

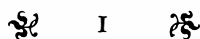
A LOVE LIKE OURS

A Spike/Buffy Romance



HOLLY DENISE





THE KISS MY LOVER BRINGS

HE REMEMBERED THE TASTE OF HER KISSES WELL. THE WAY THEY burned. Then there was the way she touched him, exploring his chest and arms, grasping his shoulders and cupping his cheeks, all as though memorizing him with her hands. As though attempting to imprint him on her skin so she could carry him with her whenever they were apart.

This was familiar—all of it. The way she kissed him, how she touched him, echoed back to the way she'd been under Willow's spell. Only difference was then, her lips had curled in a futile, however adorable attempt to keep from smiling. Even while under the delusion they were going to live merrily ever after, Buffy had kissed him like she wanted to consume him completely. As though she'd known all along their time was limited.

Buffy wasn't smiling now, but her mouth was more demanding than ever. She nipped at his lips, sucked at his tongue, pressed his face between her hands and whimpered when he pulled away so she could breathe.

The way she gasped against him—her brow pressed to his, her eyes closed—made the ground beneath him tremble. She was setting him on fire, but he didn't dust. The world was burning and he was burning with it; Buffy took everything he was and made it her own.

Then she was kissing him again, hot and fiery and desperate.

"Buffy," he murmured between drags of her mouth. As though saying her name would give the moment some grounding. Make it real.

She couldn't know what she was doing to him, could she? William the Bloody would be no more, done in at last by a slayer.

By *the* Slayer. By Buffy Summers.

The woman he loved.

"Taste so good," he went on before sucking her lower lip into his mouth. "My Buffy..."

She shook her head but didn't answer, just kissed him again. That was fine with him—he could talk enough for them both.

"Can't run from this." Spike pressed a line of kisses down her throat, something in him twisting when he felt her pulse jump. "You can't hide. I'm here, love. Let me in."

"No." This she said with some finality, using the grip she had on him to push him back. Not hard, but hard enough that the world around him—the very same one that had been on its way to becoming nothing more than background noise—solidified again. Hard and real, like everything else. The hustle and bustle of the Bronze, some tart up on stage singing sad ballads as his sad slayer tried to chase her sad away with him.

As he tried to let her.

Fuck. He doubted Buffy would understand, much less *believe* the pain she caused simply by turning away.

"Why do I keep doing this?" she asked, her voice low, but not so low that he couldn't hear. "Why?"

"You know why," Spike replied, in no mood to play nice or coy right now. The Slayer knew exactly why she kept coming to him—was beyond time that she grew the stones to admit as much. "You need it."

"I don't need *this*. *This* is—"

"Wrong," he finished for her, the familiar knife giving the familiar twist and all the familiar places flaring with pain. "I know, love. Sing me another one?"

"I just—you..." The fire in her eyes flickered and died. "Why is it you? Is there something...*wrong*...with me?"

"With you?" *That*, Spike could say, he hadn't expected, and he

bloody hated it. Fuck, the suggestion alone robbed his useless lungs of even more useless air, but he felt the rip anyway. And still, the devil on his shoulder whispered that if Buffy thought there was something wrong with her, she might not object to doing something wrong with *him*.

That was what all this amounted to, right? Her sense of right and wrong—or rather, her sense that he was wrong, no matter what he did or how he tried. If doing what he could to be right got him nowhere, why not try to make her wrong? Was easier to go down than up, as it was. All she had to do was fall a little.

For now, though, the devil went ignored. It so often did these days.

"There's *nothing* wrong with you," Spike insisted. "Nothing. All the wrong's with them."

"I can't feel anything," Buffy said, her face crumpling. "I can't... But when I'm... When I touch you..." She shuddered and twisted around. "There...there must be something so... I *feel*... But you can't..."

"You don't believe that."

"Spike—"

He inhaled and quickly sealed the space between them, seizing her wrist. "Look at me," he said thickly, lifting her hand to his face, his fingers stretching over hers. "Look at my eyes."

He half-expected her to jerk away. That was the way this song and dance went, after all. But she didn't. Instead, Buffy swallowed hard and obeyed, locking her gaze with his, startling him so much it took him a second to collect his thoughts. "Do you think I feel nothing?" he murmured. "Do you really think can I touch you without trembling? That I don't break every time you cry? Do you think it's bloody *easy* for me? It *kills* me."

Buffy stared at him, her expression unreadable.

"Do you really think I can't feel it when you ache? Tell me." He closed his fingers around hers and held, his jaw tightening as he fought to keep control. "Tell me I feel nothing."

She wanted to. He saw that quite clearly. Saw her fight to spit those words out—the same old song and dance. The road *much* traveled. She knew every turn. Every twist. Every crack. Every tiny imperfection. Every stop. Every bloody talking point. Buffy was a

master of this road. Buffy and her war against the love of a soulless man.

Even if he had given her something real. The kisses they'd shared since her return had seemingly demolished the friendship they'd been working toward. She hadn't run from him before Sweet and his merry band of Broadway demons seized Sunnyhell's vocals and made everyone warble over their innermost secrets. No more than she'd run from him after discovering to which lengths he was willing to go in order to protect her. To protect her and Dawn. Buffy had been friendly to him then. Accepting. Open.

She'd looked him in the eye and spoken to him the same way she spoke to her friends.

She'd made him feel like a man.

How was it only two glorious kisses could rip that away? Was he getting too close? *Had* he gotten too close? Perhaps she was seeing that he could be what she needed. He was the only one who could make her laugh these days—that much had definitely not escaped his attention. He was the only one she actively sought out...or he had been until he confessed it was killing him. Until that sodding chorus line wanker of the underworld decided to muck up his life by taking away the very thing which made getting up worthwhile.

Even if seeing Buffy everyday without touching her had been slowly doing him in, there was nothing he'd looked forward to more.

"Tell me I feel nothin'," Spike said again, more urgently now. "Tell me it didn't happen...seein' you lying in sunlight. So bloody far from me. From all of us. And I couldn't stop staring at you. I think... Fuck, I can't remember who dragged me away. Who pulled me... 'cause I would've dusted there. The sun was coming and you were gone."

"Spike..." She released a deep breath, trembling. "I know you feel. That's what scares me."

"Scares you?"

"You can feel and I can't." Tears crowded her eyes again. "I can't. But when I'm with you I can pretend."

He touched her cheek. "Pretending you feel this, then?"

"Different kind of feel," she replied with some of that wonderful, brassy attitude of hers. "The inside kind of feel. I know you have it. I

don't. And when I'm with you, I feel like maybe I can borrow it. What you feel. Make it mine."

Fuck, this was more than anything he'd ever thought he'd get from her, and he sure as fuck wasn't about to bugger it up now. Spike pressed his brow to hers, breathing her in. "All I have is yours. Take it."

"I can't. But...thank you."

He had no bloody idea for what she was thanking him, but he wasn't about to piss away the opportunity to hug her tightly. It was a once-in-a-lifetime thing; he knew it. Buffy might turn to him for passion and physical comfort, but hugs were above the physical. Hugs implied comfort on levels no one ever entrusted with him.

But she didn't pull back, rather sank into him.

"I was just..." she murmured into his shoulder, sniffing. "I was *so happy*."

"I know, kitten," Spike replied, resisting the urge to bury his face in her hair. "Could rip her insides out for what she did to you. And as much as I love railing against your mates, feel like I'd be a bastard if I didn't say somethin' to the effect of *she didn't mean it*."

Buffy pulled back, but only slightly. "What?" she demanded. "I thought... I thought *you* would... Aren't you mad?"

"Outraged," he agreed. "But she didn't know what she was—"

"I can't believe you! Of course she knew what she was doing! Tara said she... She thought about doing a spell to take my memory of Heaven away. Well, she did." Buffy laughed bitterly. "She took it and everything else away, and I was *happy*. I was happy *not* being me. I was happy being free to..." She met his eyes but looked away just as quickly, her cheeks reddening. "I was happy being someone else."

Understanding crashed over him. They weren't discussing the resurrection now—they were talking about what had happened tonight.

"Oh, *that* spell," Spike said, pulling her into his arms again before she could manage another inch away. "Sorry, love. Our Sabrina's been castin' all kinds of wonky mojo of late. It's a damn bitch keepin' up with which spell you're—"

"You thought I meant the resurrection."

Spike fell silent and he nodded. Buffy didn't try to wiggle away. He took comfort in this, if nothing else.

"I was happy tonight," she said again. "Everything was so... so *normal*. Didn't it feel like that to you? Like everything was *normal*?"

He offered a half-smile. "Not sure I know what normal feels like, love."

"You thought you were human."

"Don't hold it against me."

Buffy shook her head. "You said you didn't want to bite me."

Spike frowned, appropriately flustered. This wasn't the sort of thing he wanted blabbed around—the fact that he was so in love with the girl that even upon *forgetting* he was in love with her, he had no desire to be the vampire he once was.

"I don't," he said softly. "Not like... Not like that, anyway. I haven't for a long bloody time."

It was the truth, and he knew she knew it. That didn't mean he wasn't astonished when she nodded. But if her casual acceptance was surprising, what she said next absolutely floored him.

"I'm sorry."

"You're what?"

"You're the only person who's been decent to me since I got back. Who hasn't asked me how I'm doing every five seconds." A soft, sad smile nudged her lips. "I just... I'm so... God, Spike can you... I can't sleep 'cause they're worried. And they want me to tell them it's okay, that I understand and forgive them when all I wanna do is scream and cry and curse and demand how the *hell* they could've done this to me. After all I've done and sacrificed for them and they... They thought..." Fresh tears blinked in her eyes. "How could they think that?"

"Bugger if I know, pet. Always figured the lot of them to be rather thick."

Her eyes brightened like she might laugh, but she didn't. Her anger was too strong. "And then tonight..." Buffy shuddered, at last easing away from him. He missed her the second there was air between them, but he was sharp enough to know when she needed space. At least she wasn't running. "Willow... What she did... She *keeps* doing it. She keeps trying to fix everything. 'Whoops! Buffy's dead, let's bring

‘er back.’ And then when that doesn’t work as she planned, it’s all, ‘Better make sure she can’t remember how happy she was before I fucked it all up.’”

The harshness of her tone, not to mention the use of the word *fuck*—something Spike had never before heard her say—nearly made him fall over.

“And I *was* happy,” Buffy repeated. “For a few...for a little while tonight, even with the wigginess of not knowing who I was or—or you or any of—it didn’t matter. Nothing mattered because I didn’t have this *thing* on me. I could be a responsible sister. I could smile. I could even flirt with a vampire without it being a big thing.”

Spike managed a weak, hopeful smile. “Nothin’ stopping you now, love.”

“Do you have any idea how happy I’d be if it was that simple?”

“I can make it that simple.”

“Spike—”

“Let me make it that simple,” he said abruptly, before she could dismiss him. “Let me make it anything, pet.”

“It’s not on you to make.”

“But I could try. Do something.”

“Like what?”

“Bugger if I know, but I’ll do it. Told you I know a thing or two about torment. About Hell, even if I’ve never been there.” He paused, his brain scrambling, searching, needing words. The right words. Words that she’d hear and believe. “Live as long as I have and it’s a stretch to find somethin’ you haven’t done, yeah? Well, I know I’d prefer to be here than in some sodding hell dimension. And if I were chucked from here to there ’cause of people I loved, it’d brass me right off.”

God, that sounded weak even to him. He was trying too hard. No wonder he’d been a rubbish poet.

Still, though, Buffy spared him a grin, a full one this time, and the sight was so beautiful his knees about buckled. “So earth is your heaven, huh?”

“Course it is. It’s where you are.” Spike glanced down and released a long sigh. “And it kills me to see you hurting. I don’t know what to do

when I'm not touching you, Buffy. Especially now. But if this is—if being near me is makin' it hard on you... Makin' it..."

"Being around you isn't making anything hard on me," she replied.

"No?"

"Being *me* is hard on me. Being around anyone but you, for some reason, is even harder."

"But you don't want it to be me."

Buffy sighed, blinking tears out of her eyes. "I don't know what I want anymore. I..." Her voice broke again as she glanced around, as though only then realizing where they were, still under the stairs at the Bronze. The air was busy with noisy chatter and the soft tones of the singer on stage. They were surrounded by people. And yet, while no one was paying them much mind, he could tell she felt on display. He did a bit, himself.

And without preamble, he felt something hard crash in his chest. This was it, then. She would run off, bid him goodnight, and the next time she saw him this monumental thing they'd shared might as well have never happened. The openness. The honesty. She'd be back to pretending he was dirt beneath her boot. Like he was anything but the friend he wanted to be. The companion.

The lover.

God, if she'd only let him, he would make sure she knew she was the most cherished woman on earth.

"Do you wanna get out of here?" Buffy asked suddenly, knocking him for a six.

Spike blinked. "Yeah?"

She nodded, shifting her weight from one foot to another in such a manner that a dumber man would assume she was nervous. "Yeah," she replied. "I...I can't go home. Willow's there with the thousand apologies and I don't... I can't deal with that right now. I don't wanna stay here and I...I don't really want to be alone." Buffy met his eyes. "We could...patrol. Or...just, I dunno...walk? We could—"

"Sweetheart, is there a single scenario running through that head of yours which features me turning down spending time with you?"

"It might be Opposite Day." She smiled weakly. "I—uhh. But... don't, ummm...about the you and me and the kissage. It's... I'm still

kinda confused and... Well, confused sums it up nicely. So...could you not—”

Spike held up a hand. “Anything you ask. I’m yours to command.”

“Good,” she said, then froze. “I mean about the lack of pressure. Not the other thing.”

“Got it.”

Buffy licked her lips, making it impossible for his eyes to do anything but follow the movement, but thankfully she didn’t seem to notice. “You...wanna walk or patrol or—”

“Let’s grab some food.”

“Food?”

“Y’know...the stuff you eat?” Spike nodded at the door. “Know of some dives in this town that are surprisingly good.”

His luck was going to run out. Whatever had possessed the Slayer was certain to come back and seize her personality, warping her back into her detached, melancholy self. The version that turned down any semblance of help he had to offer. Buffy would never—

“Lead the way.”

Spike tried hard to keep his jaw from hitting the floor.

Never say never.

“Right then,” he said, seizing her hand without thought. She didn’t pull away. “Come on, then.”

Then he turned and was dragging her through the crowd. She kept close, her fingers tightening around his, holding onto him like he was her anchor.

And for the night—for the rest of their lives—he was determined to be just that.

DARK IS THE SKY

HE HAD STEPPED INTO SOMEONE ELSE'S LIFE. HE WAS NO LONGER Spike—he'd departed his body, his reputation, his story, and found himself plotted in a world where the rules he knew didn't apply anymore.

After all, there was no way Buffy would be at his side if he was still in his own life. No way her hand would be in his, their fingers entwined, their palms rubbing together.

"I want ice-cream," Buffy said.

No way she'd be making announcements like that.

Spike nodded as though they went for ice-cream all the time and this was not at all unusual. "The malt shop on the Square should still be open. Point of fact, all the bloody shops downtown have turned into regular demon hangs. Guess the wankers in this pissant town finally caught on that they'll have just as much clientele at night as—"

He cut off abruptly. Buffy was staring at him.

"What?" he asked, feeling at once very self-conscious.

"We're..." She pursed her lips. "Just like that?"

"Just like what?"

"I say what I want...and it's...no questions?"

Spike arched an eyebrow. "Don't tell me your mates would deny you sodding ice-cream."

"No, I..." Buffy fell silent a moment longer. "I guess I'm not used to my every action not being... I dunno, dissected. Ever since I got back, and god, even more so now. It's like everything I say I want to do comes with a Q&A, free of charge."

"They'd really grill you on why you want bloody soft-serve?"

She met his eyes and said in a flat deadpan, "We had a meeting after I said I wanted to order a pizza."

"Pull the other one."

"I think when I make a point to mention something I want or want to do, they interpret it as something that would make me happy. They're trying to figure out *what* it is that makes me happy about... whatever...so they can recreate it." She made a face. "So instead of just assuming that I'm hungry, they want to know *why* pizza and how exactly that will make my life better. And after I'm through playing Twenty Questions..."

"There's no fun to be had, if there was to begin with."

Buffy nodded. "Exactly."

Spike grinned and squeezed her hand, a small thrill racing down his spine when she didn't pull away. "Well, if it's all the same to you, I'm gonna assume you're in the mood for somethin' cold and sugary and leave it at that. Malt shop's this way."

The words might as well have been spoken in a different tongue for as well as he understood them. In his many fantasies concerning Buffy, he'd never assumed he would ever take her out on a normal date. One where he held her hand and opened doors for her and paid with money right from his pocket, like he was a normal bloke and she a normal girl.

Spike couldn't help but recall her reaction the first time he'd opened a door for her. The incident had, of course, precluded the unfortunate episode where he'd chained her up and threatened to feed her to his ex. It had also been the night he'd made his feelings known—the night they'd officially embarked on this bizarre journey together.

And bitch of a night as it had been, it had done its part to bring him here. To holding her hand and opening doors for her and guiding her to the counter of a normal restaurant.

"Name your pleasure, kitten," Spike said, nodding to the menu-wall and trying his damndest to keep his voice from betraying him.

"Are you going to get anything?"

The question took him by surprise. None of her little Scooby pals, aside from the Slayer's kid sister, ever offered him solid food. As it was, Spike hadn't had ice-cream since the fifties. He liked it well enough, but his affinity for human food typically leaned toward whatever was the spiciest or whatever provided the best texture for blood.

"Oh," Buffy said, tugging on his arm. "The Swirl and Curl looks good."

A blurb of laughter rolled off his lips. "Whatever you want, love."

"I meant for you."

"How you figure?"

"I dunno. You just seem to be a coconut kinda guy, I guess."

That she had spent any amount of time ascribing ice cream flavors to him had him puffing up more than it should. Still, there was the principle of the thing. "I'm not eating anything called swirl and curl."

Buffy rolled her eyes. "Oh please," she retorted. "Whatever bad-ass reputation you had has been completely destroyed. You know this."

"There are still limits."

"Pansy."

The look in her eyes was so wonderfully bright, he couldn't help but laugh. "Right," he said, puffing out his chest and stepping up to the counter, where some bite-sized teen not-so-patiently awaited their orders. "One—and I can't believe I'm gonna say this—Swirl and Curl. And whatever the lady wants."

Ten minutes later, they were seated at opposite ends of a rather cozy two-person booth, Spike warily inspecting his concoction of ice-cream, curled coconut flakes, and swirls of caramel with his spoon. Buffy hadn't waited. The second they claimed their seats, she'd dived headfirst into her chocolate monstrosity—a towering brownie fudge sundae topped with whipped cream and chocolate sauce—attacking it with gusto.

"No way you're eatin' all of that."

She perked a brow. "That a challenge or a statement?"

"It's as big as you are!"

"Yes, and I'm hungry." Buffy poked her tongue out at him before treating herself to another bite. Then, almost placidly, she lowered her spoon and folded her hands in her lap. "Thank you."

"For what, sweetness?"

"Noth—I dunno. For..." She licked her lips, heaving with a long sigh. "A lot?"

And just like that, he felt the shift. The change. The return to the not-so-pleasant but sorely needed words they'd traded under the stairs at the Bronze. There were things she needed to say, if only to speak her feelings this once. She was owed it. That and so much more.

"For the longest time, I felt like I was living in a nightmare, you know? Where everyone's wearing a mask and..." Buffy broke off, probing her brownie. "They want me to be so normal."

"You're not built for normal," Spike said. "You never were."

"You've told me that before."

"I stand by it."

Buffy nodded, though he wasn't sure if it was in agreement. For a long moment she said nothing at all. Just sat, her eyes drawn and detached.

"You're right," she whispered, and had he not been sitting, Spike would have fallen arse-backward on the floor. These weren't words the Slayer said often, and never to him. "I'm not," she went on. "And I haven't been for... I knew it. I knew it when I met with Angel."

Well, there was one way to kill his buzz.

Buffy, bless her, flushed pink. "Oh, I didn't—"

"Slayer—"

"It was boring. Really, really boring."

"You don't have to say—"

"I'm not just saying it."

He barked a dry chuckle. "Buffy, it's..." He couldn't quite force the words *all right* into the air, because it wasn't. And to him, with him, it never would be. But she had to know she didn't need to walk on eggshells around him. He wasn't fragile. He could stomach the details if it meant looking at her.

"I mean it. I was bored stiff. It was awkward and...and when the hell have I ever said something just to spare your feelings?"

Well, bugger. She had a point.

"You and I don't have that kind of relationship, Spike," Buffy said, softer. "The kind where we say things to be nice. And I don't know what I would do if we did. I count on you to be honest with me."

"I am," he said reflexively. As though it was the answer to a question.

She nodded. "When I say Angel was boring, I mean he was *boring*. The entire night was boring. It was awkward and forced and he kept checking his watch and he had no idea what to say to me. He ended up talking about his trip to Sri Lanka—because that's what you do when the love of your life dies, apparently. Take off to Sri Lanka. And when he wasn't talking about that, he was talking about Cordelia."

Spike blinked. "Angel and the cheerleader?"

"Apparently," Buffy agreed with a shrug, her eyes growing distant again. "But I did feel, in weird ways, like I stepped out of a fog. Talking with him brought me clarity. About him. About me. And it's so *stupid*. All of it. Him. My listening to him. The past three years..."

His heart was suddenly in his throat. "Slayer?"

"I keep listening to him. He called just to see how high I'd jump." A harsh laugh broke through her lips. "And I did. I jumped."

"Buffy—"

"Because we're not friends, right? We'll either hate or love each other." She shook her head. "We're so different now. Different people. Different worlds. I think in my mind I'd always thought we'd..." Buffy pursed her lips and glanced down. "But we won't. Because we're not. And I don't want that anymore. I stopped wanting it and I didn't know how or when... But..."

Spike drew in a breath and held it. He didn't know what to say—if there was anything to say. His mind was racing with both hope and incredulity, reminding him still that this wasn't really his life. No, his life had stopped the second their lips had parted at the Bronze. He was borrowing time. Any second now, Buffy would return to herself. Any second now, he was going to find himself staring at an empty chair with only a whiff of her scent to tell him she'd been there at all.

But Buffy didn't run. She sat. And slowly, she met his eyes.

"I only feel alive now," she whispered, "when you look at me."

Fuck.

Spike's throat tightened and his eyes grew misty. Something swelled within his chest, expanding and threatening to burst.

If Buffy was aware she was in the process of changing his universe, she made no sign of it. "You have such life," she continued. "And when you look at me, you fill me with it."

Somehow, he managed to find his voice. "And it scares you."

"Yes."

"Because it's me."

"Yes."

She offered no apologies, and he was glad for it. It just proved what she'd already promised—that no matter what, he would have her honesty.

"There are things you need to hear," Buffy said. "Things you won't like, but things you need to hear. Things *I* need to say. If this is something you really want to work toward—"

"It is," Spike insisted. "Christ, Slayer..."

"You're not gonna like it all."

"Try me." He tilted his head, studying her. "You're gonna tell me why it's so bad it's me, right? Is that it? The rot I won't like?"

"I don't wanna feel guilty every time I go to see you. You give me such...quiet, and..." She licked her lips, trembling. "All I can think about is how my friends would react if they knew you're what gives me that...because they won't understand. And then I don't think it matters because of what they've done to me." Buffy met his eyes. "And you've done so much *for* me."

He wanted so badly to talk just then but somehow managed to hold his tongue. This was her time to say what was needed. Everything else could wait.

"And I don't just mean last year," she continued. "With Glory. Tara told me what happened this summer. I...I think she was talking to fill the silence, but she eventually got onto the subject of you and everything that happened while I was...gone. Patrolling. Watching Dawn. And—"

"The promise," he said before he could help himself. "To protect her."

"You did."

"Not as well as—"

"You did more than they did," Buffy said firmly. "It's the sort of thing I knew but wanted to ignore."

Spike waited but pressed when she didn't clarify. "And now you don't?"

"Things are different." A significant pause. "You didn't know anything about yourself earlier tonight. And even though your slate was all blank, you were still... I dunno..."

"Yours?"

She flushed prettily, as though he'd said something which had never occurred to her. "Your instinct wasn't geared toward blood and violence. You were—"

"Yours," he said again. "Everything I am is yours, Buffy."

"And that terrifies me." She took a nervous bite of brownie, chewing slowly. "Angel tore my heart out. Not only that, he gave me a how-to guide on how to keep it from happening again. Normal boy. Pulse. Not allergic to sunlight. And I listened to him. First with Parker and again with Riley... Everything I've done since Angel left me has been to make him proud of me in some incredibly sick way. I wanted Angel's approval so much that I came *this close* to ditching Riley after I discovered he was a demon hunter, because that made him *not normal*." She rolled her eyes. "But after that, I tried. Really tried. I wanted it to be right with him."

"I noticed."

If she heard the edge in his voice, she didn't acknowledge it. Just went on. "There's a part of me detached from others. I really don't think... No, I *know* what you said about normal is true."

"You're not built for it."

She nodded. "No, I'm not. And Riley knew it. It's why he left. He knew I was just trying to make him my human Angel. And when I admitted to myself he never could be, I began pushing him away."

He winced, a slew of rather uncharitable thoughts barraging his head without warning. Things he wanted to say but knew he shouldn't. More than a century's worth of old pain—old but never dull or forgotten. That he'd ever feel sympathy for Captain Cardboard was a bitter

bloody pill to swallow, but here he was. After all, he knew intimately the futility of attempting to measure up to Angel the Magnificent.

Buffy wasn't talking to be cruel, though. She was just trying for honesty, and that he could respect, even if it smarted. As it was, though, she softened when she saw whatever was on his face, as though just then catching what it sounded like.

"I said there'd be things you didn't want to hear," she said with a dry smile.

And though he knew better, Spike couldn't help himself. "Nah. Love stories about how no man'll measure up to the big sod. Keep 'em comin'."

"That's not fair."

"Life never is."

"Spike, I'm trying to tell you—trying to work through things that I'm still figuring out. I've been fighting for this thing I've wanted ever since Angel left me. I kept fighting and kept plugging along, and I eventually forgot why it was so important. And I'm now seeing the things I thought I wanted are things I *haven't* wanted for a long time. God, my head hurts..."

Every fiber of his being screamed in protest, divided with the need to both comfort her and wring her neck. "I know what it's like," Spike said, tone a bit sharper than he'd intended. "I fought loving you with everything I am."

A flat, broken laugh bubbled off her lips. "Just what every girl wants to hear."

His nostrils flared. "You—"

"I just got through telling you that I don't... That I went to see Angel because you terrify me. You *terrify* me," Buffy whispered again, shaking now. "I thought maybe it was the vampire thing that made me feel close to you. The having-been-dead thing that we suddenly had in common. But it wasn't." She glanced down. "You'd been with me the night when Giles and Willow fought and that demon burst in. The one I drowned? But it was what happened on the porch with you that scared me. We didn't do anything... Of course you know that, but what you don't know is everything I'd tried to suppress suddenly didn't matter when you were there. I didn't have to plaster on a fake smile or

make myself care about things. When I'm with you I feel...*I feel*. Period. And that *terrifies* me. So when Angel called, I jumped on the chance to see if it was a vampire thing or a *you* thing." A pause. "And yes, I needed to see him for other reasons. Whatever we are to each other now doesn't matter—we were something once. He was *once* a big part of my life. He's not now. I went hoping that the dead feeling I carry with me would go away. It didn't. I got there and I wanted *you*." She inhaled sharply and met his eyes for real—met his eyes and held. "He didn't give me anything. It's just you, Spike."

The part of him overwhelmed by her confession and the part of him desperate to hold onto his frustration exploded into furious battle. His mind warred with his heart, wrestling over what she had said versus what he'd wanted to hear. The part where he brought her peace—where *only* he who brought her peace—that much was more than he could have ever wished. But it didn't take back the rest of what she'd said. The part where she didn't want it to be him; where the very idea that it could have been him had driven her away. Out of Sunnydale, even, and straight to the one vamp on this miserable planet Spike was determined to dust before he took his own final bow.

In the end, this was the sentiment that won out. It was more familiar and easier to trust. "Glad to be of service," he heard himself saying. "Just make sure to tip your waiter."

"It's not only that," she said, stricken, as though the words had been a slap. "God, I don't say anything right."

"It's a bloody dream come true," he continued, unable to stop himself. "You wanna hang around me 'cause of what I do for you. Told you, pet...point of fact, I think I *sang* it to you. I can't just be your sodding form of Ch'i. I love you. Being close to you without touching you—"

"I like you."

His jaw fell slack. Well, that stole the wind right out of his bloody sails.

"I like you, and that's... I'm trying to be okay with it." Buffy released a breath. "I'm trying to get over what I've been taught. I want to be okay with liking you."

At once, the blurred colors swarming around his eyes solidified

again, and the pain in his chest calmed into a warm, gentle rumble. Selfish desire still warred with the overwhelming need to be whatever she wanted. To make it easy as bloody pie for her to like him and be all kinds of okay with it. To mold himself, twist himself, perfect the things that made it hard for her and become the kind of man she could...

Only there were basic fundamentals he couldn't deny. He needed her to love all of him just as much as he loved all of her. And he knew then that whatever she was going through would be worth the wait. If they continued this—this soft conversation, this gentle understanding—even if it took fifty sodding years, the pay-off would be all the reward he'd ever need. Because he had his crumb. After so much, after so *bloody* much, he finally had his crumb.

Spike had to be fair; he'd had more than enough time to reconcile his nature with his feelings. He still recalled the morning after the life-changing dream—the panic and self-loathing, the chilling echo of Dru's *I told you so*. It had taken weeks to accept the weight of loving Buffy, and at some point, he'd stopped fighting it. He'd welcomed the change. He'd wanted to become something for her...and the desire hadn't stopped with her death.

It didn't stop now. He wanted to become a man she could love.

But he also wanted her to take him as he was.

God, he was a selfish prat.

"Spike?" Buffy whispered, her voice naked and vulnerable. "Say something?"

He glanced up, wiser. "I want it, too," he said.

"Want it?"

"I want you to be okay with liking me. Whatever it means. Whatever it takes." The words were ridiculously redundant but as heartfelt as they came. "I'm sorry, love. I shouldn't've snapped at you. You warned me, right? I just...I go a little batty when Angel's tossed in. Best you staple my lips together if you bring him up again. I don't wanna bollocks the chance of your liking me by flapping my trap."

Buffy giggled and his heart sang. "Well...I think I am."

"Huh's that?"

"Okay...with liking you. I think *I* am." That soft smile of hers would be his undoing. "Only...I'm not okay with being okay. Does that

make sense? There's this part of my brain that keeps screaming it's not right, even though the rest of me is very adamant on telling it to shut the hell up."

Spike grinned and glanced down. His ice-cream had melted.

"God," Buffy muttered. "Why do you bother with me? I'm a complete wreck."

"Join the bloody club, pet."

She snorted. "I think it's safe to say I have the market cornered on issue overload."

"Is that supposed to intimidate me?"

"It would most people."

He moved his hand before his mind could okay the action, settling over hers with gentle understanding. "Not most people, here. Not people at all."

She didn't say anything, didn't agree or tell him he was full of it. Just let him touch her hand.

Then she smiled.

There was no way any man could look into those emerald depths without losing his footing. He was holding her hand in public and she was smiling at him. *Smiling.*

Because she liked him.

He hoped to god the night wouldn't end here. He couldn't let her go just yet. Not when he felt they had only now found each other.

"I don't want to go home," she said.

Spike squeezed her hand. "You don't have to."

The tears that filled her eyes tore him to bits while simultaneously piecing the crucial parts of him back together. "Thank you," she whispered.

"I love you, Buffy. I don't think I've loved anyone but you in all my bloody life." He coughed and glanced down, suddenly self-conscious. "I don't expect anything. If you wanna crash at my crypt, you can. No pressure. I'll take the floor, even. You can stay as long as you want."

The second the offer rolled off his lips, he slumped and berated himself. Right. Tell the goddess of light to sleep in a tomb. Help her feel alive by taking her to the garden of the dead. He was a regular Dr. Phil.

“Let me call Dawn. She’ll wanna know what’s going on.”

It took a beat for the words to sink in. And when they did, she was already moving—rising to her feet to search out a payphone, but not before brushing a soft kiss across his lips. It was too brief to be passionate, too passionate to be chaste. It was unlike any kiss they’d ever shared.

It made him feel loved.

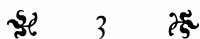
And it was all he could do to keep from dissolving when she turned away.

She’d given him more than a crumb. *Christ...*

He just didn’t know if she knew it. If she knew what she’d done. If she knew how much feeling went into something so simple.

Though for the way her eyes caught his as she raised the phone to her ear, something told him the significance was not lost on her.

And she was coming home with him tonight.



BRIGHT ARE THE STARS THAT SHINE

HE REMEMBERED HOW SHE'D LOOKED THE NIGHT AFTER HER resurrection. Her blank, lost expression, the distance in her eyes, and the way she seemed so at home in his crypt, so still and quiet. She'd sat in his rocker, looking at him numbly as though expecting him to make sense of what she was going through. And all he could do was babble endlessly. Tell her things he'd whispered to her headstone, never envisioning he'd have the chance to speak to her face.

That night, everything he'd wanted to say had poured out in an incoherent mess, hurried by the need to be heard before she remembered she was Buffy and that Buffy never hung out at his crypt. Even now, Spike didn't know if she recalled that night—or if she did, she probably hadn't retained what he'd said. Things had been so confused, so erratic. He'd been afraid she would disappear and the thought had been unbearable. Looking back now, even though naught but a few weeks had passed, Spike was astonished he'd made it through those first few days. Not out of depression—out of elation.

Even after she'd told him about Heaven, he couldn't be anything but thrilled that she was here. He ached for her, cried for her, paced the length of his crypt more times than he could count, and while he

would do anything to make her pain go away, he couldn't wish that she'd stayed dead.

He was too selfish. He needed Buffy here.

Tonight was so far removed from the first night she'd sat in his crypt. Well, the first night since her resurrection. He should come up with a clever abbreviation for the new era in which they'd entered. Forget *Before Christ* or *Anno Domini*. Spike's life was divided into clearly lined epochs—human, the Drusilla years, arriving at Sunnydale, the chip, and Buffy.

Buffy, however, was a lifetime in and of herself. There was pre-death and post-death. And now he was living in her afterlife. Close enough to touch her and afraid she would vanish if he tried.

Granted, if she hadn't run after he'd lost his temper, perhaps she wouldn't run at all.

A bloke could hope.

"Do you think we could get some light?" Buffy asked, nodding to the cream-colored candles that lined the far wall. "I'm not exactly built with superhuman eyesight."

Spike grinned, dipping his hand into his duster-pocket to retrieve his lighter. "That doesn't seem right."

"I know. I wonder if I can get an upgrade." She wrinkled her nose. "I don't suppose it's as easy as writing to your congressman."

He chuckled. "Draft a letter to the Powers?" he asked as he lit the candles along the edge.

"I think they owe me."

"We're agreed." Spike exhaled, pocketing the lighter but not immediately turning back to her. He was at a loss. The air between them was strained and awkward, now that they were here. He wasn't sure how to move forward.

"I...uhhh...I didn't bring any clothes with me," Buffy said uneasily. "For...umm...staying. I didn't think I'd...when I went the Bronze earlier..."

Spike closed his eyes. She was chickening out already. He couldn't say he was surprised, but it didn't make the disappointment any less crushing. "I got stuff you can wear," he replied, hoping he didn't actually sound as desperate as he did in his head. "Tees and the like."

"Stuff you stole from my basement last year?"

He turned around at last, surprised and relieved at the teasing in her voice. And yet, though he knew she'd asked to lighten the mood, his answer was anything but playful. "Sorry, love," he replied softly. "I... uhhh...I gave it all back."

Buffy blinked. "You what?"

"All your stuff. The sweater. The frilly little camisoles. Fuck, even the photos I lifted. Everything...everything." He paused, catching himself. That wasn't entirely true. There was one photo he'd kept. Only one. And he carried it with him wherever he went, even now. A reminder of what his carelessness had cost him. Cost Dawn. Cost the world.

"I couldn't...the reminder was too much," he heard himself saying. "What I did. What I didn't do. The things I could've done. Knowing I wouldn't...that you'd never be here..."

"I'm here," Buffy said softly.

Spike nodded in a daze, not quite hearing her. "Yeah. But you weren't all summer. And I couldn't... I visited you every night, though. Every bloody night. Told you stupid things. Rambled on for ages. Brought you flowers, but they all..."

The air smelled of tears. God, he was such a prat. He had the woman he loved in his home and within five minutes he'd already made her cry.

"Spike..."

"I shouldn't talk about—"

"No, it's okay." Buffy stepped forward, a hand halfway raised. "I... God, I'm sorry."

"What?"

"For a lot of things. I haven't exactly been nice to you." She scrunched her nose. "Though I still think I was within my right to be of the wigged with the way you declared your love for me."

He couldn't help it; he grinned. A sheepish grin, but a grin nonetheless. "Least it was memorable."

"That's one word for it." The smile on her face was the sort that could bring about the fall of empires. She held so much power in her small hands—power beyond what the world had given her—and she

didn't know it.

"I do have some tees," he said again. "Nothing fancy or what all, but...if you want 'em, they're yours."

"Sounds perfect."

Spike swallowed hard and drank her in greedily. The air between them strained.

"You...uhh...want some nosh?" Stupid question, he knew, seeing as he'd just watched her devour her weight in chocolate, but he needed to keep speaking. "I don't have much. Just stuff I got after the last time you were here. Figured you'd want more than spirits."

She laughed and nodded. "I *still* have a hangover from that one drinkfest with you. I don't think I'll be touching alcohol again until I'm eighty-seven."

"Yeah, well. The lesson is to learn to hold it."

"I hold it just fine, thank you!" An adorable pout crossed her lips. "Just in...moderation."

"Well, until you learn how to *moderate*, then, I have some crisps. Oh, and a coffeemaker I lif—err, bought earlier this week."

The narrowing of her eyes let him know, in no uncertain terms, he was busted.

"Stealing is wrong," she said.

"So the Good Book says."

She smirked. "Cute."

"I try my best." He paused and motioned toward the fridge. "Fancy some crisps?"

"To wash down my brownie sundae? Do you have any real food?"

"I'll get some." Anything to keep her smiling. "I'll get anything you want."

"And pay with actual money?" Buffy retorted, circling his coffee table to pop into his recliner. "I'd hate to have to bail you out of jail. That'd just be awkward. And they'd ask all kinds of questions. Like why you look like the living dead under certain lighting and how they couldn't find a pulse for the polygraph."

Spike snorted, his tension slowly easing. "They'll make me take a lie detector test for lifting food and appliances?"

"Of course," Buffy agreed. "In this town, petty theft is the only thing the police department *doesn't* turn a blind eye to."

"Dunno, pet. I like to think I've gotten good at petty theft. I've been at it for a while."

"You must be getting more comfortable if you're making open admissions like that."

Spike glanced up, his hand curled around the handle of his fridge. Her eyes twinkled at him over the headrest of his recliner. Christ, this felt good. Natural. Calm. Easy. And yet, the rush was still there. The fire. The whispers of what bubbled beneath the surface of their easy conversation. With as light as things were now, it could snap in a blink. The tension hadn't gone anywhere—it was merely waiting to be ignited.

"I'm getting used to the idea that you're not gonna kick me in the head and rush home, yeah."

Buffy made a face. "Have I actually kicked you in the head before?"

"Dunno," he replied easily, turning his attention to his meager provisions. "Sounds like somethin' you'd do."

A quick perusal of the refrigerator confirmed what he already knew—there was nothing to give her aside from blood, hooch, and junk food. He desperately needed lessons in the culinary desires of human women. It was something he'd never before needed to consider, but now he was fascinated with the subject—fascinated with every aspect of her everyday needs.

Water. Bread. Fruits. Veggies. Soda pop. Lunch meat. Snack foods. Condiments. Napkins. Paper plates. Plastic spoons. He'd need a place to keep his Buffy-friendly food. A cabinet? A cupboard? Perhaps he should look into moving someplace somewhat respectable, but he liked his crypt too much. He was reasonably certain he couldn't keep *everything* fresh by sticking it in the fridge.

Or maybe he could. What the bloody hell did he know?

"We can get other things," Spike said absently, drawing out a gallon-jug of milk and slamming the refrigerator door shut. He checked the expiration date and released a long sigh. At least he'd gotten that much right. "You can jot down some things you want and I'll make sure we have 'em in stock, yeah? And..."

The words caught up with him a second too late.

He was asking Buffy for a grocery list.

He was asking her to make his home her home as well. He was asking her...and Christ, how he wanted it. It was insane and it would never happen—this pipe-dream involving him, Buffy, a bed, and a cozy little crypt for two—but it didn't stop the fantasy, daft as it was.

He grinned at himself. Love's bitch, through and through. That seemed to be the sort of thing she'd notice and tease him mercilessly about.

However, when he glanced up, she wasn't smiling.

She was crying.

The bottom of his stomach fell out. "Buffy?"

Her shoulders shook. There was a quick jerk of her head, and he saw she had a worn piece of paper in her hand—one that looked more familiar than he was comfortable with.

"Bugger," Spike murmured, all thought of food forgotten. He shoved the milk back into the fridge and kicked it closed on instinct, then rounded around the nook and jerking to a halt in front of her. She still hadn't looked up. The page was wrinkled and the tear-smeared ink bled together, but the words were legible. He knew, for every time his eyes had fallen upon the verses, a part of him had snapped clean in half.

He'd never meant for Buffy to see it. What a damn fool thing to leave around the crypt. How could he be so careless?

"Buffy—"

She held up her left hand, clutching the poem like a lifeline in the other. "Is this for me?"

"Uhh, yeah. 'Spect so. Was thinkin' of you when I wrote it."

She shot her head up. "You wrote this?" she demanded. "You...*you* wrote this?"

A weak smile tugged on his lips. "Is it so hard to believe?"

Buffy didn't answer. Her face crumbled in a fresh onslaught of tears. "Oh Spike..." She trembled, and he wanted to go to her but didn't dare. An invisible line had sprung up between them. "Have...has anyone seen this?"

He swallowed hard. "I read it."

“Read it?”

“Willow... She said you’d want me to say something. Was just bein’ nice, I reckon. Tryin’ to give me somethin’ to do. But it stuck, her tellin’ me that, so I wrote it. I wrote *you*. Wrote you as best I could.” Spike forced his eyes away from the paper in her hand. “Read it at the funeral.”

“Spike...”

“I know it’s no good—”

“No good? Spike, this is the most...” Christ, she was crying in earnest now. Hot tears scaling down her perfect cheeks, her eyes shimmering, her breaths hard and erratic. “This is the most... I can’t even tell you...”

There was nothing to say. He was staring at her and she was staring back, her face wet with tears. She looked at him like she’d never before quite seen him until this minute. And that felt right, that thought.

Buffy finally knew him.

Was fitting in a way. The last woman he loved who’d read his poetry had ripped his heart out but here, the Slayer was giving it back.

“Can I have this?” Buffy whispered, clutching the paper to her breast. “Or can you at least write it down for me so I can—”

“It’s yours.”

She blinked. “You’re sure?”

“I wrote it for you, Buffy. It was never mine.”

“They’re your words.”

“And I know them by heart. I’ll know them till the sun goes out for good.” Spike smiled, relieved but not entirely mollified when she folded and tucked the poem into her back pocket. It remained between them.

The air was thick enough to suffocate a dead man.

“Dance with me,” he said suddenly, needing something—anything—to drag her attention away from his words. Perhaps later he wouldn’t feel so naked, so exposed. Perhaps later it would hit him that Buffy had wept over the verses because she felt the love he’d given her. Perhaps. But poetry and William the Bloody Awful Poet walked a fine line between humiliation and despair, and neither party was one he wanted to attend.

"There's no music," Buffy replied, every inch of her shaking.

"I'll get music."

There were blokes, he wagered, who could offer her more. Loads more. Sunlit walks on the beach. A house filled with noisy little tykes. A guarantee to never again do his shopping by means of the five-fingered discount. He pictured stereos and candlelight, perhaps rose petals and bottles of wine on ice. All the things she should have; nice things. Respectable things. Whereas Spike, in stark contrast, had nothing in his crypt to offer but whiskey, milk, crisps, a T-shirt, his bed, and a rusty old boom-box he'd lifted from the junkyard eons ago.

It was good for a few things. Spike liked music and Clem liked making mixed tapes. The random selection of tunes did its best to keep the crypt from feeling even more like a tomb.

A small grin tugged on Spike's lips. Plus, there was that one time he and the Buffybot had shagged to AC/DC's "You Shook Me All Night Long." Oh yes. Music had its uses.

And right now, he wanted to make her laugh. Anything to stop her from crying.

His nerves strung out and his heart on the line, he popped in a CD and turned to face her, holding out a hand. "Dance with me," he whispered again.

It happened before she could reply: the crypt burst out with a clash of woodwinds and percussion, startling her so much with both the volume and the tenor, she at first jumped, then dissolved into giggles.

Spike smirked. That was more like it.

"You wanna dance to *this*?" she asked, taking his hand.

Girl, to be with you is my fav'rite thing

Uh huh

And I can't wait 'til I see you again

Yeah, yeah

"Don't have a choice now," he agreed, hooking an arm around her waist. "It's in the sodding song."

I want to put on my my my my my

Boogie shoes
Just to boogie with you, yeah
I want to put on my my my my my
Boogie shoes
Just to boogie with you, uh huh

He'd told her once that dancing was all they'd ever done, and god how he stood by it. They danced when they argued, when their bodies were set in the motion of a fight. When their eyes locked across a crowded room and when her lips brushed his. There wasn't a time in all their years in which they hadn't danced together in one fashion or another. To have her in his arms now, actually dancing with her, was a sensation beyond all sensations.

It'd been so long since he'd truly danced.

I want to do it 'til the sun comes up
Uh huh
And I want to do it 'til
I can't get enough
Yeah, yeah

Spike grinned and dipped her, relishing her surprised giggle. Drinking it up like water.

I want to put on my my my my my
Boogie shoes
Just to boogie with you, uh huh
I want to put on my my my my my
Boogie shoes
Just to boogie with you.

"This doesn't strike me as a Spike song," she said, earning herself another dip.

"Spike has many songs," he retorted. "Live as long as Spike's lived, you've seen many bloody trends."

"I thought you'd've skipped the seventies."

Uh huh, yeah yeah

I want to put on my my my my my

Boogie shoes

Just to boogie with you, yeah

“Oil! Loads of good music came outta the seventies.”

“This one of them?”

“It’s catchy!”

I want to put on my my my my my

Boogie shoes

Just to boogie with you, yeah

Buffy spun out of his arms as the music died. Over the course of the song, her tears had gone from sad to happy—the sort of happy that came from deep belly laughs. And the sight was so fucking gorgeous the floor nearly vanished beneath his feet. He’d never seen her laugh like this. He’d never really seen her laugh, full stop. Not with him. Not when they were alone.

And then the tone changed completely. Something else filled the air—something that was the bloody opposite of KC and the Sunshine Band.

The long and winding road

That leads to your door

Will never disappear

I’ve seen that road before

It always leads me here

Lead me to your door

The smile melted from Buffy’s face, which would have destroyed him had her eyes not remained open and hopeful. He could see her mind, turning, twisting, and arriving at a destination before he could blink. And the next thing he knew, she was in his arms again. Like at the Bronze, like they’d been under the stairs. Not kissing him—not torturing him with that masterful mouth of hers—rather just holding

him. Her body hot and thriving with life, molded perfectly against him. Holding him.

*The wild and windy night
That the rain washed away
Has left a pool of tears
Crying for the day
Why leave me standing here
Let me know the way
Many times I've been alone
And many times I've cried
Anyway, you'll never know
The many ways I've tried*

"This is a very strange mix," Buffy said softly, moving against him in a way that had to be deliberate. A touch here, a stroke there, an artful swirl of her hips that brought their bodies together in ways he'd previously only experienced in dreams. She felt him, hard against her—she had to, and she kept moving like that. It took every ounce of his restraint to keep from throwing her against the nearest surface.

*But still they lead me back
To the long winding road
You left me standing here
A long, long time ago
Don't leave me waiting here
Lead me to your door*

"I'm...I'm a strange bloke," he replied belatedly, digging his fingers into her hips, terrified she'd drift into nothingness if he so much as blinked.

*But still they lead me back
To the long winding road
You left me standing here
A long long time ago*

Don't leave me waiting here

Lead me to your door

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah

"I'm seeing that."

The warmth of her lips was soon on his own. The curve of her smile. The hint of chocolate, and then God, her tongue. She swallowed him, devoured him, held him to her as her mouth opened and welcomed him inside. And Spike was a goner. A complete and utter goner. He moaned and melted into her, distantly aware that it was supposed to be the other way around but not giving a wretched damn as long as she kept kissing him. She had him inebriated, lost, his hands melded to her hips and her arms locked around his neck. Then, after it occurred to him once and for all that she wasn't running, he felt it safe at last to hold her as he'd wanted all night.

This kiss was unlike any they'd ever shared. The desperation from the Bronze had dissipated. There were no tears, no despair, no heartache. But she was memorizing him again. Imprinting him on her skin. Taking him inside her mouth, licking his tongue and setting him so aflame it was a wonder he could feel at all. His nerves were buzzing and her fingers were in his hair, rubbing his cheeks, exploring his throat, yet she didn't stop kissing him. She would breathe and kiss him. Sigh and kiss him. Murmur and kiss him. Moan and kiss him. Her brow nudged his when their lips weren't fused, her eyes closed, and unlike before, every bit of it was warm.

"Spike," she murmured, moving her hips in a way that had to be unintentional. Oh god, to think she might be doing that on purpose... "Spike..."

No one had ever said his name like that. It was, hands down, the sexiest thing he'd ever heard.

He knew what he wanted. He wanted her downstairs, naked and beneath him. Wanted her eyes focused on him. Wanted her breasts in his hands and her nipples between his fingers. Wanted her throat loved into a blush-red from his mouth. Wanted to pepper kisses down her stomach and bury his face between her thighs, lick her up until she became so unwound it would take centuries to piece her back together.

Wanted to sink inside her, watch her eyes as he fucked her. Wanted to hold her as she spasmed and drenched him, all the while whispering his love for her into her hair, hoping his body conveyed what he'd been telling her for what felt like lifetimes.

He wanted to make her feel like the goddess she was.

But Buffy had set the rules tonight, and he wasn't going to be the one to change them. As much as he craved her, if all she wanted were kisses, he wouldn't be a prat and push her for more.

He didn't just want sex. He wanted to love her.

"Spike," she whispered again, batting her eyes open. "Unh..."

The CD player had long made the switch to track three. Neither was paying attention anymore.

"Slayer?"

"You...ummm...you don't have to sleep on the floor. If you don't want." She took that succulent lower lip he'd been nibbling on just seconds ago and worried it with her teeth. "I don't... I'm not ready for the next thing, but I wouldn't mind sharing the bed."

He had two choices: fall to his knees or kiss her breathless.

He went with the latter.

After all, in this world or in any other, there simply would never be enough kissing her.

THIS LOVE OF MINE

SPIKE HAD IMAGINED GETTING BUFFY IN HIS BED MORE TIMES THAN he could fathom, but never had it been like this. With her just lying beside him, fanning him with her sweet breaths, filling his ears with the reassuring cadence of her beating heart. Yes, there was more he wanted—always would be—but this was the part of Buffy he'd hoped to touch all along. And here he was.

Not that his mind wasn't on overload entertaining very naughty images. God, he was only a man, and she was the woman he loved. But his own needs were on hold—unimportant. He'd made her a promise and he was damn well determined to keep it. This was about being a friend. A listener. Being anything she needed.

He wanted to do this right by her so badly.

Judging by where he was now, he must be doing something right. Buffy hadn't fled and he hadn't awakened alone. He was on his back, two pillows propped under his head, and Buffy was in his arms, her cheek was pressed against his shoulder, her left leg draped over his right, her body molding into his as though she wanted to crawl up inside him. As though she hadn't already.

For his part, Spike had an arm around her waist, and his other hand kept debating whether or not to cover hers where it rested on his

chest. He was fairly certain she hadn't meant to snuggle up to him in her sleep and, while he was far from unhappy about it, he worried about how she would react when she awoke.

He didn't think she would accuse him of taking advantage. If anything, last night had eased his worries that the wrong word would remind her that she was Buffy and he was Spike and Buffy didn't cuddle soulless Big Bads. Their relationship couldn't progress as he wanted if he kept treating her like an active minefield. That didn't mean they couldn't meet somewhere in the middle. In order to keep from treating her like said minefield, she needed to stop acting like one.

Last night she had. And while Spike wasn't naive enough to think the morning sun wouldn't chase that away, he found he was optimistic. Her eyes had been clearer last night than he'd seen since her return. She'd looked more like herself.

She'd laughed as he spun her around his crypt.

She'd been happy.

Now she was asleep and in his arms, wearing his T-shirt and nothing else, save the white cotton panties he'd spied as she'd crawled into his bed. And Christ, he was fortunate she'd already noticed his erection and decided to blush but otherwise ignore it. The damn thing had refused to deflate when they moved their snogging session downstairs, long after her lips had parted from his. He'd donned a pair of sweats to serve as pajamas, and though he'd been slightly bewildered to discover he actually owned sweats, he wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. He truly hadn't been looking forward to sleeping in jeans.

Of course, sweats had their downside. Much harder to hide a stiffy, for one thing, though he hadn't minded the way Buffy had stared at his crotch before turning a cute shade of pink and wiggling under the covers.

The fact that Spike had gotten any kip at all surprised him. He'd settled into bed beside her, drowning in her scent and with her taste in his mouth, convinced that sleep would be impossible. He'd been wrong. The second his head hit the pillow, he was out cold. Emotionally exhausted, physically drained, but somehow more at peace than

he'd had been in months. Instead of awkward and new, falling asleep with Buffy at his side had felt natural. Like they did this always. As though every night up until this one, he'd just been waiting for her to come home.

Spike sighed, brushing the hair out of her face with his free hand, unable to keep from stealing a kiss off her brow. "Let me keep you," he whispered into her hair.

Buffy murmured and shifted at that, but didn't open her eyes. And god, the feel of her moving against him, so innocent in her intent, damn near unmade him.

That was until she whispered something unintelligible and stirred again, only this time with the result of the hand at his chest slipping down his abdomen and not stopping until she reached his cotton-clad penis.

Because the Powers had a bloody rotten sense of humor. A curse rolled off his lips. "Bugger."

It took all the willpower in this sodding universe and the next to take her by the wrist and lift her soft, blissfully hand off his rapidly swelling cock. Just as it took all the willpower in this universe and the next to keep from thrusting up until he was cradled in the tender heat of her palm.

He didn't. He was good. Molesting Buffy in her sleep, or letting her molest him, was definitely on the blacker side of the gray area around them.

That was all well and good for his head. His cock, however, had been caressed by the woman he craved beyond craving. By the woman he loved. His cock didn't care that she'd been asleep at the time. His cock just wanted.

And of sodding course, his traitor brain chose that moment to assault him with lavish images, aided by the fact that he still had her taste in his mouth. Bugger. His erection wasn't going anywhere. It never did around Buffy. With her lying against him, breathing softly and flooding his nostrils with her scent, he was a bloody goner.

Better take care of his stiffy now, before she awoke. While he didn't think she'd kick him in the head and make for the door, that wasn't a chance he was willing to take. After all, what seemed brilliant before

bed was often unmasked as barmy after a good night's rest—could be she'd take one look at him and revert to form.

Thus with a long sigh, Spike carefully extracted himself from Buffy's arms, sat up and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. Then he glared at his cock, which strained unrepentantly against his cotton sweats.

"You ruin this for me..." he said sharply, rolling his shoulders with a long groan. "Lady told us, didn't she? Hands off. Give her what she needs."

The tented fabric stared at him. Every inch of his body strained with want.

"Right," Spike continued before exhaling. "No matter. She saw it last night, yeah? Didn't make her run. I'll take care of it. I'll..."

The mattress dipped and whined under the pressure of sudden movement. Buffy was awake.

Of course she was awake. He was speaking rather loudly.

"Spike?" came her voice, rough with sleep. The sound lightened his heart. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, pet. Not a blessed thing." He glanced over his shoulder but avoided meeting her eyes. "Go back to sleep."

Spike didn't really expect her to listen to him. It would've been a first, after all. Tell Buffy to do something and she always did the opposite.

Case in point. The minx threw her arms over her head and yawned. "What time is it?" she asked, and out of his periphery, he saw her stretch, the fabric of his tee riding up her skin. What he couldn't see his mind filled in, doing nothing to ease his erection.

"Early. No need to get up just yet."

"I'm awake," she replied, somewhat apologetic. "Side-effect of being a single-big-sis-parent." She paused. "What are your plans for the day?"

Spike perked an eyebrow. That sounded promising. "Not exactly one for makin' plans. I'm more of a go-with-the-flow sorta bloke."

"I guess that's true. Kinda funny picturing you making a to-do list." The air burst with a sweet, musical giggle. "And now I'm picturing it."

He chuckled and ran a hand through his hair. "Yeah. What's it got? Things like 'get blood,' 'pick up smokes,' 'do something evil'?"

"Pretty much. It's all cute, your little list of evilness."

"Don't think anyone's ever called me cute before."

"I didn't call you cute. Just this imaginary list I've made up." Buffy sat up on her knees and began inching toward him. "Are you going somewhere?"

Spike shot another futile glare to his cock, which did little more than twitch in reaction. Then her hand was on his naked shoulder and it was all he could do to keep his moan from escaping. "No," he replied shortly. "No. Just... Ahhh, Slayer, you better not—"

But it was too late. She'd seen it. Her breath drew up sharply and the hand on his shoulder went rigid. "Ohhh..." she said, her voice a breathy little sigh.

"Buffy, I didn't—"

"No. No, it's okay."

Any other time, he would have laughed himself silly at the notion of anyone giving him permission to sport a stiffy. But this wasn't any other time, and Buffy most certainly wasn't just anyone. She was his sodding everything and she was touching him.

"I'm not good to be around," Spike warned. It was the courteous thing to do. "Not...not when you..."

"It's okay," she whispered again. And then he felt her lips whispering against his throat, her nails ever-so-gently etching a path down his back and around his side. In seconds, her hand was pressed to his belly, making a fast-track southward.

Spike swallowed hard, sirens in his head ignited in a brilliant blaze. "Buffy? What...what are..."

She wasn't coy. She didn't tease. Her fingers encountered the waistband of his sweatpants and slipped beneath them without ceremony. And then she was touching him, her hot hand wrapping around his cock with a cautious tenderness that set his body aflame. She was suddenly everywhere, her breasts pressed against his back, her legs splayed on either side of his. She had his cock in his hand and was exploring him slowly, gently, stroking the hard length of him so slowly he wondered for a minute if she was truly aware of what she was doing.

“Oh god...”

“Is this what you need?” she whispered. He wondered maniacally if it was a trick question—as it was, his lungs had forgotten they didn’t actually serve a purpose and were ingesting oxygen so fast it was a miracle he didn’t choke. “I’ll give you what you need.”

It was the sort of thing every bloke lived to hear, and his Id roared in victory. But there was another voice—a louder one. The one that had conquered the devil last night—the one he was determined to keep in control. The voice of the man rather than the monster. The man who loved her.

“Not...*fuck*...what you need...oh, such a hot...little hand...” He hissed and threw his head back as her fingertips skimmed the underside of his erection, her other hand coming into play. She had her arms completely around him now, and both hands were in his pants, one wrapped around his cock, the other dropping to explore his balls, and every bloody nerve was on sensation overload.

Then she started peppering his neck with kisses again and the world about came apart.

“This is what I need,” she said into his skin.

“Buffy...”

“I need it.” She tugged her left arm away, which would have made him whimper had she not curled around his front. He barely had time to register it, the feel of her hair against his belly, before she’d sucked the swollen head of his erection between her lips with a low hum.

“Fuck!” He went on autopilot, weaving his hands through her hair to drawing it out of her face as he thrust upward, demanding more. Needing more. More of her. More of her mouth. She was so hot—Christ, she was going to burn him up. He was going to dust here with Buffy’s mouth around his prick, and hell, he didn’t care. It was the best bloody way to go.

“So hot. So hot,” he gasped, arching up. She was rich, molten perfection, her tongue swirling, laving him as she drew him in deeper, god deeper, until he brushed the soft back of her throat. “Buffy—god yes. Just like that...ahhh...”

She murmured, and the vibrations of her mouth sent electric shivers through his body.

Then she contracted her throat muscles around him and sucked hard when he hissed and bucked, his grip on her hair tightening. "Buffy! Oh Buffy. So good. So bloody good. Love this. Love you. Love your mouth. Buffy..."

She released him with a wet plop, rubbing her cheek along his length before taking him into her hand again. "Wow," she said. "Either I'm really good or you've just not had any in a long time."

Spike laughed, gently coaxing her head upward so he could see her eyes. The urge was there, deep and primal, to shove her back down and buck until he spilled down her throat, but he wanted something else, their first time together. If that was what this was. *Let that be what this was.* "You're amazing," he whispered, then kissed her. "So amazing."

"Nuh-uh," she replied, flushing.

Needing more, Spike dragged his lips across her cheek and over her brow. Buffy drew up, her eyes heavy with intent. She began inching backward where they'd lain before. And Spike followed, hopeless to do anything else. Every time her mouth slipped from reach, he reclaimed it with fervor.

It occurred to him out of nowhere that this wasn't a dream. The flesh he was stroking was truly Buffy's flesh. The mouth he kissed was truly Buffy's mouth. The hand pumping his cock was truly Buffy's hand. He had her in his bed and she was devouring him—starved, ravenous, and painstakingly open. Her mouth. Her hands. Her body. The heat of her burned his nostrils and drained his throat. He could taste how wet she was, knew that if he slipped a hand between her legs, she'd drench him. Fuck, she made it so bloody hard to remember to be good. Was he still supposed to be good? She hadn't announced a change in the rules and open invitation as sucking his cock might be, Spike had gotten this far by letting her define the relationship. Even now with Buffy under him, welcoming him between her legs, with his lips exploring her face as she stroked his erection, all shots were hers to call. He wasn't about to bugger it up.

Didn't mean he couldn't ask.

"Buffy?" Spike murmured, dragging his lips from her skin. "What are we doing?"

"I'm seducing you."

He released a nervous chuckle that sounded more like a titter. "No bloody seduction needed," he gasped, his eyes rolling back as her mouth took chart down his throat. "I'm—ohhh. I'm yours...whenever you want..."

"I want you," she whispered. "I want you now. I want you right now."

The words were a fantasy come to life. The roar of the devil at last dominated the cautious poet, bursting through the glass in which he'd been contained all night. And yet, Spike managed to throw a lasso around the beast's neck at the last second. He had to be careful. Had to make sure she was sure. He had to, but bugger if he remembered why. All he wanted to do was have his wicked way with her. And for the way she smelled, the little sounds she made, the way she moved beneath him, she wanted it, too. She wanted it and she wouldn't say no.

Not now. But after...

The devil halted. The poet raced forward. "I thought," he continued. "I...I thought you...you said you weren't...weren't ready."

"That was last night. I'm ready now."

There had never been sweeter words. "You are?"

Buffy curved her lips curved upward. "I have my hand around your thing. Insofar as signs go, that's a big one."

Spike laughed in spite of himself. "If you're gonna stroke it, you should be able to address it properly, love."

"Hey! Easy for you to say." An adorable pout fell across her face. "How do you even address your thing?"

He slid his hands down her arms. "I rather fancied the way you addressed it a minute ago," he said with a smirk.

"You would."

"Well, yeah."

Buffy rolled her eyes. "Men are all alike."

"Oi!" That comment definitely deserved a ravenous kiss as punishment. In fact, Spike mused as he greedily sucked on her tongue, he should enforce this sort of punishment more often where she was concerned. "What changed?" he asked when he pulled away, panting. "Why now?"

To his amazement, she burst into a fiery red. "I...I needed to be sure."

His hands were becoming increasingly boisterous, now at her thighs, one slipping dangerously close to the hem of the tee. "Needed to be sure of what, pet?"

"That you weren't confusing love feelings for lust feelings." She blinked rapidly when his eyes narrowed and hardened into a glare. "I know," she said. "I know. I have no reason to doubt—"

"I should think not," Spike replied, clipped.

"But I needed... It was for me, okay? I knew it but I needed to... I dunno, really know it?"

"If I just wanted into your knickers, I would've—"

"Last night. Or after the musical demon. Or any of the times I've been alone with you and all vulnerable-girl. I know." She worried her lower lip between her teeth, and what little rush of irritation had seized his spine receded almost immediately. "I just needed it. I can't explain why. Like a last little test for the hardened cynic within? I know you love me, Spike. But my inner Giles keeps trying to talk me out of it. You did nothing to make me think you don't love me." She blinked again, and for a horrible moment, he thought she might cry. "I'm sorry."

"It's all right, kitten," he whispered, brushing his lips across her chin. "I understand."

And the thing was, he did. Truly.

Love's a funny thing.

"I've known it since you let yourself become Glory's punching bag," she said quickly, dissolving into what he easily identified as the Buffy Babble. "That night on the stairs... Both nights, actually. When I went up and came down. And then in your crypt, I knew it. I just—"

"Shhh. It's all right."

"I'm lousy."

"You're gorgeous." Spike fisted the tee she wore with intent which couldn't be mistaken, then paused again. "Buffy," he said softly, gently caressing the soft skin where her thighs joined her hips. "You know this is gonna change everything, right?"

She trembled and nodded, but there was no fear in her eyes. "Everything's already changed."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." A pause, and then the world spun off its axis. "I love you."

Spike froze, locked, elated, and terrified in the same instant. His eyes flooded with tears and for an erratic second, he could've sworn his heart was thundering. The air both chilled and burned.

"You..."

"I love you," Buffy whispered again, and he realized with a start it was her eyes that were watering, not his. His were too wide, too astounded. She was going to cry, and she loved him. "I do, Spike. I really do."

"Bloody hell."

A beat, and then she arched a brow. "Is that all I get?"

The moment unfroze, and he growled, lunging for her mouth. He kissed her ruthlessly, wildly, both drowning in the taste and starving for more. He slipped his hands under the shirt, feeling her without seeing her. She breathed, and he loved feeling her as she breathed. She was so soft and his hands couldn't stop. They inched up. And up, up until his fingertips brushed the underside of her breasts, and he nearly collapsed at the way she shivered at his touch.

"All you get, she says," he retorted roughly. "I love you, you daft bird."

Buffy laughed. "So poetic."

"Not really known for my poetry."

"Which is stupid. Did anyone ever read it? I mean really." She grinned and raised a hand to his face. "Do you have more?"

He snickered. "You don't want to see it."

"I don't?" she replied, her brows bunching together. "What? Was that supposed to be some vampire version of the Jedi Mind Trick?"

"I just got you. Don't wanna scare you off."

"You remember I'm the Slayer, right? I think it'll take more than a few words to scare me."

Spike chuckled and drew away. Much as he loathed spending a single second not touching her, he didn't fancy their first time together featuring him with his sweats around his ankles. He was going to do

this right by her if it killed him. "Wouldn't be sayin' that if I were you, pet," he replied, holding up a hand to stay her when she reached for him. "Ah, ah. Patience is a virtue."

"So says you!"

"Well, if I'm not mistaken, the invite said this was a strictly naked party." He arched an eyebrow and rose to his feet, feeling slightly ridiculous with his pants around his hips and his cock bobbing out, though not at all embarrassed. Not even when her frown turned into a giggle. Fuck, the sound of her laughter was an aphrodisiac all in itself. He was determined then and there to make her laugh as much and as often as possible, even at the cost of his pride. "You got to work, but you didn't finish the job."

Buffy's eyes narrowed.

"I mean the clothing removal," Spike said hastily. "Not the other job. But now that I think of it, if you ever want—"

"You're a goof."

"Oi!"

"You're a goof and you're the one who stopped me from finishing either job."

Spike feigned a sigh, kicking the offending material down his legs. He didn't miss the way her eyes widened as they took him in for the first time, or the way they lingered on his erection. For a girl who had explored that particular part of his anatomy with her mouth, she certainly did seem surprised. "Is it my fault," he continued, his voice drawing her eyes back to his, "that your mouth is so bloody kissable?"

"So you'd prefer my mouth on your mouth rather than..." She glanced down again, blushing but not looking away. Then, brightening, she straightened as though solving a riddle. "Hey...you're not circumcised."

"Just now figure that out, have you?"

"Well, forgive a girl for being a little dazed. First there's the whole 'having been dead' thing, followed by the 'haven't had sex in a bajillion years'"—she met his eyes again, shrugging—"though I'm figuring in the time I was in the other dimension in that calculation."

"More than fine with me."

"Plus there's the whole thing where you're all...big and stuff." She

blushed again and looked away, and Spike reacted as any man whose equipment had just been complimented. He leered.

"I'll fill you up in all the right places," he promised, taking himself in his hand. Babbling Buffy was such a turn on, and he hadn't been prepared for Babbling Buffy to join forces with Overly Analytical Buffy. The combination was lethal.

Whatever she'd been prepared to say died on her lips, her large eyes following the strokes of his hand as he pumped his length. The scent of her arousal thickened, which only made him harder. She was turned on by watching him wank. There'd never been a more perfect woman.

"Well, I...uhhh..."

The poet whispered that the gentlemanly thing to do was to stop and let her collect her thoughts. The devil countered that the poet was a right git who'd never gotten near enough a woman to know what was and wasn't gentlemanly, and if Buffy was drooling at watching him touch himself, it'd be a sin to stop.

"Thoughts have kinda gone away," she said a moment later.

Spike smirked. She was too bloody adorable for words. "See something you want?"

Buffy nodded, then met his eyes again and offered a shy smile. "So, are you gonna make with the lovin' or stand there and tease me all morning?"

"Me? Tease you?" he replied, releasing his cock as he edged up on the mattress again on his knees, working his way between her open legs until he was perched between them. "Think you got that backwards, pet."

Buffy grinned and made to toss the tee off once and for all. The grin faded when he seized her wrist, stopping her. "What?"

"Our first time, sweetheart. I get to do all the touching." He batted her hands away to do the honors himself. "Waited too bloody long. Wanted to undress you like this. Just like this."

"You have fantasies starring me and your T-shirt?"

He snickered. "Pretty bloody sure I have fantasies starring you and every sodding combination of everything you can possibly imagine." The fabric inched slowly up her abdomen, revealing bits of flesh to his

hungry eyes. The dip of her stomach. Her cute little belly button. Up, up, and then her breasts were bare, delectable little handfuls with pretty pink dewdrop nipples. His mouth watered, his breath caught. All the times he'd dreamt this and somehow she was even more perfect than he'd imagined.

The T-shirt was gone in seconds, and they were both panting. He'd never before gotten so hot in the simple act of removing clothing. Buffy was a war-zone full of firsts, and every explosion was more delicious than the last.

And she was lying before him, wearing only those white cotton panties he'd admired the night before. Her tits rose with her hard breaths, locks of golden hair tumbled over her shoulder. She had no idea how beautiful she was. How he could just look at her all sodding afternoon. He hadn't even touched her intimately yet—this was foreplay to foreplay, and he loved it.

"Spike?" she whispered. "Is everything okay?"

"Okay?" Spike echoed, unable to drag his eyes away from her breasts, and then he had to bloody touch her. He skimmed the length of her stomach until he had one cradled against each palm, and he and Buffy both shivered on contact. "You're bloody glorious."

"I am?"

He shook his head, edging forward. Reeled in. Captured. Caught. He brushed a tender kiss across one of her nipples and trembled when she trembled, moaned when she moaned, then turned to give the other the same attention. "Gonna devour you," he growled, flicking her rosy tip with his tongue. "All night. Every night. Every day, for that matter. A bloke could die happy between your legs."

"I don't...want you to die," she replied lamely, her head falling back as she wove her fingers wove through his hair.

"Good thing I don't need air, then. You're gonna squeeze me so tight..."

"Spike, please..."

He finally drew her nipple fully between his lips, growling again when she gasped and bucked beneath him. The dew clinging to the crotch of her panties taunted his tastebuds, but he was too focused on the perfect flesh in his hands and mouth to pull away. "Taste so good,"

he whispered and licked the underside of her breast. Then he was pressing a series of wet, needy kisses across her flesh until he had her other breast captured between his lips.

"Unnh..."

He smiled, nipping at her. "Not a word, love."

"I'm really gonna pay you back for this," she swore, tightening her grip on his head. "Maybe find some of those chains you had last year and make with the...the...the whatever this is. Death-by-the-goodness-of-your-mouth."

He chuckled. "Is that supposed to intimidate me?"

"You'll see!" She bucked her hips again. "Spike, touch me!"

"I am touching you." He nipped at her again. "Bet you had no idea your titties were this sensitive, did you?"

"Ahhh..."

"My sweet, innocent slayer..."

"Innocent my ass!" she cried, though it would've been more effective had she not dissolved into a moan. "I'm...uhhh...I'm bad news."

Spike laughed harder, releasing her nipple with a wet plop. "Yeah," he agreed, moving his mouth southward, pressing kisses across every inch of skin he found. "You're a real rebel."

"Well... Pretty sure you're not supposed to bang the enemy." Buffy moaned and arched off the mattress again, trying to hurry along the process. He just grinned and seized her by the hips. And then he was buried between her legs, inhaling her scent and rubbing his face against her. Whatever she'd been about to say died that instant, rolling instead into a long, "Ohhh!"

"Somebody's wet," he singsonged and pressed his tongue against the damp crotch of her panties. "Mmm...God, Buffy..." Gingerly, he lowered her back to the mattress and hooked his thumbs under the elastic. Then he met her eyes. "Once these come off, they're staying off."

It was beyond satisfying, watching her claw and gasp for air. Her breasts were wet from his mouth, her cheeks flushed, and her hair was tousled. *Goddess*. "So take them off, already!"

"I mean for good. No slayer of mine goes around wearing knickers."

“Really? I thought you’d be the type of guy who’d go for some black lace.”

The lady knew how to negotiate. “Maybe some knickers are okay. But not now. Not when we’re here.” Then he was stripping them down her legs, practically purring when she lifted her hips to help him along. He didn’t look up at her. Not yet. He wanted nothing in his hands but her flesh. Nothing...

The panties were gone. Spike looked up.

And his jaw dropped.

Buffy squirmed and turned a shade of red he’d never seen before. “Surprise?”

Truly, it was nothing too terribly kinky...on some people. On Buffy.. Well, had his heart been in a position to give him an attack, it would have. He raised a trembling hand to her pussy, running his fingers over the smooth, hairless flesh he’d unwrapped. She shivered beneath him but didn’t try to hide or close her legs. She let him pet her, take her in, even as she shook.

“Bloody hell.”

“It’s not gonna do a trick or anything,” Buffy said, her sarcasm betrayed by the tremor in her voice. “Or bite you, for that matter.”

Spike met her eyes, his dancing with amusement. “I dunno...that would be either very hot or bloody terrifying.”

The red in her cheeks deepened. She turned her head to gaze at the wall. “You’re making me nervous.”

“Sorry. You took me by surprise.” He slipped his fingers lower to part her labia, and all of him shuddered at the honey waiting to be tasted. “Didn’t figure you...”

“I used to...get waxed. Back when I patrolled in mini-skirts and heels.”

He swallowed hard. God, if only he’d known then. “And now?”

“Now?” Buffy paused, then met his eyes again. “I guess...ummm...this is for you.”

“What?”

“I didn’t admit it at the time...not consciously, anyway. But I thought you’d...I dunno. Like it.” Her squirms became more

pronounced. "I've known for a while, I guess. At least, I knew I wanted this. And I wanted you to like...me. Like...my body?"

Spike arched an eyebrow, sliding his thumb over her clit, and god, watching her face dissolve in pleasure nearly had him spilling himself like some virginal teen. "You thought I wouldn't?"

"I wanted you to really like me." She blinked. "I saw the Bot, Spike. When she changed before the Glory-fight, she had to wear my clothes and since it was my body I... I saw her. She—"

"Was a stupid mess of wires and plastic, and I was a dolt for thinkin' any amount of that could even begin to..." But his thoughts lingered, remained. She was right. The Bot had been bare down south, too. At the time he hadn't given it much thought. It'd been a robot, after all, and there was only so much time a bloke could spend contemplating her mock-Buffy parts before ravaging her. If he'd thought too much, too hard, he would have come back to the conclusion he'd already reached before the order was even fulfilled—that she was a substitute for what he couldn't have. No matter how hard he pretended, having the Bot around would end up being a perpetual reminder that Buffy didn't want him.

Only Buffy did want him. Buffy was in his bed, sighing and blushing and drenching his fingers. Her pussy was plump and smooth and she'd made herself bare down there for him. Because she thought he'd prefer this.

"You did this for me," he said hoarsely, unable to draw his eyes away from her wet, pink flesh. The swollen little button of a clit he couldn't help but tease. "You..."

"It's not like I got your name tattooed down there or anything."

Now there was a pretty thought. Maybe with a little railroad spike for emphasis, just so there was no confusion as to who this pussy belonged. "It's for me." A long, happy sigh rumbled through his throat as his mouth descended. "You smell so good."

It wasn't until his objective was perfectly clear that Buffy's nervousness catapulted into all-out panic. She made a quick move to close her legs—a quick move, but not quite quick enough. Spike braced his hands on either thigh, determined to keep her spread. He felt the rush of blood beneath his fingers and watched, transfixed, as her most inti-

mate flesh quivered under the power of his gaze. "Ah-ah," he murmured, unable to draw his eyes away from her. "You gave this to me, love. It's all mine now."

"You don't have to...do that."

The tremor in her voice lent him pause. He glanced up.

"I mean..." Buffy shifted—or tried to shift—but his grip on her remained firm. "It doesn't do much...for me."

Somehow he doubted that, but he was willing to play. "It doesn't?" he replied before lowering his head to drag his tongue up her slit. And Christ, she became unglued, whimpering and thrusting herself against his face. It was damn near impossible to hide his grin. "Right. Pull the other one."

"Ohh...my god."

"That didn't do much for you?"

"I...uhhhh..." Buffy blinked rapidly, her brow furrowing as though she were trying to wrestle down a thought. "I don't... I mean, guys don't like doing that."

Wankers. All of them. "You mean blokes you've been with," he corrected, irritation swelling. "Soldier Boy didn't take the full bloody tour?"

As much as he loved the idea of being the first to do this right by her, he couldn't help but snarl at the thought that she hadn't been treasured before. Granted, he'd gotten more than an earful of just how lacking Captain Cardboard was in the sack—he'd just never imagined it could have extended to this. Any man who didn't salivate at the thought of tasting her had a few dangerous screws loose.

She was blushing again. Undoubtedly, discussing her past sexual liaisons was the last thing she'd had in mind this morning. But he wagered it was better to get everything out on the table now rather than later. "He did," she said. "But...ummm... He didn't like it."

"I thought you were the one who didn't like it."

Spike thought he did a right admirable job in keeping his tone level for as outraged as he was. Trust Captain Cardboard to muck up the best thing anyone would ever find and make her believe the problem was hers.

"I don't."

"You mean you didn't like it when he did it," he replied sharply, dipping his index, middle and ring fingers between the folds of her cunt, caressing her softly but not entering her. "Here you got your pussy so smooth and sweet just for me. Lemme have a taste?"

"I don't taste good."

Bollocks. "I'll be the judge of that."

Spike settled between her legs entirely, the fingers already exploring her daring to sink a bit deeper. He splayed his free hand across her stomach. "I'll stop if you want," he promised before burying his face in her wet heat and inhaling. *God.* "But lemme taste."

There was no reply, but she'd gone rigid as though expecting him to reel with disgust, wipe his lips clean, and search out the nearest mouthwash. Whatever had happened to her in the past had obviously made an impact.

Silly slayer.

Silly, delicious slayer.

"You really don't know, do you?" Spike murmured. "How gorgeous you are down here?"

He spread her wide with his fingers and bared her wet, pink pussy to his hungry mouth. He didn't waste time, dragging his tongue along her flesh, rolling her honey in his mouth as his eyes fell shut. "You're dripping," he whispered, shaking. "Have you always been this wet for me?"

Buffy inhaled, her lips falling apart with a melodious little whimper. "I... Oh, Spike..."

A rush of male pride slithered down his spine. He'd barely started touching her and she was already purring for him. "Lesson the first, baby," he murmured and licked her again, rougher this time. "There's not an inch of you I don't wanna devour. Especially this delicious quim." The warmth of her folds against his mouth was enough to do any bloke in. The way she wiggled beneath him, arched off the bed when he came close to pushing into her, still drawing circles around her clit, had him captivated.

"Spike..."

"I love it when you say my name like that," he whispered, then, ever-so-slightly, dipped his tongue dipping inside her. Then again, and

again, and then he was consuming her in earnest. Every sinful caress he stole of her drenched flesh made was a bloody revelation.

"Please!" she gasped, flailing off the mattress.

He pulled back just far enough to whisper, "Please what?" before renewing his assault.

"Touch me."

"Thought that was what I was doin'."

"You know what I mean!"

"Bit slow, as it turns out," he replied between licks, still drawing circles around her clit with his finger. "I'm not gonna know what you mean unless you say it."

God, she was a vision. Her skin damp with sweat, her honey-hair clinging to her forehead, her eyes wide and locked with his. So trusting. So open. And all his, he thought with a growl, inching the hand he had on her stomach upward to play with one of her nipples, and he had to fight off a chuckle when she dissolved into another long moan.

"Please, Spike," she hissed through her glare. "My clit. Please."

He'd had it wrong before—*that* was the revelation. Watching Buffy pant and writhe while asking him, Spike, to touch her. "Buffy," he gasped, plunging his fingers inside of her, fighting off a moan when she clenched and whimpered around him. "You unmake me."

"I will if you don't—"

He wrapped his lips around her clit and sucked hard, nearly dissolving at the low moan that tore through her throat. He rolled her around his mouth, flicked her with his tongue, pulled more, more, and more yet, thrusting his fingers deeper into her, feeling her tighten and tremble around him as her legs closed around his face. Holding him there as he gobbled her up, as her juices spilled down his hand, as he sucked her harder between his lips, shaking her, tonguing her, loving her with his mouth. With everything he was.

"Ohh, ohh, ohh. *Spike.*"

Drench me, baby. Drench me so good.

Buffy arched off the mattress a final time before exploding with a harsh cry, shaking so hard the bed shook with her. Her pussy spasmed around his fingers, squeezing him so tight he thought he might just explode with her. Spike left her clit with a parting kiss and licked his

way back to her opening to suck up as much of her honey as possible. Nothing in this sodding world had ever tasted as good as she did. She burned his throat and he couldn't get enough.

He could never get enough.

"Oh..."

Spike didn't even try to hide his smirk. He couldn't. No more than he could help his tongue from stealing one final lap of her pussy before he rose up on all fours. "Yeah," he purred and dropped kisses along her belly as he made his way up her delectable body. "You don't like being eaten. Not at all."

"Shut up," she snapped before wrapping her arms around his neck and dragging him down for a long, desperate kiss. "Not. A. Word."

"Bloody shame, you not liking it." Spike nipped at her lips as he slid a hand between them. Then—*Christ*—his cock was pressed against her naked pussy, the head exploring her wet folds, teasing them both mercilessly with little jerks of his hips. "Rather enjoyed fucking you with my mouth. But if you don't fancy it..."

"I never said that."

"Well, you had that bad experience and all, so I—"

"It was amazing and you know it." Buffy bit at his lips and tried to reach between them. Tried to force him to position his cock at her opening, but he batted her hand away, pressing his tip against her clit and rubbing them both blind with pleasure.

"You're trying to kill me, aren't you?"

Spike grinned against her mouth. "You want me inside?"

"Inside now. Inside now please." She kissed him again desperately, hungrily, her eyes wide with need. "Spike, oh god..."

He shook, barely daring to believe it. Believe he was here. Poised above Buffy, who was in his bed. Buffy, whose taste was in his mouth. Buffy, whose lips nipped at his. Buffy warm and ready for him, looking at him with love in her eyes.

This is mine.

"Gotta say the words," he murmured, honestly not knowing to whom he spoke or what words he wanted. Right now anything would do.

Buffy chose for him.

"I love you," she whispered, cupping his face. "I do love you, Spike."

His heart sang and his eyes stung. "I love you, too," he replied, sinking inside her with a moan of completion. Nothing had ever been more perfect than this. Her pussy hugged him, tightened around him as though determined to keep him locked in her body forever. "Oh Buffy. Buffy. So tight. So wet. Oh my god."

Buffy flexed and whimpered beneath him. "Spike..."

"Feel so good. So warm. Around me. Bloody hell, Buffy..." Spike pressed his lips to her temple, her cheek, her chin. "So good. Gonna..." He drew back, his cock dragging along her slick walls, slow torture of the best kind. When only the tip of him remained inside her, he waited for a beat, then pushed into her again, a long sigh rolling off his lips. "Slayer. *Buffy*."

There were many ways he'd envisioned their first time together. A rampant ripping of each other's clothes, perhaps as the finale to a long sparring session in the cemetery. He'd pictured her visiting him one night, telling him she couldn't wait anymore. He'd imagined fucking her hard against the crypt wall. He'd imagined her riding him to a gallop in the green rocker upstairs. He'd imagined being discovered sneaking into her room, and then invited under the blankets. Outside, inside, hard, fast, slow, soft, tender, rough...a thousand different ways. But there was absolutely nothing to compare to this. To the slow hum of her skin. The roll of her hips as she lifted herself to recapture him every time he pulled his cock from her pussy. The way the vortex of her eyes sucked him in, absorbing him, seeing what no one else saw. What no one else had ever wanted to see.

Her breaths crashed against his lips. She was so open. So *his*. And she loved him.

"This is so different," she whispered, digging her nails into his forearms and gasping when he pulled away from her. She arched off the bed, taking him back, reclaiming him, marking him, pulling him into her cunt, and squeezing so hard the world blinked into light. "So different than I thought..."

"Good different, I hope," he murmured, driving into her a little rougher. Needing more. Sensation was brilliant but he had a lot pent

up and now that she was here, looking at him the way she was, making the sounds she was, the demon he'd tried to keep at bay clawed at his skin, demanding more. Spike kissed the side of her mouth. "You've imagined this, then?"

"Lots of times."

"Yeah?"

"Naughty little fantasies." A seductive little grin crossed her lips and she lifted her head to kiss him, her pussy tightening even more, drawing him deeper inside her. "Things no slayer should think about."

Spike grinned and sucked her lower lip between his teeth, scaling a hand down her side and fitting her leg over his arm, thrusting a little harder now. Just a little. Didn't want to upset the rhythm, but fuck, he needed. He felt her every breath, every pull of her flesh against his cock. The way she molded around him, drank him in. The raging beast in his chest roared louder still, wanting her hot and writhing, clawing at his back and screaming his name.

Then she said the most perfect word in the bloody language.

"More."

God yes. Spike buried his face in her throat and gave her more. Gave her *harder*. And harder. Rougher. And she was there, shifting so she could hook her leg around his waist to anchor him to her, arching and fighting and clenching his juice-slick cock every time he speared back inside. The springs of his bed whined, the smacks of their bodies becoming heavier and more pronounced. His chest tightened as air pounded his lungs. He watched her gasp and whimper, watched her react to him, to what he was doing to her, how he made her feel. Watching her and having her watch back.

Fuck, she was perfect. So hot. So *his*.

"God, Spike, you feel..."

"Tell me, Slayer," he murmured before dipping his head to nibble on her lips. "Tell me how I feel..."

"Feel like...home." She blinked, her eyes shining, scaring him witless until he caught the euphoria behind them. She dragged her hands down his back until she had his ass at her mercy, and then she was driving him. Faster. Harder. Her head flew back and a soundless cry rode off her lips. "Don't leave," she whimpered. "Never leave."

"Never could," Spike swore, and god how he meant it. "I could never leave, Buffy. Not you. Never. Love you. Love you so much."

"How much?"

The question startled him but he wasn't about to shy from a challenge. "Like the sky has stars," he gasped. "That's how I love you."

She nodded and tore another needy kiss from his lips. "Me too," she told him, her voice so soft he thought for a second that he'd dreamt it. That was, until, her face crumpled and she began crying in earnest. But there was no pull of panic this time. He understood. These weren't tears of sadness.

"Spike..."

Spike kissed her again, and again, then slipped his hand between their battling bodies in search of her clit. "I'm here," he promised. "I've got you. I've always got you."

His fingers skated over her soft, soaked flesh, and he watched as she dissolved. Her eyes locked with his and held. He felt her tense and tighten around him. Felt her hold on, and then she was gone. Crying. Trembling. Coming so hard she pulled him right along with her. Her arms went around his neck again, her lips ravaging his with desperation he recognized. Desperation he'd never thought anyone could feel for him. But there it was—she consumed and claimed, still crying but smiling too. And it was the most perfect moment of his life.

"I love you," she told him again, as though worried he wouldn't believe her. "I do. I do, Spike."

"I know."

And he meant it. He knew Buffy loved him.

The knowledge made him tremble.



YOU'D LOVE HER, TOO

"SPIKE?"

He opened one eye, attempting and failing to fight off the giddy smile that seemed to be a permanent fixture upon his lips. For the first time in years—or ever, truthfully—he was completely relaxed. He was at peace. He felt bloody sublime, his skin a canvass of claw marks, his throat with little lovebites—or so she'd told him. Apparently, the Slayer had given him a hickey.

It had taken hours to wear each other into post-coital fatigue. Now, they lay on their sides, facing each other, Buffy's leg curled over his, his cock still buried inside her at half-mast. Give him a minute and he'd roll her under him again. Until then, he wanted to remain as connected as possible.

Whatever Buffy wanted to say apparently escaped her. "What?"

"I didn't say anything."

"Your face did."

"My face doesn't talk." He paused. "All right, so it does, but—"

"You're Grinny McGrinny."

"I'm who?"

"Mr. Grins-Alot."

"Can't really blame me, love. Think I'm gonna freeze this way." He

leaned in, suddenly desperate for a nibble of her mouth. Of course, nibbles only reminded him of how they'd spent the better part of the day and sent electric shocks to his cock. Shocks she felt, judging by her sharp gasp as he twitched and swelled.

"This way?" she asked when they pulled apart, working those miracle muscles of hers around his prick.

"Oh *fuck*."

"And here I thought that's what we've been doing all day," she retorted, her eyes flashing. "You think it'll always be like this? The much sex-having and the...sex-having? 'Cause I've only done the marathon thing once or...once, not counting horny ghosts. You spoiled me today."

Spike narrowed his eyes. "Slayer, it's gonna take a long sodding time to wear the bloom off this rose. I'm thinking a few millennia. Even then, we'll probably just..."

He paused and shivered, the hand resting on her hip tightening possessively, drawing her closer. They didn't even have *centuries* ahead of them. Millennia were out of the question. And while he'd always known this, it hit home in a way he wasn't prepared for. Not now that he had her.

After a moment, though, he decided it didn't matter. If they had forever or—it pained him to think—if they only had today, he'd love her until the sun went out. Until and *beyond*.

The second she wasn't here anymore, he wouldn't be here, either. Simple as that.

"You went all quiet," Buffy murmured, raising a hand to his cheek. "Whatcha thinking?"

Spike drew in a sharp breath and met her eyes, a soft smile tugging at his lips. "That I love you," he replied, and kissed her.

"Liar."

He arched an eyebrow. "I know you don't mean that."

"What?" She frowned, then wrinkled her nose and rolled her eyes, and though it was at his expense, he absolutely loved it. This was Buffy. Buffy with her eye-rolls and her snippy comments and her blonde-moments. Buffy with her perfect little imperfections. "Oh, no, you

dope. Believe me, if I take anything from this world, it's going to be the knowledge that you are of the Buffy-smitten."

Spike grinned. "Bloody well smitten."

"It wasn't what you were thinking, though."

"Was so."

She pursed her lips and placed a hand on his chest, gently pushing him onto his back and rolling with him so their bodies didn't disconnect. The slight movement coaxed a groan from his lips, his cock instantly erect. Spike whimpered and seized her hips. "Fuck," he purred, lifting her off him if only to feel the tortured bliss of sinking inside her again. "There is nothing in the world better than this."

"The whole world, huh?" Buffy replied, her own voice strangled but not without the teasing edge he adored.

"Been all over the place," he agreed and tongued her nipple. "Live as long as I have..."

"I will."

Spike sighed contentedly, raising his head to fill his mouth with one of her breasts. Every slide of her molten quim around him introduced him to a new level of bliss. So much so it took a few seconds for her words to settle. He inhaled sharply and released her breast, searching her eyes. "What?"

A soft, unreadable light fell across her face. "There's something...I need to tell you."

Spike held perfectly still, caught in the thin space between planes.

"When I left," she continued, gently pushing him back to the bed, "When I went...to meet..." But then her hips were rolling against his, the pink lips of her pussy slipping up and down his flesh and drenching him with her slickness, and he was too busy moaning incoherent nothings to experience a pang of loss. He could lick her nipples later—right now, his fingers would do.

"Ah," he hummed encouragingly.

"I didn't come home...immediately."

Spike had never before appreciated how difficult it was to carry on a conversation when every nerve in his body was humming with pleasure and all he wanted to do was flip her over and pound her into the mattress. For a bloke as old as he, he could definitely add this to a

growing list of Buffy-instigated firsts. His efforts should be rewarded—with the way her pussy squeezed him, retaining any of what she said was a triumph.

“You didn’t?” he managed to pant.

She shook her head. “I needed answers. I went to the desert.”

That made no bloody sense. He was probably buzzed on being inside her. On the blissful burn that seared through his body every time his slick cock plunged into her wet depths. His eyes were suddenly occupied with the bounce of her breasts again, the tiny devils which teased his mouth and warmed his hands. She was a nymph, and she was squeezing him so tight he thought he’d pop for good.

What a jolly way to go, though.

“Desert?” he managed to pant.

Apparently, she lost the plot on whatever she needed. Buffy’s eyes rolled back and she nodded, bucking feverishly as her tempo increased. “I love this,” she gasped, grazing her teeth over her lower lip. “You... inside...you’re touching...everything.”

He positively burned. “You’re perfect. So perfect.”

“Perfect?” she teased, steadying herself with a hand at his shoulder. “Now *there’s* a pedestal for you.”

“No pedestal,” Spike argued. “You’re perfect for *me*, love. Perfect for me. All of you, just as you are.”

Buffy blinked hard, swirling her hips, crashing onto him again and again. Spike blinked and gasped, staring at the sight of his cock, slick with her juices and surging into her cunt again and again. God, the view alone was enough to do him in. Her soaked, swollen pussy fitting around him, hugging him, squeezing him almost tight enough to hurt. Almost.

“Perfect for me,” he whispered again, sliding a hand down her abdomen until he was caressing her soft, bare mound. Then the pads of his fingers were brushing her clit. “Just like you.”

“Spike,” she moaned. “So good...”

“Love you.”

A soft smile brightened her face. “You keep saying that.”

“I’ll always say it.”

“Good,” Buffy replied. Then her muscles were contracting around

his cock, gripping him so good all thought blanked out. She leaned forward until her breasts were against his chest and consumed his mouth with hers as her pussy clenched around him, and then she was spasming hard, and he was helpless but to follow. His fingers dug into her hips as he bucked, twitched, and came inside her.

“Spike...”

He released a shuddering breath, wrapped his arms around her, and brought her down to his chest. Her hot to his cold, her heartbeat rabbiting against him, her breaths hard and deep.

“I’ve got you,” he said, marveling that it was true. “Always got you, sweetheart.”

“Oh,” Buffy murmured, her lips brushing along one of his nipples. “God. Do you think it’ll always be like that?”

He chuckled. “Second time you’ve asked me that, pet.”

“I think it’s a fair question.”

“Only if you wanna hear me say it again.”

“Say what?”

“That it only gets better from here.”

“Better?”

“This is only the beginning, love. Can’t help but get better.”

She giggled. “Are you saying there’s room for improvement?”

“Buffy, you kill me as it is. This is how I’m gonna dust, I guarantee it. Death by shagging.”

“And you want me to kill you more?”

Spike favored her with a lavish grin. “Fuck yes, I do.”

She wiggled and his cock twitched within her. “I guess it is my job. Slayer, and all.”

“Slay me like that any bloody time you fancy.” He kissed her brow. “The *better* comes with learning what we like. What you like...what we like *together*. I wanna find out everything.”

“I’m not very creative. I think you already know everything I like.”

He trailed his fingers down her back, relishing the way she shivered under his touch. “How can I when *you* don’t even know what you like?”

“I know what I like!”

“You said you didn’t fancy having me fuck your cunt with my mouth, either. Think we found out—”

"Shut up!"

"Whatever for?" Spike retorted. "No shame in enjoying being eaten."

Buffy made a face and shifted so she could properly slap his shoulder. "There is when you say it *like that*."

"Like what?"

"All...dirty."

"Well, it's pretty messy, love. Got your juice all over me—"

"Spike!"

Her protests made him laugh harder, his body buzzing with renewed lust as she wiggled and clenched that marvel of a pussy around him. And when she realized it and her eyes widened, his heart constricted. She was too adorable for words.

And it turned him on like nothing else.

"Holy crap," she said breathlessly, lifting herself off his chest, squeezing him again, but so slightly he honestly didn't know whether or not it was intentional. "Does that thing have an off-switch?"

"Around you?" Spike replied, smirking, unable to keep himself from pinching her clit and arching deeper inside her. "I gotta focus most my energy on keepin' from *getting* hard every time you breathe."

"Mmmm," she murmured. This time when her cunt tightened, he *knew* it was intentional. "Why would you wanna?"

He leered. "If I didn't at least make an effort, you'd be shackled to my bed for the rest of your life."

"Worse ways to go."

"Buffy..." Spike inhaled sharply and seized her by the hips again, forcing her movements to a halt and doing his best to ignore her pout. "Keep that up, and we'll end up shagging each other into exhaustion."

"Not seeing the negative."

Neither did he. Except she'd started to say something a moment ago. "You need to tell me what you..." He furrowed his brow. "Some-thin' about a desert?"

Buffy's playfulness evaporated. "I didn't tell you?"

"We got carried away."

"Oh." She flushed. "Well...ummm, I didn't come straight home after LA."

"I got that much."

"I needed answers." She paused, worrying a lip between her teeth. "There...in order to tell you this, I might have to refer to some of the things we talked about last night. The things you didn't like."

"It's all right. I'll manage."

"I know...but I was worried. I think that's why I wanted to tell you while we were...doing stuff."

Doing stuff. She was too cute for words.

"When we talked last night," he murmured, reaching up and tucking a lock of hair behind her ear, "I didn't think we'd... be together. Not like this. Not with you...loving me."

She kissed him suddenly, hungrily. "I do," she murmured against his lips. "I'm here and I do. And if you hear something you don't like, remember that. I want this thing with you. With you, Spike...I am all about forever."

Fuck. He knew what she thought she meant by that. Buffy's version of forever, the only one she had to offer, was monumental enough. Forever was a completely different thing for a bloke looking down a stretch of eternity. That he would take whatever she offered and be bloody chuffed with it was a given, but a man couldn't help but hope.

Buffy slid off his lap, making a small noise of complaint when his cock slipped out of her.

"I went to the desert," she said again. "The one where Giles took me before I died. Where I learned death is my gift. I'd...I'd just seen Angel and, well, you know how that went. When he didn't give me the peace I didn't want to admit was a Spike-exclusive, I decided to go where I learned what my gift was. See if she had any answers as to why my gift was rejected."

"Who, pet?"

"The First Slayer."

He blinked dumbly. "She lives in the desert?"

Buffy made a face like she was trying not to smile. "No, dummy. She was my spirit guide before I did—well, once before I died. She told me I was full of love and love would lead me to my gift. And she was right. I was, and it did, but then the world demanded a refund and I needed to know *why*. My time was up, Spike."

"Slayer—"

"I didn't want to admit I had a death wish, but—"

"You're not even twenty-one. That's not *time*, pet."

"It is for a slayer. It was time for me to give my gift. My ultimate gift."

"And death was your gift," he stated, unsure how he was supposed to react. No one had handed him a script.

"Yeah. My gift to Dawn. To the world." A weak, heartbreaking smile cracked her lips. "Coming back wasn't in the cards. It wasn't supposed to be, anyway. Feeling finished... I needed to know if it was supposed to be like this. That I had it wrong when I jumped." Buffy drew in a sharp breath, conflict raging in her eyes. Yet she met his gaze and softened, leaning in to kiss his lips again. "I love you."

Spike couldn't help it; he smiled, a half-sigh, half-laugh tumbling through his throat. "I love you, too."

"Twenty-four hours ago, I never would've thought I'd ever say the words."

"Right there with you."

"I fought it."

"I remember."

She snorted. "I would think so—it was yesterday." A pause. She kissed him again. "The thing is... I didn't know I loved you when I went to go see her. I didn't know it, Spike."

"It's all right," he said honestly, because it was. He knew what she meant. "Did she show? The First Slayer bird?"

"Yes."

Spike swallowed hard and nodded. "And you two traded words?"

"No." At Spike's frown, Buffy elaborated, "That's not the way it works. She talks but she doesn't. I wasn't supposed to come back. What Willow did...messed me up."

"How do you mean?"

Buffy pursed her lips and didn't respond immediately. "I'm not sure I can die."

"What's that?"

"The spell went wrong, when Willow was doing it. The First Slayer was very adamant about that—the same way she was when the gang

and I did the joining spell to defeat Adam. It's not the way it's supposed to be." A small, sad smile twitched her lips. "I've been dealing with that, too. This idea that it might never be the end for me. That I might feel the way I felt last night *forever* because Willow's magic went wonky. I'm not even the active slayer anymore. Giles confirmed that when my death failed to trigger another slayer. Apparently, the torch has been passed to Faith."

Spike inhaled slowly, shakily, not sure he understood what she was trying to tell him but at the same time *entirely* sure. "Buffy, pet, what are you saying?"

She met his eyes again, and what he saw there made him tremble. "I'm saying this...whatever this is...I'm talking your kind of forever. I've only ever thought in forevers, Slayer's prerogative, but what I want has always been simple to me. It wasn't until last night that I realized I could have it. That you were right."

"I was?" he rasped, chest hurting as though daring his heart to start pounding. The words were all ones he understood in an academic way, but the meaning beyond was still too large for him.

"I want last night to be every night. If that's okay with you." The widening of his eyes and the sputter on his lips evidently did a better job conveying how *okay* it was with him than he ever could, for she grinned and placed her hand over his mouth before he could intervene with words. "And yeah," she continued, "with the wiggins and the mind-numbing fear. This scares me and I'm not sure I'm okay with it. But I want to be. I *have* to be, and I have you to help me, don't I? I'll just...focus on tomorrow. And the day after that."

He murmured her name against her palm. She grinned and lowered her hand to the mattress, her eyes shining. "Now," she said, leaning forward to brush a kiss across his lips. "Can we get back to the sex?"

That was something he could do—something outside himself that would help him reconcile his astonishment. There was a lot she wasn't saying, he knew, a lot she still had to suss out for herself, more for him to understand. But until that time came, he was content to tackle her to the mattress and mauled her with hungry, elated kisses.

Make her realize how good it could be, this thing called living.

And hope that in the effort, he gave her back some of what she'd given him every day from the start.



"ARE YOU SURE ABOUT THIS?"

Buffy tossed him an amused glance and squeezed his hand. "And here I could've sworn that was my line."

"I'm just saying you don't have to prove anything to me."

"This isn't about proving anything. This is about not hiding." Her smile was bright enough to light the heavens. "It's about being honest. Besides, they gotta know sometime."

"Well, you might wanna be prepared for the fit Harris'll throw once he sees your hand in mine. Imagine he'll come at me with a stake."

"He better be prepared to have his ass massively of the kicked if he gets anywhere near staking-distance. No one touches the Boyfriend of Buffy." She paused. "Except for Buffy."

He chuckled and kissed her temple as they turned the corner and rounded on the Magic Box. Admittedly, he'd been thrown off his game when Buffy announced she wanted to drag him to the Scooby meeting. Wearing each other into post-coital exhaustion in the confines of his crypt was one thing—but this was something else.

It made everything she'd told him real.

"I love you," he whispered into her hair.

She turned to meet his lips with a kiss. "I love you, too."

"I love hearing that."

"You'll be hearing it a lot."

They drew to a halt together. The door was ahead. The only thing left to do was walk through it.

Spike inhaled. "Are you ready, love?"

She nodded, then turned to meet his eyes. And maybe she saw something there, something he didn't know he was showing, for she leaned in and said, "I go in on your side, I leave on your side. No matter what happens."

Spike nodded jerkily, doing his best to keep from breaking into tears. It was so hard—so bloody hard when everything he'd wanted was

literally in his hands. There was nothing in the whole of his life that could have prepared him for this. Nothing. But here she was. Smiling at him. Kissing him. Loving him.

“Buffy—”

“Shhh.” She kissed him again, smiling. “I know.”

A pause. A breath. They reached for the door together.

And together, hand-in-hand, they walked through.