up.

The back door whined when it opened. "Shoot," Dawn muttered. "Was this always so loud?"

"Been through a lot, that door. Wager you're lucky it swings in at all anymore." Spike took another drag off his cigarette. "Sneakin' out, Bit? Gettin' a tad predictable."

"Oh, shut up." In true teenage form, she stomped inelegantly toward where he was seated on the deck before plonking down in the space beside him. "You didn't show last night."

He nodded, breathing out a stream of smoke. "Sorry about that."

"You *always* show on Christmas."

"Oi. Here now, aren't I?"

"Because of Buffy."

That much was true. But then, it had always been because of Buffy. The first thing that had pulled him here, the thing that had seized and held. The reason he'd never been able to put Sunnyhell behind him. It all came back to her.

But there was also what Buffy had said before—the thing he hadn't thought much about. The monks that had made Dawn had been sure to put her in his path, feed his brain with memories of things that had never happened, but felt as real to him as the girl sitting at his side. The point of that was something he wasn't sure he'd ever understand—if those monks had seen something in him that he hadn't. If they had looked at Buffy's circle and known that he would do anything for her, that he would be her sucker until the world stopped turning. In the end, he supposed it didn't matter. The job was done regardless.

"Reckon it's because of you too, Nibblet," Spike said at last. "Big sis



mighta brought me here, but you're the one who let me in. Got me to prove myself to her."

"You're welcome," she replied flatly. "It was an accident."

He chuckled and tapped his fag against the ashtray again, watching as flecks of gray tumbled against the clay. "Most brilliant things are."

"So you're going to be around more."

"Looks like."

"That won't suck." She cast him a furtive glance out of the corner of her eye. "And Buffy, too. She's said she's going to be home more, though she still needs a job and I'm pretty sure she's desperate enough to actually try the Doublemeat Palace."

Yeah, the Slayer had mentioned that during the big gift exchange with her mates. Her mates who, for the most part, had taken to Spike's presence about as well as he could have asked. There had been a snide comment from Harris, as expected, though just the one—Anya had elbowed him hard enough to knock out his wind. As for Red, she'd muttered something about supporting anything that made Buffy happy, even if she didn't understand it. Though her tune had changed completely when Buffy had placed the gifts he'd given her on the coffee table—he'd managed to convince her to accept them, seeing as she was his girl now—and explained their significance. Best she could, at least, while omitting the story about his mum. Willow had started to blubber and thrown her arms around a very surprised Spike, who had looked over her shoulder for help, only to see that Buffy was staring at a misty-eyed Xander, who later insisted he was allergic to the tree. Then Buffy had cracked a joke about taking a job at the burger joint as a means of paying off Christmas, and the room had descended into a debate as to whether or not the place was befitting a slayer.

One thing Buffy was going to learn was that Spike took care of his women, and he wasn't above playing dirty to get his way. Though, yeah, being her steady fella would call for creative problem-solving when it came to issues like dosh. She likely wouldn't approve of the ways he'd kept himself afloat these last few years, and that was just fine with him. Spike was nothing if not up for a challenge.

"No worries, Little Bit. Not gonna let any woman of mine spend

her days flippin' burgers," Spike said, snuffing out the last of his cigarette.

"Shyeah. Like *you're* going to wear the pants in this relationship."

He bit back a smirk, seeing as Dawn was old enough now she'd be able to read his thoughts if she looked his way, and no girl needed to picture her sister or the bloke who was as good as her brother knocking boots. Though given how loud Buffy had been at the crypt earlier, it seemed likely Dawn would get an earful, anyway.

"Tween the two of us, you and me," Spike replied instead, nudging her shoulder with his, "think we can come up with a better plan."

Dawn blinked. "Us?"

"The bloody brains of the operation, aren't we?"

"We are?"

He snorted. "What? Don't tell me you think it's Harris. You and me, startin' tomorrow. We'll figure somethin' out. Somethin' your sis won't stake me over."

"I think she loves you too much to stake you."

It took a lot to warm a dead thing from the inside, but the words bloody well set him on fire. More so, even, than when Buffy had danced around them earlier. After all, love was something she did with everything she was. Every action taken, every decision made, every time she fought or sacrificed, Buffy demonstrated just how much and how deeply she loved, even if she was shy about labeling it. Those who knew her, really knew her, also knew that. Knew enough to see it when she couldn't. And if Dawn thought her sister loved Spike, then it was just a matter of time before the almost-confession back at the crypt became the real thing.

"Best get inside," Spike said, collecting his new ashtray and rising to his feet. "Got me a slayer to snuggle up to tonight."

"Yeah, *snuggle*. About as believable as a Buffybot you built to play checkers with."

"I did what?"

"Exactly."

She favored him with that impertinent smirk of hers, the same one she'd been regarding him with for years now. In his head if not in the real world. But, he decided, it didn't matter a lick how long the Nibbles

had been around—to him, to Buffy, memories were as good as experiences. The details were window dressing.

It made a sort of sense, then, how everything had come together for him. He hadn't known he loved Buffy the first Christmas he'd been here, except part of him had. The same part that had regarded Dawn as his to protect—as family.

"You're kind of a big softie," Buffy told him when he shared as much after joining her in her bed upstairs. "How did I never know this about you?"

"Hide it pretty well," he replied, brushing her hair over her shoulder and kissing the skin he'd revealed. "Takes a special kinda lady to bring it out in me. Turns out your family's just full of 'em."

*"Big softie."*

Spike growled and nipped at her ear, thrusting himself against her backside. "Feel soft to you?"

"Hmm," she replied, and he heard it—the thing Dawn had mentioned. The thing Buffy couldn't yet call love, but would someday. Perhaps, even, someday soon. Stranger things had happened. "I suppose I could be convinced."

"Good thing I am very persuasive," he rumbled into her ear before rolling her onto her back. Buffy let out a giggle that made his chest ache, he loved her so much. And for a moment, all he could do was look at her. Her golden tresses spilling across the bed, her eyes alight and full, a smile on her face—one he knew was hard-won, wouldn't always come easy, but also one he'd fight to keep there for the rest of his days.

"Happy Christmas, pet," he whispered.

Buffy nodded, stroking a hand down his cheek. "The happiest."

And it was.

