

# HAPPY ENDINGS



HOLLY DENISE





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*Albany, New York, August 2007*

“HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN TOGETHER?”

No matter how often she was asked, Buffy always struggled answering this question. It was a strange thing to try to measure—had she and Spike been together for nearly a decade, or had the clock not officially started until that night in LA three years ago when things had been tentative and fragile? When *they* had been tentative and fragile, existing in a place between the real world and the dream one, neither knowing and both knowing, until the moment broke and one of them had to be brave.

That hadn't been her. Not even then, when she knew what her fear was capable of costing her. In the end, it was always him.

If she were to answer honestly, Buffy imagined the explanation would look a little like the closing scene of *When Harry Met Sally*. “The first time we met, we hated each other. The

second time we met, we tried to kill each other. Three years later, he fell in love with me. One year after that, I fell in love with him, but the time wasn't right for either of us. We had a thing for a few months, hurt each other, spent some time apart, then fell in love again, only he died on me before it could be anything. Then he came back and spent a year believing I was better off without him, only for the world to almost end again and bring us back together." And then the eyes of whoever had asked this seemingly straightforward, two-second question would have glazed over because their interest had been of the polite variety. Nothing earnest.

The only people who really seemed to want the long answer were other slayers, and for good reason. A handful had tried to make it work with vampires, chasing the thrill, the dark, as Buffy once had, but none had succeeded because there were no vampires in the world like Spike. He was one of a kind.

This time, she decided to go with the simplest answer. The one that didn't invite follow-up questions. "Three years," she told the clerk behind the register, who was still staring after where Spike had disappeared to grab an item they'd forgotten to put in the cart. Anchovies for the pizza he was going to have ready when Dawn arrived. Even though they stank up the entire apartment and he had a far more sensitive nose, he insisted on them every time she visited.

"Three years?" The clerk gave her a look Buffy was very familiar with—one of intense, undisguised envy. She was an older woman, though not old. About where Joyce would be if she'd lived long enough to call Sunnydale her former home. "And he still does that?"

"Does what? Grabs stuff we forgot?"

"No, honey. The little nuzzle." The clerk leaned in and

mimed the way Spike had rubbed his cheek against Buffy's before brushing his lips against it and whispering he'd be back in a tick. "Like he can't keep his hands off you."

*Oh, that.* Buffy grinned, enjoying the familiar warmth that spread whenever someone pointed out Spike's excessive PDAs. Maybe one day it wouldn't come as fast, or at all, the novelty of being in a relationship with constant touches and kisses and other small affirmations having finally worn off. But god, she hoped not. For the first time in her life, she had something real and solid, something that helped balance out the chaos prevalent in all other corners of her daily experience. A relationship that truly and completely nullified the sense of isolation she'd carried with her since her calling. Having someone who not only walked with her in both worlds but also understood those worlds and her role in them.

"Yeah," Buffy said, looking over her shoulder in the direction Spike had vanished. "We're pretty happy."

"He doesn't get touched enough. You should do that more."

She blinked, her high abruptly nosediving. "Excuse me?"

To her credit—which Buffy was not in the mood to give—the clerk's face bloomed bright red, her expression contorting into one of horror. "I shouldn't have said that," she blurted, shaking her head. "I don't know what's wrong with me."

"No, you shouldn't have," Buffy retorted through her teeth, her jaw so tight it ached. "But you did. And guess what? Playing It's Really Not Any of Your Business means you automatically win the grand prize of getting to explain what the hell that meant. So explain."

The clerk looked like she would rather crawl into a bear cave slathered in honey. Too damn bad. Buffy had all the time in the world to glare her into talking. Or at least until Spike

returned with the freaking anchovies. And considering how prone he was to distractions and impulse purchases, that could be a while. Especially since there hadn't been anyone behind her in line to give him a sense of urgency.

"It was... Oh, god, don't get me fired for this." The clerk glanced around as though to make sure they weren't in danger of being overheard. "Just the *way* he leaned into you. Like he craves touch."

"Which naturally means I don't touch him enough."

"Honey, there is no *enough* with a man like that. They love whatever you give but they want more. They always want more. It's an affirmation for them, whether they know it or not." The woman paused, still a furious red, but with more confidence than she'd had a moment ago. "When you've lived so long without something, you can never have enough of it once you do have it."

Buffy frowned, some of her annoyance beginning to ebb. "How do you know he lived without it? You don't even know him."

"I don't need to. The way he acted just a second ago said it all." The clerk straightened her shoulders and plastered on a bright, phony grin just as Buffy's instincts gave off their familiar *vampire incoming* warning. "Did you find what you were looking for?" she asked, all pleasantness as Spike settled in at Buffy's side, his arm going around her waist with the same, effortless ease as always.

"Bit more than that, actually," he answered with a grin, depositing not only anchovies but a bottle of his favorite bourbon, a canister of whipped cream, a box of tampons, and a bag of dark chocolate peanut butter cups. "Bloody good thing we shop so late, love. Don't run the risk of holding up the line all that much."

The clerk began scanning the new purchases but kept her mouth blessedly shut, despite the glint behind her eyes. The glint Buffy had no trouble reading; of course Spike had remembered that her period was due to start, and not only because he could smell it or some weird vampire thing, but because he was Spike. He kept track of these things and made sure the house was well-stocked with both the practical and the pamperful necessities. And if he could know that about her, then she should know the touch thing about him. Not need some stranger at the supermarket to literally spell it out like a mystical relationship guru.

But maybe that was her own problem—maybe she was the sort of dense that, even after having been with Spike for three solid years, ten years overall, she needed things spelled out.

Not a happy thought. Or one she wanted taking up too much real estate, especially when Spike didn't seem to want for anything, and he wasn't shy about asking these days. Sometimes outright demanding, though in a way that felt safe and balanced for reasons they had never discussed but understood all the same. That when he fisted her hair and bucked into her mouth, telling her to take all of him, it was with a level of trust and respect and love above all else that transcended what normal people got to experience. That was theirs and theirs alone.

Even still, over the next few weeks, Buffy found it impossible to completely shut out the voice of the nosy clerk as she went through her daily routine. Getting up, getting ready, getting going, and Spike there in a non-hovering way, but always *there* nevertheless—brushing past her with as much contact as possible, dragging her hair away from her face, kissing her temple or her cheek or her lips, throwing an arm around her for a quick squeeze before she headed out to do

stuff on her own for a few hours. Touch was innate to who he was, and it was always him who did the reaching. Or maybe not *always*—that was shortchanging herself—but often. When Buffy reached for Spike, it was typically with purpose. When Spike reached for her, it was just for the pleasure of doing so. And if she were honest with herself—truly honest in ways she didn't always find comfortable—she would understand, *appreciate*, that this wasn't a new development. It was simply who he was and had been from the start. Desperate for touch and eager to get it however he could. Even if it hurt.

Even if the touch wasn't about him at all.



*Sunnydale, California, February 2002*

BEING DEAD HAD DONE A LOT TO HER BODY'S NATURAL settings. In many ways, Buffy felt restored to default. Like, before Glory, a routine fight with some nobody vamp wouldn't leave her sore for days on end because Buffy had trained herself into the physical embodiment of the Slayer. She hadn't felt the blows so much as absorbed them, dragged them into herself and turned the pain into strength that could be fed back to whatever thought it had the cajones to fuck with her on any given night. She'd been more force to be reckoned with than Slayer then. Something unbeatable, unstoppable, save for one person, and no, that person hadn't been Spike. In the end, the only thing that had ever defeated Buffy was her willingness to be defeated.

It was possible that was still the case, but it didn't feel like it. The part of her that was entirely *slayer*; the part that her friends had—knowingly or not—been the most interested in



resurrecting, more and more seemed like something she'd left in the makeshift grave they'd dug for her. Buried out there in the great strange wilderness, content to remain at rest. For yes, Buffy went *through the motions* of being alive—she even sometimes sang about it—but didn't take those *alive* feelings with her when she set out to patrol. The body she'd honed into a weapon operated more or less on autopilot, not bothering with whatever subconscious tricks she'd taught herself when taking a punch or a kick or a blow to the head. The end result was, naturally, that Buffy found herself dragging home more than walking. And sure, Spike was a part of that—a not-small part—but some inner compartment of her psyche understood that was an excuse. Spike being able to take a beating, or a fucking, or both, had nothing to do with her own complete, whole-body exhaustion. The ever-present ache that was existing as Buffy Summers, living undead girl.

Sometimes she just needed to let herself heal up before being thrown back into the arena. Give her muscles a night off all kinds of monster wrestling, and maybe also give herself some space to reconsider the path she was on, even if she had already read the end of this book. Going cold-turkey on Spike sex was a challenge for some future Buffy. A stronger, less wobbly version of herself that had yet to crawl, much less walk or run. And that was fine. Present Buffy didn't need to worry about Future Buffy, just wait for the day she inevitably arrived, and all of Present Buffy's mistakes became the property of someone more solid.

Now all she had to do was get through this patrol without stumbling across her shameful secret, go home, and draw a bath. But it was like the thought was a dare—or worse, a beacon. No sooner had it crossed her mind than her senses tingled *vampire*—tingled *Spike* in that way they had once

tingled *Angel*—and she felt his eyes on her. That unique, singular way of being regarded by the only person who had ever seen all of her, and she stopped walking.

“No,” she said, her voice heavy and her body heavier as she turned to face him.

Spike smirked, as she’d known he would, and sauntered forward, giving her a rolling sort of up and down appraisal. “Well, good evening to you, too. Aren’t we in a mood?”

“I don’t have the energy for small talk or to stand around while you play dumb. No, we’re not going to...” Buffy rolled her hand, not wanting to say the actual words. “I took out a nest last night and my bruises still have bruises. Nothing you have in mind will make that untrue.”

If she didn’t know him so well, she might have missed it—the subtle change in his eyes, the sparkle dimming from that overt sexual hunger to a softer concern, and god, she couldn’t with this, either. So much easier to pretend what they were doing was just physical when he didn’t look at her like that. Like he worried. Like he loved her.

“Heard there was a tussle,” he said, frowning now and moving forward, stepping into her bubble, her space, and overwhelming her with the raw intensity of his presence. Making her iron will blanch like the pretender it was, the rest of her teetering on the edge of doing something really embarrassing, like throwing him against the nearest mausoleum to make the sore places even sorer. “Get into that skirmish after you left, then?”

Yep, because as every fallen hero knew, there was no better way to sublimate your guilt over the vampire you were screwing than taking out a bunch of vampires you weren’t. That way she could look herself in the mirror and say things like, “Sure, you’ve become the worst version of

yourself, but at least you're not *also* letting other undead off the hook."

The answer must have been on her face, for Spike stepped even closer, his expression sliding from concern to understanding, and that sort of awful resignation she worked really hard not to notice. That look he got whenever he knew she was in the midst of a shame spiral that featured him.

"Why don't you come to the crypt?" he asked in whatever passed for his version of innocent. "Won't lay a hand on you but to help you feel better."

Buffy rolled her head back and sighed. "Spike..."

"I mean it. Know where all the tender spots are, don't I? Been told a time or two that I give a jolly good backrub."

"And I'm supposed to believe that."

"Well, yeah. Being that it's the truth."

"We both know it's not."

"No," Spike replied, drawing the word out, his jaw twitching the way it did when he was fighting to maintain patience. "We bloody well do not *both* know that. Wager I know what many a satisfied lady has told me in the past, being that it was *me* they told it to."

"You're disgusting."

"And *you* think you know everything, and that's your bloody Achilles heel. I'm perfectly capable of touching you just to make *you* feel good. Or have you forgotten already how much time I've spent between those creamy thighs of yours to—"

"And this conversation is officially over." Buffy turned and marched intently in the other direction, her heart pounding along with her temples, and as much as she hated to admit it, her other parts. For better or worse, her body was primed to respond to him these days, the careful distance she'd once

maintained in tatters, perpetually waving a white flag, because there was nothing so easy as crossing a line she'd already crossed.

Of course, though, he wouldn't let her get far. And of course she wouldn't actually want him to. Now that the primal part of her had been activated, the bits of Buffy perpetually reaching for him, her plans of drawing a hot bath and soaking would leave her woefully unfulfilled.

It didn't take long to retrace her steps, and Spike was still there, his eyes knowing but his mouth thankfully shut. He didn't do much more but raise his hands in surrender before falling in line beside her, and remained silent long after they arrived at his crypt, busying himself with lighting his bajillion candles and dragging out an assortment of bottles that looked suspiciously like they would be right at home on a shelf at the Magic Box. She stared at them long enough for him to catch her and shoot her a challenging look, and though she knew she shouldn't, Buffy decided to let it go. Spike stealing merchandise was hardly headline news, and making a thing about it now would reek of trying to stay on her high horse when they both knew it was firmly parked in the stable for the night.

"So how are we doing this?" she asked instead, trying to sound detached even if her skin was tingling. "Your bed, I'm guessing?"

"If you like," he replied. And like always, but especially when they were alone and about to be intimate, his voice poured over her like wine or chocolate or something equally decadent.

It was over then. She knew it and he knew it; no sense keeping up the pretense. But Buffy was nothing if not stubborn, especially when she'd lost, so she lifted her chin and

avored him with an imperious look. "You lit candles up here, so we might as well stay here."

"Ever so practical of you," Spike replied in a tone that was somehow both the definition of straightforward yet also shaking with laughter. Implied laughter was still laughter. "Right then. Gimme a sec to spruce up a spot for you and we'll get started."

"I assume I need to be naked for this?"

"Better, yeah, if there's direct contact with the bits that hurt. Let me really work in there." He didn't look at her as he spoke, having already turned to find a place for her to lie down, leaving her alone with more of that implied laughter. Like he was waiting for her to snicker so he could accuse her of being the one who turned everything sexual. It was a fiendish strategy, and therefore one that suited him well. "Course if you wanna keep dressed, won't stop you. Know you can be a bit shy sometimes."

"Shy? I'm shy?"

Spike glanced at her, his mouth twitching again, though this time the way it did when he was fighting a grin. "Yeah, and it's bloody adorable, the way you still go all dainty on me."

"I... I am not *dainty*. I am the opposite of dainty." Buffy tore her top over her head in a rush of pure defiance, which she realized, belatedly, had probably been his intent all along, but she wasn't about to give him reason to laugh at her for being *dainty*. Besides, he was right. Spike had seen, stroked, and sucked pretty much every inch of flesh she had many times over. Physically, she had no secrets from him, and it was silly to cling to modesty. Except there were times when he looked at her and it was like he was *more* than looking at her. Like he was seeing beyond the skin, even beyond the muscles and sinew and bones and everything else, into the parts of her

she kept shielded from everyone, even herself. Sometimes *especially* herself. And the thought of being that exposed, that *seen*, would have her doing as he said. Needing to cover up and hide and forget that he could do that. That of everyone in her life, everyone she'd ever let close, the one she hadn't wanted was the one who understood her best.

Part of her expected the charade to end the second she started losing clothes. Spike would give her one of his heated looks, suggest that maybe he ought to be naked as well. Just to, you know, remove any possible restrictions. Many a good massage had been foiled by pants. Only Spike hardly glanced at her once she had stripped down to nothing, too intent—or pretending to be so, in any case—on getting the makeshift massage station set up. He had spread one of his floofier blankets across the sarcophagus that sometimes doubled as a couch and placed a small pillow at the head.

“Think face-down first, yeah?” he said, all business, Mr. Cool Customer, as though he didn't care one way or another what she decided to do. Hell, she could gather up all her clothes and march right on out the door, no skin off his nose. And it was so irritating, so infuriating, so entirely him that if she had even a hint of self-control, she'd be doing just that. Walk out and leave him high and dry just to make the point that she *could*. If being here was a choice, it was one that could be reversed at any time and he'd just have to live with the uncertainty.

But that's not what she did, because Buffy and self-control were estranged at the moment. Instead, she climbed onto the sarcophagus and turned over on her belly, breasts pressed into the fabric of the blanket, muscles even more tense than they had been before she'd entered the crypt, all of her tingling with anticipation of the coming foreplay. Spike touching her,

goaded her, teasing her toward capitulation just so he could crow whenever she started to beg.

What she didn't expect was a blanket. Specifically one that settled over her skin from the waist down.

Buffy lifted her head. "What are you doing?"

Spike shushed her—actually shushed her—and stroked her hair away from her neck. Not that she had much hair to worry about right now. No more bouncing from this girl, at least for a while. "Point is to be comfortable, yeah?" he replied, rubbing his hands together. "Wager this is more comfortable for you. Don't want you shivering."

"You don't?" she asked flatly.

"You'll get enough of that anyway. Better keep you warm where I can."

"What do you mean, I'll be—"

"I mean I plan to show you a few things."

Yeah, she just bet he did. Buffy grumbled but otherwise didn't move, kept her cheek pressed to the small pillow he'd laid out for her, and listened as he padded around the crypt, trying to keep track of him and anticipate, and growing increasingly frustrated when he didn't do what she expected. There was the sound of something opening, maybe the freezer door, and then the soft *clink* of ice as it collided with a glass surface. What he was after, she hadn't the faintest, but wasn't about to give him the impression she cared by asking. Soon enough, he was near her again, standing at the head of the sarcophagus, close enough she'd swear the molecules of her skin reached for him as though magnetized.

"Where's it hurt, love?" he asked, all seductive and rumbly. The ass.

"Everywhere."

"Everywhere? Bloody tragic."

"Are you going to do anything?"

"Do you want me to?"

Buffy sighed, her irritation starting to rise once more.

"Spike—"

"Here."

Something cold and wet brushed against the skin at the back of her neck, making her start and yelp, but also making her burn and shiver. She would have whipped her head up, would have started yelling, but then the sensation was moving. Dragging along flesh that, by contrast, seemed suddenly on fire. Buffy let loose a sound she'd never heard herself make before—a sort of low, guttural groan that was both pleasure and relief, parts of her she hadn't realized had been in pain suddenly rejoicing. It was intense and immediate, the sensation of instant release, and she shuddered and arched up into his touch, whimpering her encouragement when he kept moving, skimming the ice—for that was what it had to be—down the column of her neck, then across her shoulders and back again.

"What... What are you doing?"

"Need me to spell it out?" Spike's voice was warm, which contrasted beautifully with the magic he was performing along her skin. "Would think it's obvious."

"Not to me, it's not."

"Don't know much about this glorious body of yours, do you?"

Well, that sounded downright accusatory. "What?"

"You put yourself through the paces every night," he said, running the ice in circles across her neck now, every pass making something within her uncoil. "Get all inflamed in places you don't even feel anymore, until you take that pain away."



She wanted to argue just because he shouldn't know more about her than she did, but when he was working magic, it was futile. He was right, and they both knew it.

"That's what the ice does," he continued in that low, delicious rumble. "Speaks to those parts that are inflamed. Where you're flying too close to the sun, Icarus."

"Icky-what?"

He chuckled, and god, she loved that sound too. Its richness and texture, how it rolled over her, reached inside of her, lifted the bits of herself that seemed weighted down.

"Don't worry about it," he told her, and for a pleasant change of pace, she decided to obey. Let him work over her hot skin until there was nothing left of the ice but the cold water clinging to his skin, then moaning all over again when his fingers began gliding along her neck, gentle at first, then kneading into the muscles he'd tricked into relaxation-mode. Every thought she had—every objection, every protest, every defiant sneer—flitted out of her head. Then he was unwinding knots that she'd thought had become permanent fixtures of her body, really gnarly places in her shoulders and an especially tender spot along the underside of her arm, strained from too many times she'd held her stake aloft while lunging for the kill. Then down her back, along her spine, his fingers finding and pressing and rubbing and unworking what felt like a lifetime of tension.

And it was more than that—of course it was. Every touch, every stroke, every discovery of bruises and sores earned yesterday and each of the thousand days before it had her melting into soft, pliable Buffy goo, but the rest of her was simmering. Tightening in ways that ice, try as it might, couldn't unwind. Intensifying every time his hands swept lower, working along her spine and then the small of her back,

then her ass itself, even if through the blanket he'd placed there in some bizarre attempt to preserve her modesty. And then lower still, over her thighs, her hips, massaging along her calves and the arch of each foot before he dug his knuckles into the places where she carried most of her weight.

"Oh my god, how are you so good at that?" she asked hoarsely, not meaning to speak but also unable to keep the words inside.

"Mmm," he murmured back noncommittally. "Enjoying yourself?"

"I didn't even know I hurt in some of these places."

She felt the barest whisper of a kiss along the ball of her right foot. "I know the way you move, Slayer," he murmured, rubbing his thumbs into some other magical pressure point she hadn't realized she carried. "Know how you twist and turn, which side you favor, where you're most likely to take a blow. Can feel it, too, when you're with me. When I'm inside you. How you hold yourself, how you lash out and fight back. Would love to take care of you more. Be with you like this. Will you let me?" He pressed another kiss to her foot, then lowered it back to the makeshift massage table he'd created out of cloth and stone.

And Buffy snapped—all of her snapped. She rolled over in one effortless move, sitting up and linking her hands behind his head, desperate, hot, and aching anew all over in all the ways she was used to aching around him. Suddenly ravenous for touch, for him, and she knew he knew it, because he loved telling her so. Loved rubbing it in her face that her body betrayed all the *yes* her mouth refused to give him, and sometimes she wanted to resist, wanted not to be so weak that she surrendered in with little to no coaxing, but now wasn't one of those times, and she knew it. She'd known it from the second

she'd agreed to follow him back to his crypt. Everything that had happened since then had been nothing but a game of chicken with herself and this moment.

Except Spike was jerking away, evading her mouth as it sought to find his, his hands on her shoulders, grip tight and hold firm. "What are you doing?" he asked, pushing her back—not strongly but with enough force that she knew he meant business.

"We both know what I'm doing," she replied, trying once again to catch him in a kiss. Once again meeting nothing but open air, and her previously relaxed muscles went tight with frustration. "What are *you* doing?"

"Trying to keep my promise."

"Your promise?"

"To keep myself well out of it. Make tonight all about you." He flexed his fingers but didn't release her, and if it weren't for the pained look that crossed his face, she might have catapulted into annoyance and lost the mood entirely. But she didn't—it was there in his darkening eyes, his tightening jaw, his flaring nostrils, and most tellingly in the strain in his jeans, which, aside from an undone button, remained firmly in place. "I get you around my cock, baby, and it's not just about you anymore. Don't want you cryin' foul 'cause ol' Spike got his rocks off after all."

Buffy let out another of those didn't-know-I-could-make-it sounds, the burn inside dangerously near the boiling point. "I release you from your promise."

"Not that easy, love."

She mewled, almost pawing at him. "You're an asshole."

"Right you are, but not the point tonight."

"But—"

"The point tonight," Spike said, pushing now, so she was

falling back, her shoulder blades hitting fabric and stone, “is that I can make you feel better without taking any for me at all. That’s why you came here, yeah?”

“I came here to get laid, you moron. Why the hell do you think I let you talk me into this?”

Spike tilted his head, favored her with one of those enigmatic, penetrating stares that she felt down to the bone. Seeing her and more than her—hell, probably seeing the future too. The one in which some bitchy version of herself would, in fact, brandish any failure on his part tonight as evidence that he was always looking out for himself. It made her hate herself a little—or a lot, even if self-hatred was overstocked and she didn’t have much room for more—but she also felt it was inevitable. Just as inevitable as the fact that she would be here again, and again, and again, despite what she told herself every time she left. All the choices she’d make in the middle of the fall back to earth before she remembered that she always hated it when she landed.

“Lay back,” he said then, startling her, and a thrill shot through her, making her heart skip and the rest of her somehow relax *and* tighten with anticipation, for she knew the note in his voice. It was the sound of Spike capitulating, of her winning, and the pressure of trying to convince him rolling firmly away. Buffy let her head fall against the sarcophagus and spread her legs in welcome, the pulse there throbbing even harder now, anticipation a physical sensation, the same as his gaze. The hungry way he looked at her, eyes dark and something beyond intense. God, no one had ever looked at her the way Spike did—as though she were a necessity, something vital like blood or air or all of the above. Like he could have her and have her and have her and still always want more, never tire, and she loved it, craved it, craved the way

she felt when his were the eyes appraising her, for it was a bit of what she'd lost. That warmth and comfort and safety, that knowledge that this at least would forever be, and then the absolute terror that would follow when she realized nothing could ever really be forever. Except those brief moments when he made her forget.

The lid of the sarcophagus slid minutely as Spike climbed to her, over her, moving with grace she envied and intent she craved. Buffy's breaths came faster, almost too fast, all of her hot and trembling and, *yes*, he lifted one leg to fit over his shoulder, bringing his face with those sharp, sexy cheekbones and wicked mouth close, close enough she felt his breath against her pussy, that stupid breath that shouldn't even exist, then even closer, her other leg following suit, so the heels of her feet were digging into the small of his back.

One day, surely, she would stop feeling surprise at the way he ate her out. At how his lips and tongue moved, how she could feel his hunger as though it were a tangible thing, the care with which he licked and sucked and pulled, the sounds he made low in his throat like what he had in his mouth was something beyond delicious. Then there was the litany of filthy poetry he'd whisper into her flesh. How she was fire, the sun, liquid ambrosia and more. Buffy had never been one for talking during sex—not before Spike, at least—and like so many other things, would never have thought it'd eventually become something she needed. Something she missed when he didn't give it, but he wasn't talking tonight and she *did* miss it. The heat was there, Spike licking and stroking and making with the small incoherent murmurs, like he couldn't hold back despite his best efforts, but not the words that had form.

And how did she tell him that? She didn't. Couldn't. He'd read too much into it. All things that were true but not the

sort of true she was comfortable embracing. So instead, Buffy tried to shut off the part of herself that wanted more *Spike* in the sensation, focused instead on the feel of his tongue dipping inside of her, then thrusting, fingers playing along her slit and teasing her clit with such careless consideration that she might have believed it was truly an afterthought had she not known him so well. But nothing about the way Spike touched her was an afterthought. Not the featherlight strokes of his thumb over her clit or the press of his cheek to her inner thigh. Not the parting kiss he gave her opening, or the deliberate manner he dragged his mouth along her folds until he was where she wanted him most. Nor the thrust of his fingers into her cunt, twisted just right to stroke her *there*, as he circled her clit with the balled end of his tongue. Making her whimper, making her arch, making her desperately long for the sweet ecstasy of release and somehow dread it all the same, for that would mean this was over. The fog thinned, the rest of her returned to earth and the realities she couldn't run far enough to escape. And he seemed to sense this thought too, was ready to graduate from teasing to giving her exactly what she wanted, his mouth around her, hot despite his cool, sucking hard as he fucked her with his hand, rubbing places in her body she hadn't known existed before him. That she somehow forgot existed in the time between being with him, for it all seemed like a sort of fairytale when they were together. But his lips were around her clit now, tongue in constant motion, and she felt it, the coalescence, the burn, the sizzle before the explosion, and when she came it was with another sound she hadn't known could be pulled from inside of her. That seemed, like everything else, part of the fiction her life had become in these stolen moments.

These moments with him.

Buffy fell back to earth both slowly and far too fast, the good, tingly sensations fading in favor of harsher reality. Like that her skin was covered in a thin layer of sweat, she was gulping down crypt air, her legs were trembling, and Spike was...no longer touching her. No longer on the sarcophagus at all, actually. The first orgasm was usually just a starter meant specifically to whet the appetite, make her want more and more so he gave more and more and more until she was limp and noodly, blissed out of her mind in that special place where the world outside these stone walls didn't exist. But Spike was moving farther away, not closer, his expression shuttered and—despite the fact that his very erect penis seemed to be testing the integrity of his pants—did not appear to be close to climbing back on top of her.

Instead, he glanced down and puffed out a breath. "You better go."

"What?"

"Slayer, you said—"

"I know what I said! I unsaid it! It's unsaid."

"No," Spike replied with calm that didn't reach his eyes, or the tense muscles of his neck. "Not doing this. Not gonna be your handy excuse later when the sores that were bothering you flare up again. I did what I said I would, more than that, and now it's time for you to see yourself out. You want more from me, you know what you gotta do."

"What? Ask? Throw myself at you?"

"Be fucking honest," he said shortly, temper flaring at last. "Drop the sodding pretense. Stop making like I'm seducing you when you're the one who shows up here every night—"

"I do not—"

"Or *most* nights. Told you this once already, didn't I?"

"Yes," she replied scathingly, slipping off the sarcophagus

at last to start collecting her clothes. “And then you showed up at my work for a quickie, so excuse me if I’m getting mixed messages.”

Spike snorted outright, an ugly sound she didn’t like at all. “Mixed messages. *You’re* getting mixed messages?”

Buffy didn’t answer—she couldn’t. For one, she was focusing on pulling on her pants, which shouldn’t take a lot of concentration but for some reason did, given how hard her hands were shaking. For another, she knew better, and she might be able to lie to herself about most of her relationship with Spike, but this part? No. Not this part.

All she could do with this part was finish getting dressed, find her shoes, and go home along with the shredded remains of her dignity.

She hated it when he won. Her only comfort was it didn’t happen all that often.

Except that wasn’t a comfort at all. It was part of what made her ache in the first place.



*Albany, New York, November 2007*

WHILE BUFFY’S ACADEMIC RECORD WAS SPOTTY AT BEST—or would’ve been if it had survived—she had been a rather apt pupil when she’d put her mind to it. Had she managed to complete college, she liked to think she might have even done so with one of those funny Latin phrases tacked on. *Summa cum* something.

All that to say, between her shortlived academic career and her ongoing slayer career, she knew when to research and how to use the internet, which came in handy in the weeks



leading up to Christmas. Ruminating on the overly interested grocery clerk's observations about Spike had not only made her more cognizant of all the times he touched her for seemingly no reason at all, but also convinced her to conduct a deep mental autopsy of their relationship. Or whatever the word was when the relationship wasn't dead but needed to be given that sort of deep-dive exploration. Maybe she'd be a better walking thesaurus if she *had* gone back to school. Either way, the end result was Buffy had decided on what she thought might be the perfect Spike gift for the upcoming holiday. If touch was what he craved, then she could give him touch, and not just the sexy kind. Touch like he'd given her multiple times—the effortless way his hands just *knew* her body, found the places that were sore or tender and worked magic to make them feel better. To make *her* feel cared for, cherished, like touching her was a privilege or something.

So, aside from a few odds and ends—things to put in his stocking, a new weapon for him to break, some replacement T-shirts for the ones he'd worn threadbare—Buffy was going to give him the gift of massage. And while the first one she gave him was likely not to be the best one, something about practice making perfect and all, she wanted it to be special. And just for him. Something she could give him that no one else could or would.

The only thing she had to do was, well, learn how to do it. Hence where her seldom-used-but-perfectly-functioning ability to research came in. She took to the web, and through a series of searches, found some tutorials on a website called YouTube. After some back and forth, she decided the best way to get practical experience was to order a couple of robust, life-size dummies with crash-test resilience. Not only would this keep her from possibly hurting someone by

applying too much strength, but it would ensure it was something she only ever shared with Spike.

And Spike wouldn't be hurt if she accidentally used too much strength. That was one of the things she loved most about him... Well, not *most*, but definitely a big ol' perk in the *boyfriend of Buffy* category. It was so refreshing to be with someone she never had to worry about hurting physically. If anything, Spike would just favor her with a wicked grin and beg for more.

That was the way it had always been.

Every time...except that one when she'd found him again. After she'd almost lost him for good.



*Los Angeles, California, May 2004*

BUFFY'S RELATIONSHIP WITH TIME HAD ALWAYS BEEN unconventional—how it would slow down for the moments she wanted to avoid and speed up whenever she needed an extra second to breathe. The days following the Battle of Los Angeles had existed in a strange in-between that managed to inhabit both paradigms, the hours themselves long but also fast, eating away at the odds of finding him at all. There was no reason the act of finding Spike should follow any other pattern and it didn't. The immediate aftermath saw her trapped inside seemingly endless stasis, watching from the sidelines as Spike, her vampire, the man she'd loved and lost and found and almost lost again, was dragged limply from the wreckage of an overturned taxi, looking little more than a corpse, pale skin covered in purple and black welts, his clothes hanging off him in scraps and rags, his duster dragging

along his feet in a way that made the emergency extra *paramedics* (Andrew's pun) speculate he'd been using the car as a shield from the sun over the course of the search. His right knee was shattered, his spine fractured much the same way Buffy imagined it had been nearly seven years earlier, once upon a restoration ritual. She wasn't even sure he really saw her when their eyes met, his bruised and blackened eyes glassy, looking through her, absent of recognition. Absent everything, actually, making him look truly dead. But he wasn't—*he wasn't*.

For the first time in her life, Buffy hadn't been too late.

But only just.

Time continued to act wonky in the hours that followed—Buffy camping out in the lobby of the nearest empty building, which her team had turned into a field hospital. Waiting as doctors and witches alike negotiated Spike through the sanitization system they had devised as a first immediate precaution. Checked for the spells they knew could be dangerous and slow-spreading, the germs and other bits that weren't supposed to exist in this world, all the while keeping Buffy hungry for updates but unable to be there with him, to see if the life returned to his eyes. Until finally, Willow emerged with a tired but victorious grin and told her that Spike had passed all the tests they knew to check for and could be taken somewhere to get some rest. That she should probably not push him too hard, because in addition to his physical injuries, he was displaying classic symptoms of good old-fashioned shock, and no, no one wanted to ask what a vampire his age could have seen or experienced to cause that much trauma.

Buffy nodded her way through the explanation, all the while bouncing on her toes with anticipation so intense it

made her already-aching muscles whine, but any pain was also secondary, absorbed, acknowledged, and unremarkable. Then Willow started talking about Angel, newly human and being a big baby about it because of how banged up he'd gotten in the interim, and Buffy tuned her out entirely. She hadn't known at the time, but this would become her standard reaction to any mention of that particular ex—her brain instantly overloaded with so much anger and resentment at the massive *everything* he'd kept from her that the best way to survive was to ignore it. Either that or let the cancer of her own rage consume her from the inside out, and he wasn't worth that.

Then a door had opened, and one of the witches from Willow's coven whose name Buffy had forgotten despite being told multiple times was wheeling Spike toward her. Spike, who was still corpse-pale and covered in welts, but more alert now. Alert and looking at her, seeing her, *knowing* her, but not saying anything. Not when the wheelchair came to a halt at Buffy's feet, or the witch delivered some aftercare instructions Buffy struggled to follow, or she assumed the position behind him to push him from one building to the next. Take him the only place she could think of—the room that she'd made her own at the Hyperion—and hope it was the right call.

And then, after time finished its wonky dance, she was suddenly alone with Spike for the first time in over a year. Alone with this man who had died to save the world, died to *give* her the world, and then come back without notice or fanfare, kept his resurrection a secret for reasons she doubted she would ever understand. He sat on the edge of the bed, looked at her when she moved, tracked her progress through the room, but didn't speak, didn't move himself, rather regarded her with the same sort of careful reserve one might a

hungry lion. As though he expected her to attack at any moment.

She might have, had it been any other time under any other circumstance. The questions crowding her mind, the heartbreak, the need to know *why why why* she'd only known he was alive in time to nearly lose him again, and the absolute terror that she already had the answer. But it wasn't any other circumstance, it was this one—the one where he'd seen things horrifying enough to haunt a vampire, where he'd clawed his way to shelter under the wreckage of a cab and drifted in and out of consciousness for days, bones too broken to move and stomach threatening to eat itself in hunger. All things *them* were secondary, if they factored at all. The best she could do now was show him the love he'd shown her once, and hope it did as much good.

"I know they cleaned you up at the...place," she said, then winced and wished she could suck it back in. Over a year since she'd spoken to him and she would have liked her first words to be profound or meaningful, something other than clinical, but here they were, and course correcting would just make everything worse. "I... Do you mind if I take a look?"

He didn't respond, nor did she expect him to. Still, the resulting silence was awkward and heavy.

"I also thought... The blood we had available, it wasn't much and it wasn't...good blood. I mean, it's good in that it hadn't spoiled, we made sure of that, but it wasn't... Do you think maybe my blood would help?" Buffy rounded so she was in front of him again, catching his eyes, which locked on her immediately, letting her know he was present and aware. Some part of him, at least. It was definitely Spike looking back. "I got some stuff," she went on, flushing. "Some anti-septic wipes and a razor. Yes, I packed a razor to the apoca-

lypse and no, I haven't had a chance to actually shave my legs, but it's here. I can use it to... You know. If you don't want to bite."

He worked his throat, though she couldn't be sure it was in response to what she'd said or just a reflex. His eyes, however steadfast on her, didn't tell her, either.

"Okay," Buffy said, reaching for the hem of his shirt. "I'm going to... Can I?"

She waited, hands fisted around worn cotton, and tugged upward after another long stretch of silence, watching for signs of distress or uncertainty but seeing none. He neither helped nor hindered, just sort of allowed the shirt to be pulled over his head, moving his arms when needed but not in a way that felt purposeful, rather that his body was following stage direction absent his mind. Buffy did her best not to react at the skin she revealed but couldn't quite kill the whimper that scraped at her throat because god, she had seen Spike beaten up before—she had *beaten up* Spike before—but neither she nor Glory nor the First had managed to do to him whatever had happened in the fight. His skin was a patchwork quilt of bruises, somehow looking worse than when she'd first caught sight of him under that car. There was a psychological reason for this, she was certain Walsh would say; that seeing him banged up in a banged-up setting was easier on the mind than banged up in a normal, clean setting, but damn. *Damn.*

When she'd been a kid, just lounging around the house, her mom would scold her for not wearing socks, saying the sight of her bare feet made her cold. Buffy hadn't understood how that could work at the time but she thought she might now, for each mark her eyes found gave her a new ache. Made her hurt simply by looking at them, feeling them, the echoes of what this body had been through.

She didn't realize she was crying until her vision blurred, and quickly shifted her focus to getting herself under control. The last thing Spike needed right now was to feel the burden of her own regret, and even if everything else between them had changed, she knew that much never would. It was just who he was and who he had always been, soul or no. So she wiped her eyes and made a quick beeline for the bathroom, wetted a washcloth and grabbed her serviceable but otherwise uninspired razor off the sink. Spike hadn't moved in that time, not that she'd expected him to, but she thought perhaps he might have been more with her when she returned. The awareness from earlier sharper, it seemed, though she could just as easily have been imagining it.

After a moment's consideration—should she keep in his line of sight or risk startling him from the side?—Buffy opted to round the bed and approach him from behind. Neither option was great, but she thought it might be less intense, less spotlighty, if he couldn't see her watching him like a hawk. If her presence was a help or, as it had been when he'd been freshly souled and in the school basement, a hindrance.

"I'm behind you," she said thickly, climbing onto the mattress and edging toward him at a pace that was neither fast nor slow, rather steady. "In a second, I'm going to touch you. Let me know if...if you don't want that. You don't have to say anything—just shake your head and I'll get it. Okay?"

Again, no response, but by this point she knew better than to expect one. Buffy stopped when she was almost flush against his back, wanting to give him space but also needing to be close enough that she wouldn't strain herself to reach. She wasn't even sure what she meant to do, really, until that moment. Until she was close enough that breathing in meant breathing *him*, his skin with its colorful wounds and strong

antiseptic smell, which she imagined had to be hell on his senses and likely his mind, too, for she doubted anything had been explained to him. Even more so that he would have followed any such explanation, much less retained it.

Buffy inhaled and pressed the terrycloth to the back of his neck. She had the fleeting thought that maybe he'd prefer ice—he was the one who made her realize how good it felt in certain scenarios—before remembering that he was already room temperature and his muscles didn't swell the same ways hers did. Or, hell, maybe that was wrong. Those bruises and welts had to come from somewhere, his vampire anatomy responding to physical trauma, perhaps, the only way the body knew how. Relying on human functions despite not being human. And these were certainly all thoughts and they were all in her head and she was thinking them, strangely, inexplicably, while rubbing the washcloth along Spike's neck because, well, it just seemed like the thing to do, and Buffy needed to do something. Specifically, she needed to do something for him—something more than sit and wait, something that would help him, reach him, wherever he was. Here but not. Somewhere she couldn't see, much less follow.

She lowered the washcloth and pressed her brow against his shoulder, waiting for more of that strength she was always expected to have at the ready. Like so often, it felt like reaching for something at the bottom of a barrel that was not only empty but scraped bare from previous searches. Buffy shuddered and forced herself to lift her head but couldn't quite keep from whispering a kiss along the back of his neck.

"Buffy?"

She froze, her heart thundering so hard her chest ached. "Spike?"

No response. No nothing. Just more of the heavy silence



cushioning them into this moment, accented by her breaths and the pounding in her head, but nothing else. It stretched long enough that her pulse began to regulate, that it was just easier to believe she was hearing things, and she was about to reach for the razor when he bowed his head, a hard, awful sob wrenching free.

"Buffy," he said, no denying it this time. It was his voice. It was *him*. It was Spike speaking to her. "Buffy... Is this heaven?"

Her mouth fell open, a thin scratchy cry fighting free.

"Not heaven," he went on a moment later, and then released something that was between a howl and a snicker. "Stupid berk. Not heaven. Not heaven. She—"

"Spike?"

He froze, every line in his body going rigid. "You... You're here? You're real?"

The question was a wound she fell into, one that wrapped around her, entwined her in hurt and regret and fear and hope and awe all at once, shoving its way into all her open places until she had to remind herself to breathe lest she choke on the feeling. And wouldn't that be fitting? Wouldn't that be *them*? Two people destined to keep missing each other from here until eternity, even when they were on the same page. Even when they thought they had a shot of getting it right.

"I'm real," she managed at last, her voice hoarse. "I'm here...and you are too. You didn't die out there." He started to turn, or try to, then rumbled a pained cry when his body refused to cooperate. And that was fine—she didn't need him to turn. Didn't need him to risk hurting himself any more than he was already. All that mattered was he was there, talking, and as long as that was true, anything else could be too. "Stay still for me," she said, gripping him by the shoulders,

relishing the strength there. The familiar contours of the muscles beneath his skin, reassuring and firm and as real as anything else.

"Buffy?" he asked, ignoring her and once more attempting a turn. Once more encountering that barrier caused by pain, and driving Buffy to a quick decision. If he was trying to see her she would make it easy, the earlier worry cast aside, and she slipped off the mattress so that she was kneeling on the floor between his legs.

"You hurt yourself," she explained, snatching the razor back off the bed. "You need to drink."

"Buffy.." Spike blinked, not comprehending. "How are you here?"

"I came with the others."

"Others?"

She lifted a shoulder, trying for a grin. It hurt her face. "You should know if there's an apocalypse going down, I'm gonna be there. Can't save the world without me."

More blinking. "I... How did you find me?"

"By being stubborn and refusing to let you die on me again."

He released a shaky breath. "Anyone else make it?"

Buffy hesitated, unsure how much to say, or who all counted as *anyone else*. There was Illyria, the would-be god who had leveled a lot of the playing field on her own out of grief for Wes. There was the kid, Connor, who had turned up to find his father, Angel, who had indeed been found in a spot of non-fatal sunlight, something called the Shanshu Prophecy realized. And there was Spike. Any others, Buffy hadn't known to look for.

But that was a conversation for later, along with a slew of

other conversations. Like *what the hell* and *do you still love me?* For now, she had one goal in mind.

“Let’s focus on you,” she said, seizing the razor and bringing it to eye-level, then carefully lowering it to her wrist. “You need better blood than the blood they gave you.”

“What?” But he was following her movements, his eyes wide. “No, don’t.”

“You’re way more hurt than me now.”

Then he was shaking his head, withdrawing. “God, I’m still there, aren’t I? Still under that bloody rubble. There’s no way—”

“What? No, you’re here.”

“I can’t be *here* because you’re *here*,” he snapped. “Buffy isn’t here. She’s across the sodding globe cuddled up with her new creature of the night, isn’t she? She wouldn’t rush here for me.”

“First of all, huh? And second of all, yes, I would, you dingus.”

“Nice try.”

“Spike—”

He pulled his head back, smashing his lips together much the same way she remembered Dawn doing whenever someone threatened to try to make her eat her peas, his eyes wide and begging, pleading, not really believing, maybe, and she couldn’t force him but she *had* to force him. Had to do this one thing, this small thing, because if she could save him now maybe she could save them together. Maybe everything they had gone through, done to each other and themselves would be made all right.

It was a stupid thought but one she couldn’t shake. One that sank its tendrils in and drilled to her center. Ever since she’d

learned he was alive, that he'd spent the last year with someone he hated over seeking her out, she'd been both tearing herself apart with trying to learn the why of it, the how, the *what the fuck*, only to come to the only conclusion there was. The reason Angel had left, that Riley had left, that her father and Giles had left, none able to handle the person she was or the person she was destined to become. Spike had left but unlike everyone else, he'd left so she could live, really live, and if ever he had the choice, he would always come back. That was absolute, final, and what had gotten her through the months without him. The knowledge that this time had indeed been different.

Only it hadn't. Andrew had told her Spike was alive, that Spike had decided to stay away, and everything Buffy had thought about them, about their final moments together, had gone up in flames, leaving her to sort through the ashes in the seconds she could spare, wondering why why why, but also having the answer. The same answer that had been there with Riley and Giles, with her father and maybe even Angel. And she'd come across the world to fix it, hoping she wouldn't be too late, that she'd get her chance to address the one thing no other man in her life had let her address.

This wasn't how she'd have chosen to do it, but nothing between them had ever gone the way it should. Why should now be any different?

"Spike, I know I'm awful," she sputtered, burning from the inside. Everything tumbling out, scorching her throat, this explosion of thoughts and fears, the culmination of every awful thing she'd stored in her head over the last year, and especially over the last week, combing through the rubble to find someone her brain had told her was dust but her heart refused to leave behind. There was no stopping it. Mount Buffy was erupting truth lava everywhere. "I know that's

probably why you decided to stay away and I'm not going to ask anything from you except...except this. Let me do one thing right and I'll leave you alone. I'll—"

His hands were around her face then, firm and familiar, guiding her head back until their eyes were locked, her own stinging and spilling tears she hadn't even realized had started to fall and his clear and blue and full of all that *Spikeness* that she had been chasing in her dreams since last May. Seizing, grasping, only realizing too late that she had to be dreaming because she'd left Spike at the bottom of a crater on the other side of the world. That he'd saved her, saved everyone, and had died believing the most he could hope for was an insincere consolation prize. Knowing that if she hadn't leapt at the chance to see if Angel's kiss still stirred anything inside of her, Spike might have had more to carry with him into the ever-after than words he believed were given out of pity and the memory of her throwing away the most important night of her life the second her ex rode into town.

"Awful?" he demanded now, his voice harsh, raspy. "Who told you that? Who had you believe it?"

Buffy shook her head—or tried. Spike's grip was too firm to manage more than a wobble. "You came back," she croaked out when he didn't release her. "You died and you came back, and you didn't tell me. You didn't *tell me*, Spike!"

"I didn't... I didn't..."

"You didn't. After everything... After *everything*, you didn't tell me. And then you went and almost got yourself killed again before I could even yell at you about that." She jerked her head back again, successful this time, and used the momentum to seize him by the wrists, which seemed to startle him for whatever reason, for he was suddenly staring at where her hand was clamped around his skin as though trying

to puzzle it out. But damn if she'd let him distract her again. "So yes, forgive me for concluding that I'm awful because that's the reason, right? Common denominator in all my relationships? You'd rather hang around *Angel*, who you hate, and—"

She wasn't entirely sure what happened after that—how she went from kneeling between his legs to in his lap, his mouth on her mouth, her face wet with tears that might have been hers, might have been his, and now belonged to them both. And she knew it was wrong, knew that she was hurting him, *bad* to be hurting him, but his arms were around her and he was kissing her lips, her cheek, her brow, along her chin and down her neck, and saying over and over that he loved her, he was sorry, so sorry, that she was why he'd thought this was heaven, that it was the only way he could reckon she'd be with him after he'd spent this last year too bloody terrified to reach out, and she was never awful, never, and never say that. Never think it, never believe for one second that she was anything less than Buffy Summers, the best person in the world, surrounded by idiots and cowards and he was both of those things. Both an idiot and a coward, and he would try, try so hard to not be one going forward. For her. For them. For this was real.

And eventually, he did give in, accept the gift of her blood, only not from her wrist. He might be broken, he said, but she made him whole just by being there. That when he pulled her onto his cock, it was less about sex and more about feeling the realness of each other, him her and her him, with her arms holding him to her, her pussy clamped around him, skin to skin, flesh to flesh, Buffy moving and Spike moaning and then, yes, piercing into her and drinking, drinking, but not the way she'd been drunk from before. Minus that pain and fear,

minus even the rush, just knowing this wasn't the end of anything except the time when she hadn't known he'd been alive, and he hadn't known she loved him.

It was the start. Their start.

The last new start they would ever have.



*Albany, New York, December 2007*

BUFFY WAS NERVOUS. UNREASONABLY NERVOUS, SOME MIGHT even say, because, well, it wasn't like she didn't know exactly how this would go. The second Spike walked through the door, the second he realized what was going on, he'd give her one of those *Spike* looks that transcended description. He'd understand the way he always did, bypassing the need for her to say anything or even make with the gesture at all, because that was just the way it went between them. She was not gesture girl. She was "feels exposed when talking about feelings" girl, even with the man she planned to spend the rest of her forever with.

Spike never commented on her lack of verbiage when it came to them, though. He knew she loved him. He also knew she had a rough history with those words, one that left her gun-shy about saying them, even three years into the closest thing either one of them had ever had to domestic bliss. The fact that she had gone to the effort would be enough for him.

It just wasn't enough for her. Not since she'd started noticing the things she noticed now.

She had their place all set up for the surprise, including mood lighting candles and soft music. Or not soft music, but Spike music made softer courtesy of the orchestral arrange-

ments she'd found and downloaded, illegally, to burn onto a CD. She'd thought about certain lotions he might like before giving up and deciding to go with the ones she kept in their bathroom, as he would inevitably just say something like he wanted to smell like her, anyway. Lastly, she'd gotten an honest-to-whatever massage table with the little face cradle and everything, something she figured would get a lot of use—sexy and otherwise—in the future. All she was missing now was her vampire.

Her vampire who was due home very, very soon. Any moment now, really. And in the meantime, Buffy didn't know what to do with her hands. Or if she should be just waiting by the door for him to arrive or off pretending like she hadn't converted the unliving room, as he called it, into a makeshift massage parlor. She had just about decided to go take a few swings at the punching bag set up in the sparring room when those telltale tingles did their thing, and her heart somersaulted.

He was home.

"Lo," Spike said over the jingle of his keys as he pushed through the door. He was on autopilot, she could tell, for he didn't so much as look around before kicking the door shut and starting the familiar shuffling off of his duster. "Not gonna bloody harp on it tonight, but if you get a mo', you might tell your watcher—" But then he did look up, his eyes finding hers with that unerring vampire precision. He stared at her for a moment, then worked his throat. "Got the feelin' I missed something important. Not an anniversary, is it?"

"Like you'd miss an anniversary."

"Well, no, but..." He nodded and broke his gaze from hers, taking in the stage she'd set. "Candles, music. Can't blame a fella for thinking things. And what's that?" He'd finally



noticed the massage table currently occupying the space normally claimed by their coffee table. "Do some rearranging, did you?"

"It's your gift," she blurted, then cursed herself. "I mean, if you like it, it's your gift. For Christmas. If you don't, then we never talk about this again and I'll go for something safe. Like a really fancy sword or stake carved out of really good wood."

He arched his eyebrows and gave the room another look. "Would help a bit to know what this is before I ask for an upgrade." Spike sauntered near her, smiling now, distracting her with the soft curve of his mouth and the way it never failed to reach his eyes. She knew then what she'd known from the start—that her gift was going to go over incredibly well, and she'd been a dummy for doubting herself. She also knew he was both tickled and touched by her nervousness. That fretting over it was almost another gift altogether, because fretting reinforced just how much she cared. Not that there was any doubt, but he relished it every time the proof was both subtext and text-text. "You trying out something naughty?"

"I want to give you a massage."

His eyebrows went up. "That so? Been nursing this desire long?"

"There was a woman at Shop Rite we tried a few months ago who said you were touch starved."

Spike blinked, gave his head a little shake. "I'm what now?"

"That I don't touch you enough." God, her face was starting to burn. "Not as much as you want."

"Well, can't argue with that," he replied, grinning again. "But then, I want you touching me always. Not exactly an attainable goal, that."

"But I don't touch you enough when it is all...attainy."

"Bollocks. You touch me plenty." The smirk had graduated to a grin, and he wrapped his arms around her waist. "Though if you fancy a demonstration—"

"Spike, I'm serious. I want to give you a massage. Take care of you like...like you've taken care of me."

He nudged her brow with his. "And you think you don't?"

"I think if touch is what you want, then I should—"

"You're perfect. Too much to take some old bat's word over mine." He kissed her before she could reply, that perfect combination of sweet and sin and Spike, communicating all the things he already didn't have trouble communicating but in a way that was even more impossible to ignore. And Buffy felt the tremble of weakening resolve, of relief that felt like disappointment, as well as the lingering worry that she was missing something—that she *had* missed something. But no, no, she still wanted to do this. Give him more touch, better touch, show his body love the way he did hers every freaking day.

Granted, he didn't make pulling back easy. Every time she tried to break her lips from his, he was there, chasing her back into the kiss, making all the yummy sounds that had become a normal fixture of her everyday soundtrack because yes, actually, in so many ways, she *was* the luckiest woman in the world. Something out there had understood the trials and pain and heartbreak she'd experienced and decided to ensure at least one thing went right, even if it had taken her a while to trust it. Buffy finally placed a hand on his chest and pushed, not hard but enough that he understood she meant business.

"I really want to do this," she said in a rush. "Like, bad."

"Ohh, *bad*?"

"Spike—"

“Don’t worry, baby, I am not gonna stand in the way of getting your hot little hands all over me.” Spike smirked and, as though to prove how much he meant it, stepped back so she could admire the washboardness that was him as he tugged his T-shirt over his head. “Believe me,” he continued, turning his hands to his jeans as he toed off his boots, “this is somethin’ I aim to enjoy.”

Then he was naked—and hard, because lord forbid the man spend one minute unaroused—kissing her fiercely, hungrily, before pulling away to practically prance over to the massage table, which he threw himself on with such enthusiasm she worried the whole thing might just collapse. But it didn’t. It whined and wobbled but remained, much like the man it was supporting, very erect.

“Careful!” Buffy hissed, trailing after him. “That thing is made of wood, you know!”

“Got a bit of that, myself.”

“I noticed.” It was impossible not to notice Spike’s wood. “But if you broke the table and landed on a piece the wrong way, that’d definitely put a crimp on our evening plans.”

Spike didn’t look remotely concerned, focused instead on stretching out lengthways across the table, gauging the appropriate position to tackle the face cradle. “Think you worry too much. Also...” He rapped his knuckles along the surface. “Unless it grows different these days, think whoever told you this was wood was having a laugh.”

“Well, it could be. Wood...composite or something. And I just bought it, so it’d be nice to have it for more than just tonight.”

He favored her with an exaggerated pout. “Sorry I got you all cross, pet, but by all means, vent your frustration on my poor, vulnerable body.” Spike dutifully lowered his face into

the cradle and gave his butt a little wiggle—as though he feared she wouldn’t realize just how eager he was and shaking his ass was his way of punctuating the sentiment with an exclamation mark. “You know I’m good for it. Though if you decide this oughta have a happy ending, I’ll do my best to oblige.”

Buffy shook her head, trying to shove back the compulsion to laugh and succeeding solely by virtue of a lot of practice. The last thing he needed was more encouragement. “All right,” she said. “I know this next part is going to be hard for you—”

He growled and gave his butt another shimmy.

“—but I need you to stay still.”

The shimmying stopped. “Not a problem.”

“Who are you kidding?”

“Ye of little faith.”

“Me of much experience. Now, your second challenge is to be quiet and simply enjoy. Think you can manage?”

He responded by not responding, which she took as a victory. Buffy had no delusions about him keeping quiet, especially once she got her hands on him, but she’d relish in this now. Give herself the chance to build up to what she had been practicing these last few weeks. Even if she knew he’d appreciate anything she did, she still had the need, the drive to make sure it was more than a gesture. That the time and attention she’d applied would be felt in every stroke she made. So, with a fortifying breath, she neared and seized the lotion she’d made sure to have within reach, lathered up against the gentle soundtrack of Spike-tunes turned orchestral, then set her hands to his skin and began to rub.

“Oh fuck,” Spike moaned almost at once, practically arching up into her touch. “Buffy—”

“Shh. Lay still.”

“Dunno if I can.” He relaxed nonetheless, the tension leaving his muscles again, though he didn’t hesitate to release a long moan as she began to work her way across his shoulders, applying the sort of pressure she believed—hoped—straddled that perfect range between pleasure and relief, especially in the areas she thought would be the most strained. His neck, the connective muscles between his shoulders and his arms, the places he tended to take the most blows because of posture or technique, feeling all the while for the telltale signs of tightness or wear as the videos she’d unearthed had advised, and employing some of the finger exercises she’d learned to loosen those areas up.

To her surprise, probably to his as well, Spike did remain still, if not silent. Every few seconds, he’d release a low groan, a growl, a sigh or something that let her know she was doing something right. Working her fingers down his spine, along the small of his back, soothing out knots and turning unyielding muscle into something softer, until it seemed like Spike himself might be melting into the table. Then lower, over his leg muscles, his hips, even digging into the flesh of his entirely too cute ass where his weight fell the hardest whenever seated or, more often, when knocked there by someone up to no good. And lower still, digging into his calves in turn before beginning to work over his feet and discovering with a start that he was especially sensitive there, twitching and jerking but not quite pulling back, and offering a light growl when she teased she might have to double back just to explore how ticklish he was sometime when she was being less nice and he was being more evil.

“Not now,” she assured him, rubbing circles into the ball of his foot. “Just... The Big Bad has ticklish tootsies? This

seems like information the girlfriend is honor bound to exploit."

"Bloody hell, you keep doing that, and you can exploit me however you fancy."

"Dangerous words."

"Dangerous fella."

"There's a word for it," Buffy replied. She pressed a kiss to the middle of his foot, grinned when he jolted in response, then laid his leg back against the table. "Me? I think you're kind of a pushover."

"Bite your tongue."

"And here I thought that's normally your job." She made her way back toward the head of the table, stroking her hand along the length of his spine as she did. "If you wanna flip over, I'll do your front now."

She expected another showy flash of movement, Spike putting every ounce of his vampire speed and strength into making sure she didn't miss the way his dick waved at her as he settled onto his back. But there was no showy flash of movement, and he didn't snap back at her with some other witty Spikeism about biting or the list of things he'd like her to do to his front. The playfulness of just a second ago seemed to evaporate, and she didn't know why. Not until he pushed up on trembling arms and held there for a second.

"Spike? You okay?"

He turned his face toward her, and she caught it in the flickering candlelight. The shine of tears against his skin, the slight tremble of his lower lip, how dark his eyes were, and before she could say anything, before she could begin to process what she was seeing, he had reached for her, cupped the back of her head and pulled her to him for a sweet kiss

that tasted of him and wet salt and something else she was afraid to name.

"In case I don't mention it later," he rumbled when they pulled apart, stroking his thumb across her cheek, "best bloody present I've ever gotten."

"So good it made you cry?"

"That's how you know it's good." He kissed her again, slipping into that place that was just for them, the Spike that lived only within these walls, that was for her and her alone, and she didn't know what to make of it. How quickly it had happened, and how shaken he seemed. "Really, Buffy," Spike said in a low voice, curling his fingers along her nape. "This is...more than I could've asked for."

"A massage isn't more than you could've asked for."

He shook his head. "It's more than that. All the trouble you went to."

"It wasn't trouble. No trouble. You know I avoid trouble in my off time. Get enough of it at work."

"Buffy—"

"And...isn't this kinda proving that lady was right?" Buffy cupped his cheek, brushed her thumb over his wet skin. "It wasn't much. It was just... I started thinking of all the times you've taken care of me and—"

"It's not a bloody contest, you know."

"No, but if it were, I'd be losing."

"This bint really got in your head, didn't she?"

Buffy shrugged as though to say no, knowing perfectly well he'd know better. See through it. That along with the videos and the practice dummies and the planning she'd done to set the stage for his gift—her own meltdown not included, but nothing ever went as planned—she'd been poring over the life-

time's worth of memories they'd built together so far, the times he'd made her feel better, either simply by being with her when she needed someone to share her silences or when she'd been bruised and beaten and not in a place to take care of herself the way she should. How he'd always reached for her, reacted to her, craved contact however she would grant it. How, back in Los Angeles, he hadn't snapped back to himself, pulled out of the place he'd retreated to survive those days following the apocalypse, until she'd touched him. Their entire shared history was Spike reaching for her, caring for her, grounding himself in the moment he was in if he could feel she was there too.

So yeah, maybe the woman had gotten in her head. But maybe it was for the best. Maybe she needed to understand just how much Spike still craved something she could give him. That she wasn't giving him. That he would never ask for.

And now she was ruining his present. Tonight was not about Spike taking care of Buffy, and if she didn't watch herself, that was exactly what it would turn into.

"Lie back," she said, pressing at his chest. "Time for your front."

He didn't budge. "In a mo'. Just need to set the record straight first."

"No setting. This is about you."

"If it is, then lemme do as I like." Before she could push him again or protest, he'd wrapped his arms around her in full, pulled her into the cradle of his legs, now dangling off the side of the table, and held her in a hug until she had no choice but to sink into it. "Wouldn't be here if it weren't for you," he rumbled into her hair. "Wouldn't have survived this long."

Buffy couldn't help herself—she snorted. "That's bogus."

"No? How do you reckon I would've fared without the



Slayer at my back after those army gits shoved a chip up my cranium?”

“By being a menace and killing demons.”

“Right. Suppose I never told you about the time a bunch of wankers cornered me at Willy’s to knock the stuffing outta me for killing my own kind.” Spike pulled back just enough to catch her eyes. “It was you, pet. They wised up to the fact that I was yours. Wagered the safer bet was letting me pick off the tossers barmy enough to put themselves in my path than risk the wrath of the Slayer. Can’t count how many times you saved my hide simply by being you.”

Buffy pursed her lips. Okay, no, she hadn’t known about that. But it didn’t really change anything. “Well—”

“Then there’s Glory. You stormed to the rescue when the smart thing would’ve been letting her rearrange my insides.”

“I was there to kill you for blabbing about Dawn.”

“And it’s my good fortune you did a lousy job of it, but we both know better.”

“Better? No, I was really going to kill you.”

“But you didn’t. You gave me what no one other than you ever could.”

“A kiss?”

“A chance,” he said firmly. “The best bloody chance. And you kept doing it. When I came back with my soul, when you snatched me back from the First—”

“Spike, you don’t need to do this—”

“Tell you you’re a bloody marvel? Regale you with dreadful tales of where I’d be if not for Buffy Summers? Think I do.” He cupped her cheeks with both hands this time. “You believe all the rotten things you think about yourself, that the pissants you let close have convinced you are true. Take the word of a bloody stranger over the man who knows you inside

and out. And I cherish what you give me. Every piece of it. Every little bit, every crumb, that got us where we are right now. You hear me?"

Buffy nodded, not really feeling it but knowing she would. Knowing in an academic way he was right, kinda resenting it because he didn't *always* need to be right, but something inside of her loosened at last. "And the touch thing? You said it was the best gift."

"It is," he agreed, "because it's you. It's *you*, Buffy. Not a happy ending. Happy bloody life."

And that was it—the rest faded, fell away, the last of the tension, of the nerves, of the worries that she'd allowed inside. They wouldn't stay gone, she knew, because nothing like that ever did, but she also knew there would be more of this. More of Spike knowing what to say the way she knew what to do, the way they worked, the way they balanced, the way they cared.

She wasn't great with words, but she didn't have to be. She had him.

Though there were times, few and far between, when the words she wanted were within reach. Much like he was. And now that she was feeling solid once more, it was time to get back to the giving part of the present. There was still so much touching she wanted to do.

"Maybe we can negotiate one happy ending," Buffy said, wrapping her hand around his cock and grinning at the immediate way he melted into her. "What do you think?"

"Think I'm a greedy berk who'll want more than one," he said, voice hitching, his eyes falling shut and his head rolling back. "Like that life I mentioned."

"It'll be hard," she replied, starting to stroke the way she knew he liked best, "but I think we can arrange that."

Spike peeked an eye open and somehow, likely just by being him, was able to give her a lascivious look. "Best happy ending is the shared sort, you know. Care to join me?"

Buffy pressed her brow to his and kissed him. Let herself feel it, his lips, his love, his hunger and his need, the entirety of his self that was hers. And yeah, she knew where this was going. Knew that by the end of the night, the table she'd bought would probably be in pieces and she'd have trouble walking straight tomorrow. For now, though, she was a bit touch starved, and determined to get her fill. "Don't worry," she whispered. "I'm already right here."

