

ESSE EST PERCIPI

HOLLY DENISE



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“ARE WE GOING TO talk about this?”

Buffy closed her eyes, suddenly worried about the fate of the basketball she had just confiscated. The thing would be way too easy to smush between her hands, but then Riley would have nothing to aim at the hoop he had affixed to the back of his dorm room door, and things between them would probably go from strained to super strained.

Like if Riley knew she was tense enough to pop a miniature basketball, he'd probably skip right on past asking and get to demanding they have a conversation. Which might not be the worst idea in the world, granted, but she still wasn't ready. Honestly, she didn't know when she'd ever be.

It didn't help that this was the scene of the crime. That Riley was sitting on the bed where he had been inside a not-Buffy Buffy, believing it was Buffy and having no way of knowing it wasn't Buffy. Those were the facts, ma'am, and where her indignation should die a swift, uneventful death. She—she being the real Buffy—had no reason to feel the way she did except that feelings didn't seem to care if there were reasons. Feelings were not bound by the laws of rationality and logic. They existed in bold defiance of all those things, and as a result, she was supposed to ignore them. Irrational feelings could not be more important than rational logic.

And to be fair to him, Riley had been good about not pressing the Faith issue the last couple of days. Instead, there had been this. A strained coexistence where she didn't feel like they were apart or together, her mind at war with itself. And every time she'd feel even remotely like maybe she could get over it, she'd remember something like the ever-so-helpful remark he'd made that something had *felt different*. That Buffy had been *off* that night. That he should have known. And like clockwork, the entire cycle would restart because if he believed he should have known, why couldn't she? Were her feelings on the matter so insignificant? She didn't think so.

Except, again, that was the irrationality talking. It just wasn't fair to expect someone to do an ID check of their girlfriend before they hopped into the sack. She knew this. She did. Really.

“Buffy...” Riley sighed, and she felt her hackles get all hackly. “Is there anything I can do? Anything at all to make this better?”

Buffy didn't respond, just squeezed the basketball tighter until she felt something inside of it give. “Oops,” she said, glancing down as the air rushed out of it. “I'll, umm, I'll buy you a new one.”

“Forget the basketball. Let's talk about this.”

“Talk about what?”

“You know what.”

She tossed the deflated skin toward the waste basket and missed. Great. Because nothing could go right today. “You'd think being the Slayer would mean higher accuracy,” she muttered, doing everything she could do not glance in Riley's direction. “Or, I guess, a preternatural understanding that sometimes hellmouth hijinks are going to be extra personal.”

Riley sighed again. “I just want to know what I can do to make this better,” he said,

so gosh-darned earnest it made her want to scream and punch him at the same time. “It wasn’t... Do you need to know exactly what happened?”

“Like a play-by-play? Oh, because that won’t be terrible at all.”

“It was still you, where it counted. To me, it was.”

The words struck something inside of her that she hadn’t known could be reached by words alone. “Where it counted?” Buffy repeated, doing her best to keep her voice level. It was no small feat—the situation in her head was suddenly so loud she could barely hear her own thoughts. “So it’s just my body that counts?”

“That is not what I meant.”

“Really? ’Cause that’s what you said.”

“No, it’s not. I just... If I had known it wasn’t you, you know I never would have... It never would have gotten that far. To me—to *me*, I wasn’t with anyone else. I was with you. *You*, Buffy. The only person I want. The only one who matters.”

And just like that, her swelling anger collided head-first with guilt and regret, and she, like the ball, felt the wind rush out of her. Two deflated things in the same room in a matter of seconds. Maybe that was some sort of record.

Or maybe her problem was she was trying to oversimplify something extraordinarily complicated. Not for the first time, she tried imagining what she would have done if she’d been in Riley’s shoes. This thought experiment tended to blow up within the first few seconds, her indignation and hurt getting in the way of genuine reflection, but he was asking now, really asking, and the least she could do was push through her discomfort. Her body might have been used but she wasn’t the one who had been taken advantage of.

Buffy stilled, her mind resting on the thought. *Taken advantage of. Taken advantage.* That’s what had happened, right? A stranger had come into Riley’s personal space, wearing the face of someone he knew and trusted, and manipulated him into sex, all for the thrill of it. More than the thrill of it, actually, the pleasure of hurting Buffy. Riley could have been anyone in that sense. A means to an end.

It was one of those weird brain things—thinking about something old but with new words, new words that provided new perspective. And now that she’d started, she couldn’t stop. The only conclusion that made sense with all this unwanted thinking was that Buffy had been selfish. Ever since it had happened, all she could entertain was how the body hijack had impacted her. About how hurt *she* had been in the aftermath. That Faith had gone after someone she cared about, someone she was close to, was just a given. That’s all the people in Buffy’s life were, after all. Tools to be used to inflict pain.

Riley had been a tool. A tool Faith had wielded to hurt someone *he* cared about. And on top of dealing with the potential relationship fallout that was them, he was having to reconcile with having been used—with being so insignificant to another human being as to be fashioned into a weapon meant to cause pain. Faith had used Buffy’s body for sex without her permission, but she’d also used Riley’s without his. Or at least without him knowing exactly what he was signing up for.

For someone like Riley, that was probably a lot to consider. Even more to accept. He

was rather old fashioned in his thinking—coming around to the idea that he had been raped would be hard to reconcile. And here she was, making the whole thing about her. Her feelings, her betrayal, her icky sense of invasion and violation. She hadn't considered what he must be going through at all.

"I'm sorry," Buffy heard herself say, not realizing she meant to speak until the words were out. But they felt good, right, and without the pretense she'd been living with the past couple of days. All this time she'd just needed a nudge.

"You're sorry?" Riley, when she turned to him, had furrowed his brow, clearly not following. "What...? Why?"

"I didn't... It just occurred to me that what she did, she did to both of us." It sounded so stupid, spoken aloud like that, but no less true because of it. "I know the stuff we deal with isn't like...normal couple stuff. Like, being Single White Female is usually a lot less literal than what happened here."

"I..." He didn't look any more enlightened. If anything, the frown had deepened. "Does this mean you forgive me?"

"It means I just realized that you were a victim too. Which is dumb but I've been all topsy-turvy in my head and—"

"A victim?" Riley's voice hit a pitch she hadn't known it could reach and he jumped after it—literally sprang to his feet, all jack-in-the-box style. "What do you mean, victim?"

Buffy blinked. "I mean she... What she did, she used us both. She used my body and she used you, too. To get to me. And yeah, not crazy about the whole *victim* thing, but...that's what this is, right? When someone uses your body for sex against your will?"

"Against your will?" He was staring at her like he'd forgotten how language worked. "Buffy, we've been intimate before. We're dating. It wouldn't have been against anyone's will. I wanted to sleep with *you*. I just didn't know it wasn't you."

"And that's where the whole *against your will* thing comes in," Buffy replied, the cushy place she'd landed in just a moment ago suddenly a whole lot less cushy. "You wouldn't have slept with her if you'd known it wasn't me."

"Of course not."

"So it *was* against your will. Not...what's the term?" She knew Walsh had used it at least once in a similar context. "Informed consent."

Riley stared at her for a moment, his expression not vacant, exactly, but not clear either. As though he was trying to do long division without a calculator, and she was the jerkface who had invented math. Finally, he shook his head and something behind his eyes solidified. Something she was immediately sure she didn't like.

"I don't like calling it that," he said.

"You don't like calling it what it is?"

"It makes it sound like she... Like I was *raped*, or something." He barked out a dry laugh. "I'm not a rape victim."

"It's nothing to be ashamed about."

"I know, but it's also not what I am. I don't... *Men* don't get raped. Not like that."

"Like *that*?"

“By women,” he said, and there was an edge to his voice now. An unspoken *don't push me on this* flavoring every word. “I’m not talking about what happens in prison when you bend over in the shower in front of Big Bubba. Women can’t rape men the way men can rape women. It’s not remotely equitable.”

It might have been her imagination or her rising temper, but something in the way he spoke sounded almost...proud. Or if not proud, then definitely a quality near enough that she found herself flashing back to that time they’d run into each other after dark and he’d said that thing about men doing the protecting and women being the protected—how he had made her feel stupid and small for going out on her own to find Spike rather than waiting for Jonathan. Sure, she wasn’t as good at fighting and stuff, and only Jonathan had ever managed to beat Spike before, but she was still the Slayer. Not exactly helpless. At least not as helpless as Riley had made her feel.

That night, his attitude had been annoying. Right now, it was more than that. It was...dangerous. Like he was above experiencing this sense of utter violation. Like it was for women and women alone. A specific way only they could be hurt.

And maybe that was it—the sign she was waiting for. The answer to the question she’d been asking herself on repeat for the last few days. If Riley could share her pain, experience it with her, she wouldn’t feel so alone in the aftermath of what had happened. But he didn’t, and she did, and she’d finally arrived at a bridge too far. Unable to move past this one thing because this one thing was everything.

“Riley,” Buffy said, “I don’t think this is going to work.”



Her friends thought she was nuts, of course. At least, Xander definitely did—she’d already sat through one lecture and had a feeling that others were on the horizon, and not only because he’d warned her that he wasn’t done. Willow had been a little more sympathetic, saying that Buffy needed to do what she felt was right even though, really, there had been no way for Riley to know. And sure, his ideas were a little antiquated but he was a nice, decent guy, wasn’t he? Not the love-’em-and-leave-’em type that Parker had proven to be, or the vampire type that was Angel, and maybe Buffy just needed some space to process what had happened and would be back aboard the Riley train once she had some perspective. Even Giles seemed to think she might have been a bit rash. After all, *he* hadn’t recognized her in Faith’s body until she’d rattled off a list of only-Buffy-would-know facts, and Riley hadn’t known her nearly as long. It wasn’t fair to hold him accountable for the crimes of others.

Really, out of everyone, only Willow’s new friend Tara had been supportive. Saying that there were plenty of guys who fit Buffy’s not-Parker and not-Angel criteria and if that was the strongest thing Riley had going for him in the relationship department, it didn’t bode well for future happiness. What mattered was what Buffy felt comfortable with and if this was a deal-breaker, better they find out now than before she had the chance to get really, really hurt.

Buffy had appreciated that—so much so she practically insisted Tara join them at the next Scooby meeting, not-so-secretly hoping for the same level of unbridled support when she announced the reason she had called for a Scooby meeting without Jonathan, the Scooby leader. Because breaking up with Riley had freed up a lot of Buffy's time, and what was left to fill that time, aside from schoolwork, was slayage. And she'd noticed something off in the slayage. Or something that wasn't *off*, necessarily, but something that suddenly didn't make as much sense as it always had.

Like the time she'd been engaged to Spike and the years of animosity between them suddenly seemed...weird. Sure, she'd rationalized that away but so close to her last reality-altering spell, things were feeling hinky. Hence why she'd insisted on meeting with her friends, even if they'd all looked at her like she was nuts. The revelation of the shared mark worn by both the monster seen rampaging around campus and the tattoo visible on Jonathan's July calendar spread hadn't made much of a dent. Buffy being fresh off a breakup and not in her right mind, according to some (Xander), meant she was looking for any excuse to shift attention off the fact that she'd just ended a perfectly good relationship for a perfectly no good reason, and even if the mark looked similar, that didn't mean it was the same. Silly Buffy.

That Jonathan had shown up at the right moment with the right explanation certainly didn't help matters...and his story hadn't convinced Buffy, either. Maybe it was just breakup-brain at work, but she found she was a little suspicious of men who seemed too good to be true or knew all the right things to say to make her feel small and stupid. She'd ignored that with Riley as much as possible, and look what had happened.

So it stood to reason that if she wanted to take down someone who seemed too good to be true, she needed the help of someone who was neither good nor true. And there was only one person in all of Sunnydale who fit that particular bill.

"Why, Betty," Spike drawled as she helped herself over the threshold to his crypt. He was sitting cross-legged on one of the sarcophaguses, inspecting his nails and acting, for all the world, like he'd just been waiting around for her to show up. "Not used to seeing you out and about without your big hero lurking over your shoulder. Or under it, as it is. What happened? He finally let you off the leash?"

Might as well get straight to the point. Buffy stopped in front of him and crossed her arms. "You hate Jonathan, right?"

"Bloody do-gooder's always getting in the way of my plans," he agreed, slowly raising his eyes to hers. "Seem to recall you being there for a lot of that. Fancy a stroll down memory lane?"

"That's just it. I don't think our memories are reliable."

Spike blinked, looking something between surprised and impressed. And it probably said something that this was further than she'd gotten with the others. "That a fact?"

"No. Not a fact. It's a theory. But I want to see about proving it is. A fact. Not a theory."

"So you came here. To me."

She nodded. "Figured you'd be especially motivated, what with the multiple kickings of your ass he's dealt over the years."

“Kickings I’ve imagined if this theory of yours is right.”

The words could have easily come out all skeptical but somehow didn’t—at least not a skeptical that was obvious. Forget saying something, it was just flat out wrong that her mortal enemy trusted her more than the people she considered her family.

But she wasn’t here to think about that, so she wouldn’t. She had a mission.

“So,” Buffy prodded, “does that mean you’re in? You’ll help me prove this world is...wrong?”

Spike held her gaze for a moment, his mouth curving into a smile that had her balling her hands into fists, though she didn’t know why. It wasn’t like she went around punching him on the regular—that was more Jonathan’s territory. Unless, of course, it wasn’t. Maybe in the real world, assuming her theory was based on fact, she was much punchier when it came to the resident undead pest. Maybe this was her body remembering what her mind did not.

Or maybe Spike just desperately needed to be punched.

“That the only reason you’re here, then?” he asked, throwing her for more than a loop. “Nothing to do with the little song and dance you did the other night. You’re just here for help.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh, gonna play coy, are we?” Spike edged forward, slipping his legs over the side of the sarcophagus and forcing Buffy to step back, lest he land on top of her. “I’ll admit, you took me by surprise. Never figured you for such a bloody cock tease. But I’ve thought about it since then—a lot—and I think I have it worked out.”

“You have *what* worked out?”

“What you were on about. Same reason you’re here now, minus that piece of stale wonder bread that follows you around. You’re bored out of your mind.”

Seriously, he could start making sense any time now. “What?”

“That’s right. Hard to quit fang once you’ve dallied. You miss the rush. The danger.” To her shock and horror—and maybe other things—Spike’s eyes dropped to her mouth. “You miss the thrill of doing something you oughtn’t with someone you oughtn’t. So you had to get your kicks somehow, and there I was. Ripe and ready to be played with. I don’t blame you, Becky. But this here’s a toy that plays back.”

A beat passed, then another, and then the fog crowding her head cleared and she understood—she understood way more than she cared to. “A few nights ago?” Buffy said, not bothering to keep the edge out of her voice. “Let me guess—you ran into me somewhere and I said something to you that sounded very *not* me. And ever since then, you’ve been thinking something very wrong because like the rest of this stupid town, you’re too stupid to know when the person in front of you *isn’t* the person in front of you.”

He lifted his gaze to hers once more, arching an eyebrow. “Dance around it all you like, pet, it’s not gonna work. Got a peek at the kind of girl you really are.”

“No, you didn’t. See above, re: not me.”

At that, the light in his eyes dimmed, and a frown took over his face. Spike backed up a

step as though to get a better look at her, confirm that he was looking at Buffy Summers. “What are you on about?”

“That was Faith.”

“Faith in what?”

“Faith in *me*.” Wait, that sounded wrong. “She’s the evil slayer. They one you told Giles and Xander you were going to send my way if you ran into her first?” Buffy barked a dry, humorless laugh at the look on his face—the confusion swarming the corners where heated intent had been just before. “Yeah, she did a little switcheroo with our bodies. Nearly got me killed in the process. Jonathan helped put us back where we belong but not before she made every effort to ruin my life. I thought I knew about every step on her make-Buffy-suffer tour but apparently, this is the gift that keeps on giving. Even when you wish it wouldn’t.”

“So...that stuff about warm champagne, that wasn’t you?”

“Considering I have no idea what you’re talking about, I’m gonna say no.”

The shadow on his face darkened into a frown. No, not a frown. A pout. Spike was pouting. “Well, that bloody figures,” he muttered, rolling his eyes at her, or himself, she didn’t know. “Here I thought you’d gone and gotten yourself a personality. Should’ve known I wouldn’t have that sort of luck.”

“What did she say to you?”

“Trust me, pet, you couldn’t handle it.” This he said with a flat smirk that again made her fist want to get extra punchy. “Wouldn’t want to sully that lily white virtue of yours.”

“What?”

“Never you mind.” Spike blew out a breath and shook his head. “So, you need my help in taking down the big man. Mighty flattered that you came to me for this. Your soldier not cut out for the job? Would hate to think what he’d say if he knew you were here.”

It was the second time he’d mentioned Riley without really mentioning him, which Buffy found annoying, and not only because she was already so over people bringing up her most recent ex as though he was some sort of arbiter of her life. She’d gotten enough of this attitude from Xander—she didn’t need it from the resident undead.

She meant to say as much—she did—but what came out instead was, “Riley and I are done.”

“Oh ho? Trouble in paradise?”

“Like you care.” Buffy huffed, reconsidering the logic that had steered her to his door. But it wasn’t like she could hit *rewind* and undo that decision—and it also wasn’t like anything in this town stayed quiet for long. Being that Riley was the dumpee, odds were good he wouldn’t exactly be charitable in recounting their final conversation. Either she gave Spike the details now and got the whole thing over with, or she waited until he inevitably learned through the grapevine and circled around to throw it in her face. Which, yes, would give her license to stake him, but then she wouldn’t have anyone to help her test her Jonathan-isn’t-as-great-as-he-seems hypothesis.

So suck up her pride now or wait for Spike to catch her off guard. There really wasn’t a choice.

“He slept with Faith,” she said in a rush. “I mean, while I was Faith. While Faith was in my body. He slept with her.” He’d also apparently told Faith that he loved her—this she’d learned in the course of the breakup, which hadn’t had the impact Riley had been going for. He’d argued that she couldn’t dump him over this because he loved her. He *loved* her, and she could ask Faith if she didn’t believe him. Except, of course, Faith was gone and odds were good she wouldn’t resurface until she was far enough away to avoid catching any of what she had coming to her. Or, more likely, when she thought enough time had passed that she was good to return and fuck up Buffy’s life some more.

But yeah. That was her track record. Two boyfriends, one left town and the other loved her but not enough to realize she wasn’t in the room with him. Never mind the other stuff. The weird justification Riley had insisted upon to avoid being a victim.

Whatever Buffy had expected to see on Spike’s face, though, wasn’t there. No jeer, no smirk, no delight at her pain, just a mask of confusion that was...well, confusing. This reaction was not very Spike-like.

“He didn’t know it wasn’t you?” he asked at last. “He had this bird in his bed and he didn’t cotton on that it wasn’t you inside?”

“Well, you didn’t, either!”

“Maybe not, but I knew something was off.”

“Oh yeah. Sure. That’s why you weren’t being a weirdo creep a second ago—you *knew* something was off.”

“I thought you’d realized the bloody obvious, is all,” Spike snapped. “Or you’d had a row with the enormous hall monitor. Or, hell, you’d caught on that I didn’t find Red’s little matrimonial spell nearly as repulsive as I should have. I knew something was *off*, Betty. Just hadn’t worked out what it was.”

Wait, what? That was way too much to absorb all at once. Maybe ever. “You thought I was just...toying with you?”

“Not like it’d be the first time, yeah?”

Buffy was sure she didn’t want to know what that meant and somehow kept herself from asking. That didn’t stop Spike from explaining anyway.

“All I’m saying is a bloke who’s sharing your bed ought to have known the difference. The bitch only talked to me for a minute and yeah, might not have sussed out what had happened, exactly, but I knew something was wrong. If she’d stuck around longer, pushed a little more—”

“I don’t need to hear it,” she said.

“Actually gone so far as to kiss me, I would’ve known in a pinch.”

Buffy’s heart stuttered. “What? She kissed you?”

“No,” Spike replied. “Like I said, she didn’t get that far.”

“But she...got somewhere?” Her ears filled with a high-pitched ring, her head suddenly light enough it might just pop off her neck and float its way to freedom. “What did she say to you, Spike?”

He very much looked like he didn’t want to tell her, which just wigged her out more. Her mortal enemy should not be embarrassed, and he definitely shouldn’t feel bad on

her behalf. Maybe she didn't want to know.

Except she stood there waiting. And after a moment, he sighed and relented.

"She said she—*you*—could have me if you wanted me," he told her. "That you...bloody whatever, could have anyone, actually, but me especially. Ride me at a gallop until my legs buckled and my eyes rolled up. Squeeze me with muscles I've never even dreamed of until I popped like... Well..."

"Warm champagne," Buffy muttered, understanding. Understanding more than she'd ever wanted to understand, and now the bottom of her stomach had fallen loose. Where it landed, she didn't know. This was both somehow not as bad as she'd thought it could get and worse. Knowing Faith had been that close to Spike, used her lips, her voice, to... Well, no wonder he'd been all innuendo-y when she'd shown up.

"Oh god," Buffy said, her legs suddenly wobbly. "Oh my *god*. And...you didn't know? I—*she* said all that and you still... You thought it was actually me?"

"Like I just told you, figured you'd just put two and bloody two together and were having a go at me."

"Two and two?" That didn't make sense—not at first. She thought back to a moment ago, something he'd said that had stuck but she hadn't jumped on, and maybe it wasn't important but it was, because *there* it was, the other shoe. Something about the spell—Willow's spell. How he hadn't been as disgusted as he should have been. Which... Buffy looked up again, her heart now in her throat, making the air around her seem especially thin. "Spike..."

"Don't get your knickers in a twist. It's nothing."

"What's nothing? The fact that you liked kissing me?"

Spike lifted a shoulder, then his chin, and met her gaze with a sort of steely defiance. "Always been a curiosity of mine," he said tersely. "What it'd be like."

"To fuck a slayer."

"Well, yeah."

"You're disgusting."

"Am I? Think it's rather human, actually. Close as we are. Two sides of the same bloody coin."

Buffy swallowed, realizing belatedly that he *was* close—closer than he had been a moment ago, and that he'd moved without her noticing, the air that was his colliding with the air that was hers, whispering along her skin, making something inside of her seize and clench. And she wasn't excited, no, because that would be ridiculous, but she also was, because she always was when she was with Spike. Every interaction charged, dangerous, and even if this was the longest they'd ever been alone without Jonathan or the others nearby, intimate in ways that almost seemed indecent.

"And I would've known, Betty," Spike went on, somehow even closer, yet still not touching her. She licked her lips and watched him watch the movement, more aware of her body than she ever had been before. How loud it was, her pulse, her thoughts, the rhythmic pounding of her heart. "I would've known the second she kissed me, if she had."

"H-how?"

“Because it’s there, isn’t it? You feel it too.”

“I do not,” she argued, mostly on principle. That was what she was supposed to say. “I don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

Spike arched an eyebrow and lifted a hand between them, skimmed his fingers along her collarbone, not touching her—not quite—but making her feel the movement all the same. The way her skin reacted, like her very cells were drawn to follow. “You do. It’s here. The way you respond to me. The way your body just knows.”

“You’re a vampire.”

“Yeah, and what I’m talking about has bugger all to do with it. What I’m talking about is you and me. It’s why way back when I told you I’d rather be fighting you. Always there. Has been from the sodding start.”

She remembered that. Not that it was easy to forget—that time he’d vampnapped Angel and Jonathan had rescued him with seconds to spare, Buffy and Kendra there as backup. Spike trading punches with Kendra while Buffy battled a crazed policewoman and Jonathan did his best to tear Angel free from the insane altar he’d been pinned up on. Spike smiling through his fangs and telling her, once they swapped, that he’d rather be fighting her anyway. It hadn’t lasted—Jonathan had swooped in before she could get herself into trouble, out of her element as she’d been—but the moment had stayed with her. Had followed her home after Jonathan brought the organ crashing down on Spike and Dru, had whispered at her as she’d sat anxiously by Angel’s side while Jonathan patched him up, had nagged her all the way into her dreams that night and several nights thereafter, Spike saying he’d rather be fighting her. While in the moment, she’d thought it obvious. Of course he’d rather be fighting her. She was just the Slayer, not Jonathan. Not as capable of doing lasting sort of damage. A pushover. Another trophy to win before he set his sights on something truly insurmountable.

All this time, she’d thought that exchange significant only insofar as how it had affected her. How it had made her feel, which she hadn’t ever actually decided except, well, seen. Sure, Jonathan might have been the actual threat, but in the meantime, Spike, famous vampire, had singled her out. It had been exhilarating.

“I would’ve known,” Spike said. “The second she tried, I would’ve known. So yeah, I get why you kicked your tin soldier to the curb. Someone who knows you like that shouldn’t need to be told when you’re not behind the wheel.”

He turned and walked away then, toward the refrigerator like he hadn’t just been all up in her business, and Buffy stared after him, her mouth ajar, her mind racing, everything in her trying to figure out what the hell had just happened. She’d come here because she’d thought he’d be down to unmask Jonathan, assuming Jonathan was indeed wearing a mask. This entire side-tangent about Faith was a distraction she hadn’t asked for and didn’t need.

Except it was strange, getting validation from the person who was supposed to hate you. To have your mortal enemy agree that not being recognized by your partner when it mattered most did indeed matter. That she was right to have felt the way she felt, to have done the thing she’d done.

“So,” he said, snapping her out of her thoughts. He had made his way back to the fridge, was studying its contents, his back to her. “You need my help humbling Jonathan the wonderbrat. Happy to be of service, Bitsy. Just—”

“It’s Buffy.”

Spike glanced at her over his shoulder. “What’s that?”

“Buffy,” she repeated slowly, drawing out each syllable. “My name is Buffy. Not Betty. Not Bitsy. Not whatever other B-name you’ve thought of to say instead of Buffy, which is, again, my name. If we’re going to work together, you should get used to saying it, because I’m not going to answer to anything else.”

He studied her for a moment, looking bemused at first, then entertained, his mouth once again curving into a grin that did unholy things to his face. Made his eyes crinkle at the sides, made his skin pull tight over cheekbones that she shouldn’t be noticing but noticed anyway because, well, they were hard to miss, those cheekbones. All lethal and sharp and evil, obviously, being attached to an evil vampire.

“All right,” he said, his voice lower than it had been a moment ago. And not a threatening low, either. More of an inviting, almost seductive low, which was a dangerous kind of low because she’d just told him to say her name and as it turned out, “Buffy,” in Spike’s brand of seductive low voice had the potential to be very, very seductive.

Though maybe it was her imagination. *Probably* it was her imagination, actually, because they’d just been talking about Faith, who had come onto Spike, and about kissing, and about how he was sure he would have known immediately if Faith *had* kissed him. Which she hadn’t. And Buffy definitely didn’t feel a certain way about that, nope. Well, except relieved that no more unsanctioned intimate usage of her body had been committed—she already felt icky enough knowing this body had experienced sex she didn’t remember, and that had been with her boyfriend. Former. If anything untoward had happened with Spike—or anyone else—she’d probably just hurl herself into some gorge and be done with it.

“So,” Buffy said, forcibly steering her thoughts back to safe, neutral territory, or as close as she could manage. “Jonathan. It doesn’t really add up, you know? His being all...Jonathan.”

“Right, Jonathan does have a certain Jonathan quality,” Spike replied dryly. “Expect you have a mite more to go on than that.”

“He stopped the mayor the same week he was in England being knighted. He won the Tour de France while accepting an Academy Award for *Titanic*. He’s a doctor, a lawyer, and a surgeon, plus—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, heard he walks on water, too.”

“Spike, think about it. The things I just said—they’re not possible. I mean, I know we think they are because we’re...*in* this somehow. We’ve been made to believe it.” Buffy drew in a breath, waited for him to object, and tried not to say the next bit in a rush. “You mentioned Willow’s spell, the make-us-get-married spell... Do you remember how that felt?”

Spike dropped his gaze to her mouth almost immediately. “Pretty sure we’ve already

touched on this, haven't we?"

"No, I mean..." Her cheeks went hot. She tried to ignore it. "I don't mean how it felt...when we were..."

"Snogging?"

"Whatting?"

There was that grin again, wicked and cheekbony.

"I mean just... We didn't question it," she went on. "The us-ness that was...us. Despite the fact that it came from literally nowhere."

"Did it, now?"

"Didn't it?" She didn't mean to squeak out the question but that's how it sounded, all squeaky. In a thousand years, she hadn't intended to ever revisit the subject that was their ill-fated nuptials—and definitely not with him. Talking about the spell meant thinking about the spell, and how swept up she'd been during those brief hours. How happy—no, blissful—and how the burdens of various heartaches, especially the one named Angel, had suddenly become like helium. So weightless they lifted right off her shoulders and floated off to who-cares-where, right up until the helium turned to lead and came crashing back to earth. More specifically, to Buffy. Adding to her gravity.

It had been manufactured happiness, sure, but happiness nonetheless. And Spike had been...nice. He'd started researching on Giles's behalf without needing to be told. He'd wanted to protect her—which, yes, a little testosterone for her taste, but maybe he was just used to seeing her be the sidekick rather than the mainkick and that memory would clear up too, once she figured out what Jonathan had done.

There was also the kissing. The touching. The way her skin had hummed and her blood had burned, and she'd dreamed, a couple of times, of what might have happened if the spell had gone on just a little while longer. If Spike would have made good on any of his whispered promises...and then her shame at herself for thinking it because, well, that would've been wrong too. She would have felt more than embarrassed in the aftermath—she would have felt violated.

But tell that to her dreams.

Buffy shook her head, breaking herself out of her thoughts. Not the time or the point. "We were fighting," she said, desperate to get back on track. "And then you proposed to me. And it wasn't weird. It didn't seem weird at all."

"Suppose you have a point."

"Yes! Everything I just said about Jonathan—how he's done all these things while never leaving town. Has all these careers, won all these accolades. And we just accept it because it seems like it should be right but—"

"But it's not," Spike said, surprising her with a nod. "Suppose you have a point there, too."

"I do?"

"Don't sound so surprised, pet. You are the Slayer, aren't you?"

"Yeah," she replied. Then nodded herself, squaring her shoulders. "Yes. I am. A-and that's another thing. You know slayers, better than anyone, don't you?"

A proud smirk twisted his lips. “Bloody right I do.”

“Have other slayers been like me?”

Spike furrowed his brow at that, then looked at her in a way that made her feel something more than naked. For a moment, she expected him to deflect, or otherwise say something else that would have her skin so hot it could just slide off her bones like melting butter, but he didn’t. Instead, he shook his head, something shifting behind his eyes.

“The birds I’ve fought before weren’t the sort to look to others before making a move,” he said, somehow completely without judgment. She didn’t know how he managed that or how she knew it was what he meant, but he did and she did. He wasn’t calling her weak—he was identifying something amiss. “Doesn’t seem much like you, either, now that I think about it.”

“But that’s all I remember,” she argued. “Me being number two to Jonathan’s number one. The superpowered supernaturally selected sidekick. But that doesn’t make sense, either. Like...why would the Slayer be a sidekick? Am I just that bad at it?”

Spike scoffed. “Not hardly.”

“How would you know? We’ve never fought one-on-one.”

He seemed to consider this, then shrugged and rounded on her, his eyes bright and eager. “Nothing stopping us now, is there?”

“Except that chip in your head.”

“Lesson the first, Betty. Learn to live dangerously.”

The corners of Buffy’s vision went a little dark. “I told you not to call me that.”

“So you did.” He grinned and rocked on his heels. “Gonna show me what you do with vamps who don’t listen?”

“Are you asking me to hit you?”

“No. I’m telling you to try.”

It was as if the words set something loose inside of her—a primal something she didn’t understand but god, if it didn’t feel right. Natural. *Good*. Everything in front of her went blurry, or *she* went blurry, for in a blink she was standing on the other side of the crypt, her knuckles pleasantly sore, and Spike was on the ground by the wall, rubbing his nose like he wasn’t sure it was still actually there.

“Bloody hell, think you might’ve broken something,” he groused as he climbed to his feet. “Keepin’ a short leash on your rage, aren’t you?”

“You told me to hit you. What did you think was gonna happen?”

“Not bloody that.” Still, despite the edge in his voice, Spike didn’t look all that fazed at what he’d unleashed. Rather, he was grinning like an idiot, bouncing on his heels. “Come on. Do me again.”

“You’re twisted.”

“And you’re having fun for the first time since I’ve known you.”

Was she? Buffy frowned—had to actually contort her mouth into a frown because before he’d made her aware of it, she’d been grinning. Holy crap. More than good, this just felt right. Like some missing piece of herself that she hadn’t actually realized was

missing until now—until she was couched in what it meant to have it back.

She could either stand there evaluating herself or enjoy what she'd just rediscovered, and for once, Buffy was going to choose Option B. Spike seemed ready for her—eager, even—for when she looked up again he was right in front of her, still vibrating that frenetic energy, ready this time when her fist flew at his face.

And god, she loved that he was ready. Loved that he knew just how to block her, how to counter, how he seemed to intuit the way she was going to move, and how she intuited his intuiting. In effortless seconds they were carving swaths across the stone floor of his crypt, circling, evaluating, throwing punches and exchanging blows that should have been impossible, and not because of his stupid chip but because this dance felt so natural. Felt right. Felt like something they had done time and time again but forgotten somehow, which wiggled her out more than anything else because *how* in the world could she have ever forgotten this?

“The body remembers,” Spike said as she threw a mean right hook that would have connected if he hadn't ducked away like a big sissy. “Yours knows mine, Bessy.”

“Bessy? Like a cow?” She was going to kill him—quasi-friendly sparring over, dead vampire coming up. “You have zero sense of self-preservation, you know that?”

He favored her with a wild grin that brightened his eyes and made something in her chest spasm. “Fires you up,” he retorted. “Gets your blood pumping all nice and hot.”

“Stop sniffing my blood.”

“Stop smelling so delicious.” When she came at him again, ready to smash her knuckles through one of his perfectly distracting cheekbones, he caught her fist and tugged so she nearly tumbled into him, needing to steady herself with a hand against the solid slab of stone he called his chest. And then his face was pressed to the crook of her neck and he was dragging in breaths that sounded a lot like moans, and her legs went wobbly in the knee area and she kinda fell the rest of the way against him, not meaning to but not putting up enough of a fight that she managed to avoid impact, which knocked him enough back on his feet that he went stumbling into the wall, taking her along for the ride.

“Gonna have to kill the wanker on principle,” Spike murmured, his voice a whisper. Buffy became aware of a few things at once, the first being that there was a hand on her ass. Not just on, gripping. As in, his fingers were digging into her, holding her against him as his words vibrated along her skin. “Making me forget this.”

Her heart was pounding so hard it hurt. “Forget what?”

“How it feels to fight you.” He squeezed her where he held her, and it felt good. Right. Like it had with Willow's spell, only different. Realer, somehow, and that didn't make sense, because if she was right and this world was some fabrication of Jonathan's, then nothing was real. She couldn't even be sure how much of the past few days, months, years she'd lived as she remembered them.

And god, that was a terrifying thought. How much of her life might not have unfolded the way she thought it had. Had she really been in love with a souled vampire in high school? Had Faith really done a body switcheroo? Had she actually been dating someone named Riley? Was he really a part of a secret military organization looking to contain the

demonic population? Or was that all Jonathan too? Jonathan inventing plots he could inject himself inside, all the better to play the hero?

Was that why things had felt so natural during the Will Be Done spell? Because Buffy and Spike had, however fleetingly, broken out of something that had made them forget this was what they were best at? Fighting, yes, but also this...weird intimacy that didn't feel nearly as weird as it should.

These thoughts chased each other inside her head, making everything around her feel slanted. And she was still against Spike, being held by Spike, whose face was still buried in her throat, making her skin tingle and her heart flutter—like actually flutter, all schoolgirl-like—and none of this felt strange. It felt more like...like...

He must have heard the screaming in her mind, the questions and uncertainty she was firing all over the place, for he pulled his head back then just enough for his eyes to catch hers. For him to ask without asking—*are you feeling this too?*—before those eyes dropped to her mouth and she wet her lips on instinct, and the questions kept coming and the best way to answer them was a nod. Whether or not she made it that far, she didn't know, for then he was kissing her. Spike was kissing her. Holding her and kissing her and groaning into her mouth, against her lips, his tongue curling and probing and she was kissing him too, gripping him like he was the only thing keeping her tethered to this world, and it might be wrong but how could it be? How could anything be wrong when it felt this right? When it felt like it had before—a missing piece locking back into place, coming home, and flooding her senses with parts of Spike that had always been hers, just lost. Just out of reach. The way he tasted of smoke and booze and leather and iron, the sounds he made, the desperate rasp of his voice when he gasped into her. How he felt fitted for her, these shoulders she could grasp, this mouth she could reach, this waist that her legs found so natural to wrap themselves around. None of it new yet all of it a discovery all the same. A rediscovery of something that had been taken from her as surely as anything else.

“Fuck,” Spike panted when he broke away, pressing his brow to hers. “Yeah, I had it right. No sodding way.”

His skin was cool in ways both familiar and not. She'd forgotten that—or she thought she had. How nice it was to have a balance when it felt like every inch of her was on fire, how it made it seem safe to burn even hotter. “No way what?” she asked.

“That I wouldn't know you from your kiss.” He nudged her with his nose, his lips barely skimming over hers. “From the way you use this mouth.”

Her throat tightened. “Oh.”

“There's just you, Buffy. Always just been you.”

Spike didn't give the words time to settle before swallowing her again, and that was okay, because Buffy very much wanted to be swallowed. Consumed. Experienced. It wasn't why she'd come here, was maybe not a great idea while the whole state of the world was in question, but something had unlocked inside her, and it was too late to try to keep contained.

Not to mention he'd said her name, her real name, and just as she'd suspected, that was

pretty hot.

The next time he broke his mouth from hers, he dragged it back down her neck, licking and nibbling and making her skin buzz and her vampire senses go extra tingly. Making something inside of her clench because it felt so good, all of it felt so good, and she knew she shouldn't be doing this. Shouldn't be holding onto him, gasping, bucking into the hardness at her belly with increasing desperation, frantic and unfocused and out of control. *Out of control* like she had been once before and that had nearly cost her everything. Nearly cost her the world. She'd chased the thrill of doing the wrong thing with the wrong person, surrendering to sensation at the worst possible moment, and she'd promised herself she would never let her hormones put anyone in danger ever again.

And god, that made it sweeter. Made it more addictive. The burning, pulsing knowledge that this was something she shouldn't do—not until she knew more, had undone the magic that had been set. But tell that to her body. Her stupid, stupid body that quivered under every caress of lips and tongue, every hint of teeth, her body that tightened with delicious tension at the vaguest suggestion of a threat. Made her feel like a version of herself she'd lost sight of. The girl she'd been once before she'd been forced to become the woman she was now.

Spike scaled his teeth back up the column of her throat, murmuring low, "You got anywhere you need to be?"

"Huh?"

"This business of yours featuring the wonderbrat...you in a hurry?"

Buffy's heart somersaulted. "I mean, if the world is wrong, we should put it right, right?" At the very least, that sounded like the responsible thing to do. It was the reason she'd come here, after all. To recruit Spike in her unmask-Jonathan plans since no one else was up to the task. She had not come here thinking...well, any of this. That she would mention what had happened with Riley or Faith, that Spike would provoke her into fighting him to see if she could, and definitely not learning, thinking, maybe even believing that the wildest parts of Willow's spell might not have been off the mark.

"If the world is wrong," Spike replied, and suddenly his hand was in her pants, like all the way in her pants, and he was grinding his palm into her, through fabric that was soaked and setting off some internal set of fireworks, "then it's all right to be wrong in it."

"Wrong?"

"You're the Slayer. It's wrong of me to do this." He grinned and bunched aside her underwear, groaning when she groaned and then hissing out half a curse, half a prayer at what he found—the ease with which she opened for him, all hot and wet and desperate, his fingers practically swimming in her. "Wrong of me to want to bury my face in your cunt to see if you taste as good as you smell."

Buffy blinked, very hot and very turned on and very *yes do that* but also very confused because, well, not exactly Experience Girl over here. "Taste?" she echoed, her cheeks burning so hard she thought her skin might start to melt. "Like...with your mouth? On...me?"

Spike pulled back, his eyes narrowed. “Well, yeah,” he said as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Like with my mouth, on you.”

“Down there on me?”

“Down...” He blinked, and so help her, if he started to laugh, she was going to stake him. But he didn’t laugh. In fact, she didn’t think she’d ever seen him so far from laughter, including the time he’d been drunk and heartbroken. “Not exactly stunned to learn Captain Cardboard’s as dull behind closed doors as he is everywhere else, but here I thought your soul boy’d be a mite keener on giving than he was as a villain.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

Spike still didn’t crack a smile, though by his expression, he was growing increasingly frustrated, which made no sense to her at all. “Darla was the only woman I’ve ever seen him listen to,” he said. “Take orders from, that is. Only woman he ever cared about making happy, even when they were making each other miserable.”

He spoke like he didn’t mean for the words to hurt, but that didn’t stop them from hurting...mostly because she didn’t think she could argue with them. “What does that have to do with evil Angel? Or mouths?”

“Means even though he’s a selfish berk who never much fancied putting others first, I know for a sodding fact he knows how to get a woman off with his tongue,” Spike replied baldly. “Surprised the soulful side didn’t see fit to show you.”

“He couldn’t. We couldn’t.”

That did it—Spike finally cracked, though the smile was less smirky and more sympathetic, which she didn’t know what to do with. She also didn’t know what to do with the fact that he didn’t argue with her, rather brought his mouth back to hers, the fingers that had gone still at her center suddenly in motion again, making her jolt, remember just how exposed she was at the moment, how vulnerable, and how much she wanted.

“Gonna let me?” he asked when he broke away once more, stroking a line up and down her slit in a way that she might have mistaken for lazy if her eyes hadn’t been open and she hadn’t seen the way he was looking at her. Reverent, not lazy. “Gonna let me find out if you taste as good as you smell?”

“You really want to?”

“You need me to beg?” He curled his tongue around his teeth and teased a finger along her opening before slowly, intently pushing it inside her and moaning at whatever he felt. And she moaned, too—half surprise and half earnest, because no one had ever done what he’d just done without her experiencing a twinge of discomfort, if not pain. She hadn’t known it was possible to feel the good part without the bad. But also she had never been this wet before—maybe that was why. And before she could wonder any more, he was talking again, his words dirty and his voice low. “Need me to ask if I can pretty please eat your delicious cunt?” he murmured. “I will, Buffy. I’ll beg.”

“Oh my god.”

“Because if you taste even half as good as you smell, it’ll be the best thing I ever had in my mouth.” Spike hesitated, then slid in another finger, making her feel full and empty at the same time, somehow, but still no discomfort, just the sensation of *yes* and *more* and

please. She rocked into him, the strokes of his hand as he pushed and pulled and pushed again, and if that felt this good then how would it feel with more than fingers. With *him*? It was reckless and stupid and she was probably the worst slayer in the world, but Buffy understood she wasn't going to leave this crypt without knowing the answer. That whatever she'd come here for had changed and now she needed something she couldn't even name, hadn't known existed until a few seconds ago.

A squeak burst through her lips when he finally pulled all the way back, a soft, illicit wet sound hitting the air—wet from her—and Buffy forced open eyes she hadn't realized she'd closed in time to watch him dip his fingers into his mouth, and if she thought he'd moaned before, then she didn't know what to call the sound that rumbled out of him now, just that it made her legs wobbly and rocketed that *hot* sensation close to boiling.

"God, yes." He closed his eyes, licking whatever was left of her on his skin. "I'll make it good. Make you scream. Let me eat you, love. *Please*."

"I... I don't know if I like...being eaten."

"You're gonna love it," he swore, opening his eyes again. "You're gonna wonder how you've lived so long without my tongue in your cunt. You're gonna want to ride my face every sodding chance you get, and if you're a *very* good girl, I'll let you. How's that sound?"

She must have nodded or said yes or just signaled to him that she was on board, for the next thing she knew, the room had shifted and she was no longer practically splayed across him but sitting on the sarcophagus she'd found him on, what suddenly seemed like a long time ago. Days. Weeks. Eons. And Spike was between her legs, tugging her down so she was practically hanging over the edge, making such quick work of her pants and shoes it'd be a wonder if they were still fully intact. The thought should alarm her—hell, everything about this should alarm her—but it was hard to care with Spike kissing her, tearing at her mouth with eagerness and desperation she felt down to her bones. Like he wanted to crawl inside of her; like he couldn't get enough, like every kiss just made him hungrier.

"Wanna take my time with you," Spike whispered into her skin. "But I don't think I can."

"Oh."

"You find you need to grip something, pet, you grab my hair, all right?"

And before she could reply, before the image could fully form in her head, he was slipping down her body, nipping at her through her bra, her shirt, and then his mouth was on her bare skin, sliding along her belly and she was shaking all over. Shaking with intensity that surprised her, considering she was not exactly a quivering virgin anymore, but suddenly the experience she did have seemed woefully inadequate. All hushed and hurried and private, in the dark, under the covers, rather than open and...watchable. Spike shifting so he was on his knees before her parted legs, his eyes wide and full and fixed on her most private place, and she was so wet it was embarrassing. All of this was embarrassing. A slayer spread out like this in front of her enemy, every inch of her exposed, vulnerable, on offering to a predator. Instinct had her trying to close her legs, hide, but

he must have sensed that instinct for he splayed a hand on either thigh to hold her exactly as she was.

“Look at you,” he said, staring at her center with open hunger. “Aren’t you a vision?”

“No,” she blurted. “I’m not.”

Spike snorted and lazily rolled his eyes to meet hers. “Think I’m in the better position to judge, aren’t I?” He grinned, teasing his teeth with his tongue before lowering his gaze once more, dragging his fingers, still wet, along her slit. “So hot,” he murmured. “Gonna burn me up.”

“Spike—”

“Hush now.” He drew nearer, his mouth so close she could feel his breath—those inexplicable breaths he took—crashing against her flesh. “Time to feast.”

And then he was eating her, his mouth soft and cool and hungry, and it was a damn good thing Buffy had something under her because there was no way her legs would have held. She threw her head back, a sound unlike any she’d ever heard herself make tearing through her lips, and her skin on fire and her muscles in full rebellion and Spike’s lips moving over her, his tongue, cool and sure, making swirly motions that seemed to unknot her from the inside. And it felt so good she could cry, could scream, could do all of the above and more, and he was groaning into her as though he felt it too. The strokes coming faster, more eager, nearing her clit without touching, which made her feel a sort of out of control that was scary and invigorating at the same time.

“Fuck, Buffy,” Spike whispered into her, pressing his brow along her thigh. “So sweet.” He released a shaky breath, spreading her open wider and stroking along her opening again. “Taste so fucking good...” His fingers were back, slipping inside of her, returning that wonderful pressure, that sense of fullness, of rightness, she hadn’t realized she’d been missing until he’d given it to her. Buffy mewled and wiggled, gasped when he gasped, full and better for it, and then his mouth was on her again, licking, laving as he reestablished the rhythm from before, stroking and probing and touching parts of her that had never been touched, never been explored. The air became heavy, the sounds she was making, the sounds her *body* was making, and then Spike. His groans. His words. Those words. How they reached inside her, pushed deeper, stroked and unharnessed and set her free and made her feel bold and beautiful and all those things she always wanted to believe but never could. Not fully. Not with her whole self.

And then his fingers were gone and his tongue was inside of her and Buffy about catapulted out of her body. “Oh shit,” she hissed. “Oh shit.”

“Mmm,” Spike rumbled into her, his tongue curling. “That’s it, baby.”

“Spike—”

“Hold on to me. Show me where you want my mouth.”

She didn’t know what he meant, or maybe she did, for the next thing she knew, she had his hair curled in her fist and she was thrusting herself against his face, holding him where she wanted him, only she wanted him everywhere. Doing that plunging, curling thing with his tongue as he tried to lick her up from the inside, rumbling one of those low growls he couldn’t seem to hold back, touching her and teasing her and stroking with

Buffy-wet fingers, getting closer still to giving her what she wanted most but not close enough. Resisting her when she tried to use the grip she had on him to pull him away from where he was slurping at her with indecent abandon, not embarrassed by the noises she was making or he was making or they were making together. Just ravenous for more.

She didn't hear herself, didn't hear the, "Please, please, please," tumbling loose until he finally pulled away from her opening, flashed her a heated look and whispered back, "Good girl," before thrusting his fingers back inside of her and covering her clit with his mouth. Tongue first, then lips, then a combination, sucking and tugging and licking and the heat inside of her began to expand. All of her did—the world under her skin desperate for release, stretching along her insides until the seams started to give. And he was rubbing something inside of her, somehow pushing her more into his mouth, his tongue swirling, his lips pulling, and that brightness had nowhere to go but out, no more keeping it back, and when it burst free it nearly took her with it, leaving her a trembling, gasping mess, her skin prickling and her eyes watering and Spike still licking her, still pressing into her. It was too much, way too much, but she thought it possible for a second that she'd die if he stopped and Buffy was nowhere near ready for death yet. Not when she had just discovered her body could create magic like this.

"You're magnificent." Spike had his brow pressed to her inner thigh. "So fucking magnificent." He released a deep breath then slowly, achingly so, withdrew his fingers from her with a wet *plop* that should have had her burning with renewed embarrassment but didn't. Because she was magnificent. "The way you gripped me, bloody near broke my bones, pet."

"Sorry," she whispered.

"No sorry. Don't be sorry. Just get ready to do it again." Spike grinned up at her and slowly rose to his feet, making a point to drag his tongue along her slit one final time, ending with a swirling kiss to her clit, before his mouth was back on hers, consuming her, letting her taste what he'd tasted. "Get ready to squeeze my cock like that."

There was a jostle, the hiss of a zipper, and Buffy blinked her eyes open as something large, much larger than his fingers, slipped along her folds. Distantly, faintly, she wondered if she ought to say no—this had gone further than she'd intended, they still had the larger problem that was the state of the universe, they didn't know what else they might be messing up. If this was something either of them would want when the world was right once more.

But maybe that didn't matter. Maybe all that mattered was that she wanted it right now. Needed it right now.

"I'm ready," Buffy whispered.

"Bloody right you are," Spike whispered back, and then he was pushing into her, spearing her open, becoming part of her, and it felt better than good. It felt right. It felt like a piece returned to her that had been stolen, which meant this had to be something else the spell had taken from her. Something she was reclaiming for herself.

The world was wrong but this wasn't.

Thank god she'd found it again.



A lot of things over the next few days were blamed on the augmentation spell, or whatever the hell Jonathan had cast to make himself the main character of their lives. Among those things were the breakup with Riley, which obviously couldn't have been Buffy in her right mind, no matter the damage that had been done.

Of course, no one knew about said damage. Knowing would require Buffy to tell them, and she couldn't.

She couldn't tell anyone about what had happened in Spike's crypt.

How he had turned her upside-down world right-side up again. The things he'd murmured against her throat over the wet slap of their bodies, the hard cadence of his thrusts, the faint marks still visible on her hips from where he'd dug his fingers into her skin. The way he'd trembled into his release, flooding her with him, then dropped to his knees to eat it right back out of her. Delicious, he'd said, how they tasted together. And then he'd sprung back to his feet, tugged her off the sarcophagus, spun her around and plunged back inside of her, whispering urgently to hold on, to scream it out, make his ears ring. Make sure the whole sodding graveyard knew who was staking the Slayer.

Later, much later, Buffy had managed to extricate herself from the tangle of limbs they eventually fell into, limped her way toward the discarded bits of clothing strewn throughout the crypt, and asked Spike if he wanted to help her hunt down the demon.

"What demon?" he'd asked, lifting his head and favoring her with a drunken grin. "There's a demon?"

"Yeah. The whole reason I came over here."

"Think the reason you came is obvious, Busty."

Buffy had scowled and chucked a shoe at his head, which hadn't done much beyond make him smirk like he'd won something. And before she could get any more annoyed, he'd climbed to his feet and started lazily plucking up his own clothes, ready to follow her out into the world.

"If I'm right about this, everything could change once we find this demon," Buffy had told him as he perused the selection of weapons he had on hand. "Assuming I can kill it."

"You can kill it," Spike had replied without glancing at her.

"Without Jonathan? If I've done that, I don't remember."

"Think we learned your body remembers plenty that your mind doesn't." At that he *had* looked at her, a look packed full of meaning that she'd felt down to her bones. "Magic can't change who you are, pet. Most it does is make you forget for a while."

She'd hesitated. "Do you think that goes for us, too? That we're... That we..."

Spike had handed her an axe, not breaking his gaze from hers. "Think today's the most I've felt like myself since the last bit of magic gone wonky," he'd said, voice soft and serious. "Since Red."

"Really?"

"Already told you as much, didn't I?" He'd paused, then closed the scant distance

between them, cupping the back of her head and bringing her in close until their brows were touching. “Meant it, what I said before.”

“What part of what you said before?”

“All of it.” He’d grinned and kissed her, and like everything else, it had felt good. More than good, it had felt right. The one part of all of this that wasn’t screwy or uncertain.

That had lasted until they’d hunted down the demon.

Until they’d killed the demon.

Until the world that had been wrong was right again. And the history they shared rearranged itself in her head, in his head, redefining their relationship as she’d known it would but in ways she somehow, stupidly hadn’t seen coming. She’d been right—her relationship with Spike wasn’t at all what she’d thought it’d been. What Jonathan’s spell had molded it into. Somehow she hadn’t anticipated learning that all those amazing things Jonathan had done, those epic fights and brutal wins, had actually been *her* accomplishments. That she and Spike weren’t together and never had been because they hated each other. Truly, viscerally, mortal-enemies-wise. It was so obvious now. It should have been obvious then.

But it hadn’t been. And no matter how wrong she’d had it, the only thing Buffy could summon when thinking about that afternoon was a pang that she couldn’t have it back. That what she’d felt hadn’t been real, rather the byproduct of magic, like everything else. Including her breakup with Riley.

Except that felt real, even if Buffy tried to tell herself it wasn’t. The thought that it might have been another spell casualty hadn’t even occurred to her until Xander had brought it up in the first post-Jonathan unveiling Scooby meeting. That at least certain things that hadn’t made sense before made sense now, like why *The Phantom Menace* wasn’t actually any good—Jonathan had made it, therefore it couldn’t have been bad, but they’d all agreed it was bad anyway—and why Buffy and Riley hadn’t worked out. Never mind that their breakup had nothing to do with Jonathan and everything to do with what had happened with Faith before the stupid spell had even been set.

“But things would’ve gone differently if you’d had a conversation with the real Riley,” Xander had insisted. “Come on, Buff. Whatever happened then, it was because of the screwiness of the world. I’m still trying to wrap my head around being a Jar Jar Binks defender.”

The logic was there, kind of, if you squinted. And Buffy did feel she had lost something important—something big and...big. That could have been Riley. It would certainly be more convenient if it was Riley than if it were anyone else.

So here she was, on a date with Riley. Or not a date, just a touch base. A reconnection. A “remember when we broke up because of magic, how weird was that?” conversation that they were both trying to pretend wasn’t as awkward as it was. Or at least, Buffy was trying to pretend. She very much wanted it to not be awkward—to not be in Riley’s room near Riley’s bed where Riley had had his non-Buffy-Buffy sex and then rejected the idea that he had been a victim of sexual assault, and thinking about how stifled and trapped she felt in here compared to how free and cherished she’d felt...nowhere else specifically,

but at some other point in her life.

The basketball she'd accidentally slain during her last visit was still in the trash can. How was it that so little could have changed when the entire goddamn universe had changed?

"So," Riley said, leaning forward and placing his elbows on his knees. "Are we going to talk about this?"

"I never bought you a new basketball."

"That's not what I meant."

"I know." Buffy sighed, fidgeting, her skin hot and itchy, toying idly with her hands and looking anywhere but at him. "I just... I don't know what you want me to say."

"That you're sorry, for one? That's a good place to start."

She whipped her head up. "What? What do I have to be sorry for?"

Riley widened his eyes in a way that practically screamed, "You're joking, aren't you?" She in fact was not.

"Well, when you broke up with me, you kinda tore my heart out," he said. "You... I know what I did was... I know it hurt you. I didn't mean to, Buffy. That's the last thing I wanted to do. But you hurt me too."

"I know. I'm sorry. I just... It seemed like... At the time, it seemed right."

"Because you didn't like the way I refused to let you call me a victim."

Buffy shifted uneasily, that same sensation she'd experienced before—a sort of visceral discomfort, a wrongness she wanted very much to ignore—starting to spread all over again, only worse this time. When it had happened during their last conversation, the world had been broken, everything with it a possible casualty of that brokenness. But nothing was broken now. Nothing except her heart, and not for the right reasons.

"There's just you, Buffy. Always just been you."

She trembled and crossed her arms, cursing her stupid mind for being stupid and going back to places it shouldn't. Places it didn't belong—places it could never go again. The same places where she'd shoved the other things she didn't want to think about, such as the look Spike had given her the second the spell had shattered. How horrified he'd been, how ruined, and how quickly he'd made himself scarce. Not even sticking around to gloat, enjoy the fact that he'd gotten his mortal enemy to beg him to fuck her harder, to come apart on his cock and tongue and hands, to take him into her mouth and let him release down her throat just because she'd enjoyed the way he'd whispered her name. Spike, the walking innuendo, had taken off, and she'd been left with nothing but the awful knowledge that this thing she'd thought she might be fighting her way toward had been a mirage.

The Riley thing was just the poop icing on the shitty cake that was her life. And standing here, listening to him talk and feeling little more than the echo of past resentment, she realized something else.

She'd pursued Riley harder after the engagement spell—forced herself to throw in with a guy she'd previously only had mild interest in. The passion, the heat, the fire, everything she'd told Willow she was missing with Riley had been hers again for a few hours, and

the person she'd shared it with had scared the crap out of her. At the time, it had been easy enough to convince herself into believing the reason why was tied to the fact that it was *Spike* and *vampire* and *gross*, but she was now firmly in "fool me once" territory and didn't think that excuse would pass her inner bullshit test.

If losing what she'd thought she might have had with Spike hurt more than what she'd been trying to build with Riley, maybe it was time to listen to the instincts she'd done everything she could to ignore.

"That's it, isn't it?" Riley asked, prodding her out of her thoughts. "That I don't see what happened with Faith the same way you do."

"No, it's not that."

"Could've fooled me."

"It's how you see me," she said. "Or don't see me."

"What? What does that mean?"

"Riley." She released a deep breath. *If at first you don't succeed...* At least she'd tried, she guessed. At least she knew this was the right call. "I don't think this is going to work."



It went smoother the second time around.

Go figure.

At the very least, her friends didn't come at her with a bunch of appeals designed to make her rethink her decision. It probably helped that Buffy had thought more about the *why* behind the breakup—that she had more ammunition at the ready when the questions inevitably came. Things like the fact that even if Riley hadn't guessed exactly what was off the night he and Faith had knocked boots, he hadn't known her well enough to ask any questions. That by his own admission, Faith hadn't had to talk him into anything—something had been *off* and he'd been okay with that without further examination. And when Buffy had tried to give him the benefit of the doubt, Riley had reacted viscerally to the idea that he, a man, could be victimized by a woman, and what that said about his attitude overall. If she had to talk herself into a relationship, it probably wasn't one worth pursuing. After all, her life was destined to be short and violent. Why would she choose to spend what little time she had with someone who didn't make her feel *more*?

What more, they would ask, and that was the part she wouldn't be able to answer, because the only measurable *more* was what she'd felt in Spike's crypt. Or hell, all the fun she'd had tormenting him when he'd been Giles's chained tub hostage. Even that had been *more* fun than she had on any of her normal-girl dates with Riley. And yeah, she and Spike were not ever going to be a thing, but shouldn't she want something that excited her at least as much as trading blows with him did? Shouldn't she feel *that* alive?

Yes. Yes, she should. But this part she'd keep to herself. The others wouldn't understand.

She also should be thanking her lucky stars that the larger fallout of Jonathan's spell

didn't include fessing up to her friends just how close she and Spike had gotten during their brief partnership. In fact, Buffy was starting to think Spike had given up on the whole *get the chip out* thing and left Sunnydale behind. The first few patrols had been the worst, heading out just knowing she'd turn a corner and there he'd be, and she'd have to confront all the things done and said and experienced. Things that, despite her best efforts, she couldn't stop reliving. But he hadn't been there the first night, nor the one following, and by the time a week passed, she had officially stopped expecting him. It wasn't until another week was behind her that she began to wonder if he was even still in town—not enough to swing by his crypt and see for herself, though only because she wanted to avoid the scene of the crime. If Spike had bailed, that was good. Great, even. The best.

She could convince herself of that during the day when her brain was occupied by all things academia and Adam. Less so in the quiet hours when there was nothing but the silence to keep her company. When her defenses were at their weakest. And then she'd find herself thinking things like how much she'd enjoyed demon hunting with Spike, how they'd worked together seamlessly, how easy it had felt and how strange it was that anything with Spike could be easy, especially considering the whole lack-of-soul thing that he had going for him. But then the things he'd said, whispered, the way she'd felt when she'd wondered if maybe they had been something outside of the false world, and how that hadn't frightened her. Had, in fact, invigorated her because it had made a sort of sense that she couldn't explain, and even though everything had gone back to the way it was supposed to be, that *sense* remained. She couldn't unfeel what she'd felt or unthink what she'd thought, nor could she make those feelings or thoughts seem wrong.

All she could do was hope time made her see things the way she had before the spell. And maybe, if Spike stayed away and she was allowed to forget what had happened, she'd get what she wanted.

Or maybe he'd just wait until she no longer expected him to show up.

At her dorm.

When she was about to turn in for the night.

"Spike?" Buffy asked stupidly, wondering for a moment if she'd fallen asleep and into a very vivid dream. "What are you doing? And...here?"

For a long beat, he didn't say anything, just stared at her like he hadn't expected her to answer the door. Like she was the one who didn't belong. Then he seemed to collect himself, blinked and made a show of peeking into the room at her back. "Witch out for the evening?"

"Umm, yeah. She's been gone a lot recently." Buffy waited for a beat, her heart thumping so hard her chest rattled. "Did you need something?"

Spike met her eyes again and nodded. "Need you."

"What?"

"Need to talk to you," he amended in a rush. "About Adam."

"Adam?"

"Yeah. Wanker came to me today." He looked over his shoulder. "Care to let me in?"

Got info you'll want to have."

"I can't pay you for it."

"And that'd be a real problem if I were askin' for payment."

Buffy frowned, but her curiosity—and more than her curiosity, her suddenly very obvious *oh my god, I'm in trouble* thirst—was too great to not step aside. "Make it quick," she said as she closed the door, hoping the sound masked what was going on behind her ribcage. "I've had a long day and I could really use some sleep."

At that, Spike glanced pointedly at her bed. "That a fact?"

"Just talk."

He looked back at her, his expression annoyingly closed off. Not once in his life had Spike been unreadable. Not until this moment, right now, when she desperately needed to read him.

Jerk.

"It's like I said." He made a rolling gesture with his hand. "The science experiment gone wrong swung by today. Spoke a piece about his grand vision and that he aims to make you the lynchpin, and how he wagers the best way to do that is through yours truly."

Buffy went rigid. "Why? Why through you?"

Spike blinked like the answer should be obvious. "Because he knows about us."

"He knows about...us?"

"Well, yeah, everyone does." A beat and more blinking, then he rolled his eyes. "The bit about us being mortal enemies, pet. You need me to draw you a sodding diagram?"

Oh. Right. *That* us. The real 'us' as opposed to the 'us' they never had actually been. That made sense, even if it hurt. Whatever had happened between them had been so incidental Spike wasn't just trying to forget it—he *had* forgotten it. Consequence of a spell gone wonky, and never mind whatever else.

"So," Buffy said before clearing her throat, forcing herself to refocus, "Adam came to you to get the skinny on, what? How to take me out?"

"Something like that."

"Did you let him know I've kicked your ass every which way till Sunday every time we've fought?"

"No." Spike narrowed his eyes. "Stuck to the truth."

"Which is?"

"That you're good, yeah, but you're part of a package deal. Got your mates and all. Family who come to the rescue with an axe at just the right moment." He paused again. "And that most of the time, I get in my own way. Make plans and get bored waiting."

"I'm still not hearing why you're here."

"What, you don't want this information?"

"Why are you giving it to me in the first place? Isn't this exactly what you've been waiting for?" Buffy crossed her arms and narrowed her own eyes right back at him. "Hell, as wired in as Adam is, I wouldn't be surprised if he could help you with your little chip problem."

“He can. He already offered.”

“Then, again, I must ask, what the hell are you doing here telling me?”

For a moment, Spike seemed at a loss for words, just looked at her as though the answer were obvious and she was bound to stumble upon it if he gave her enough time. But he must have gotten bored waiting again, for he sighed and shook his head, a sound that was half groan, half growl rumbling through his throat.

“You really need me to spell it out?”

“Apparently yes.”

“You think I don’t know how this goes?” he retorted, scoffing. “You’re not someone that can be taken out by a two-bit Mary Shelley reject, doesn’t matter how bloody resourceful he is. And if it’s all the same to you, I don’t fancy being on the losing side just to have you stake me. So do with this what you will—believe it, forget it, share it with your super soldier and put together something that’ll save the day, the way you hero-types do. You know—”

“Riley? Why would I tell Riley?”

Spike seemed to lose steam at that, his face falling. “You two patched things up, didn’t you? Everything’s as right as sodding rain? Least that’s the way I heard it.”

“Well, you heard wrong.” Her heart started thumping again, harder than before. Hard enough to feel all the way down to her feet. “I... We’re not together.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, I... I talked to him. I said I’d do that. The talking. And I did. And it... Well, it was just break up part two, for realies this time.” Buffy licked her lips, took a hesitant step forward. “Where did you hear we were together?”

And that was it—whatever façade he’d come here wearing fell away, softening the hard lines of his face, rounding his eyes and loosening the tension in his shoulders. “Was in the neighborhood around his place the other night and saw you two looking cozy,” he muttered. “Wagered all was aces between you again.”

“I promise, it wasn’t cozy. It was...awkward. And the opposite of fun.” Though why she felt the need to promise, she didn’t know. Except there it was—a small thrum of what she could only call hope. “You...you thought I was back with Riley?”

Spike nodded, sucked in his cheeks. “Yeah.”

“And you... Is that why you haven’t been around?”

“Noticed that, did you?”

“Spike.”

Another beat. Then another. Then he nodded again. “Thought maybe I just needed to wait it out. Git bugged up once, was only a matter of time before he did again.”

“And in the meantime, if you’re Mr. Helpful...”

“Right. There’s a reason my plans never go right.” He raised his eyes back to hers, and as it so often did when she was with him, the world around her cracked. Not a lot, but enough. Enough that for perhaps the first time in her life, definitely the first time since becoming the Slayer, she saw something clearly and without pretense. Understood that she was at a precipice she hadn’t anticipated but discovered anyway—and there were two

ways to the bottom.

“Spike...”

A pained smile flashed across his face. “Fella’s gotta try, doesn’t he? Even if he knows he’s gonna lose.”

“But what if he doesn’t lose?”

“He always does, especially to this girl. This slayer. All the time. Every time.”

“You just said that was luck.”

“Big talk. The way a man pretends to be when he’s given away the only part of him left to give.” He slapped a hand over his chest, not looking away. “This part, pet. Last thing I have, and it’s yours to do with as you will.”

And it was. She saw that now. Saw everything.

“I think,” Buffy said softly, closing the final spaces between them, “I might have a use for it.” She placed her hand over his, holding his gaze, and kept holding until his face went blurry, and kissed him, ready when he moaned and melted into her, melting on her own right back.

Maybe it wouldn’t work, but maybe it would.

Stranger things had happened.