

DREAMSCAPE



HOLLY DENISE



THE DREAMS BEGAN THAT NIGHT.

She was exhausted; her muscles screamed for a hot bubble bath. Her mind was stuck on replay. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw the fight again. She heard every word, felt every punch, relived every humiliating second and was no better off for it.

He killed slayers, Giles said. The guy that called himself Spike killed slayers. He'd made a career out of it, and evidently, it was the reason he was here now. Because she was the Slayer, and he killed slayers. It was what he did.

He was strong. She'd never faced a vampire, other than Angel and a few of the Master's older goons, that she hadn't been able to kill on the first try. Spike was old, yeah, but not as old as some. Not as old as Angel, and not nearly as old as Luke or Darla or any of the fang-faced buffoons that had caused her grief the previous year.

He was strong. Way strong. Stronger than any vamp she'd faced. Hell, Buffy was pretty much convinced she could dust Angel if she really wanted to. The few times they'd fought each other, she'd always gained the upper-hand.

Though that could be explained rather easily. Angel had this silly notion that Buffy needed to be guarded—that she was the perpetual

damsel, and hurting her would upset the balance of the universe. Never mind that she'd, oh yeah, *died* less than six months ago. No, Buffy was definitely a delicate little flower.

With as hunky as he was, Angel could be annoying as hell when he set his mind to it.

Something he assuredly had passed onto Mr. Sexy Brit Vamp. While picking up the debris of Parent/Teacher Night, Angel had confessed that Spike was one of his vamp-kiddies, or whatever term he'd used to describe it. So her kinda-boyfriend was completely responsible for the current pain in her ass. The current incredibly sexy and oh so ruthlessly dangerous pain in her ass.

She couldn't escape him. She showered and he was there. She brushed her teeth and he was there. She changed into her flannel jammies and he was there. He snipped at her, mocked the pain he'd caused whenever she flinched, whispering little taunts, promising the next time they saw each other he'd use her blood for mouthwash.

Buffy shivered hard and shook her head, flopping onto her mattress, wincing and biting her lower lip to keep her moan from touching the air. Things would look better tomorrow. Once her shoulders stopped aching and the pain in her side didn't throb every time she turned.

A long sigh trembled through her lips. Things *would* look better tomorrow.

They had to.



HE WAS THE FIRST THING SHE SAW WHEN SHE ENTERED THE ROOM.

"Hello cutie," he drawled, his azure eyes sparkling as he sized her up. "Fancy seein' you here."

Buffy blinked and froze. She was standing in what appeared to be a motel room, trapped between the wall and a writing desk. It had all the hallmarks of a pitstop—bed, nightstand, lamp, closet. And in the small narrow stretch of hall that led to the exit was Spike.

Spike.

What on earth was that asshole doing here?

Never mind that. What was *she* doing here?

"Where the hell are we?" Buffy demanded.

"Motel 6, near as I can figure it."

"And...you're here, why?"

The vamp shrugged, sliding a hand into his duster pocket and retrieving a pack of cigarettes. "It's my dream," he retorted. "I tend to turn up in my dreams. Besides...I figured you'd be here."

"You did?" she replied, blinking in surprise. Then she shook her head hard. "And—excuse me, *your* dream?"

Spike's brow furrowed as he lit up. "Well," he drawled. "Yeah."

"You wish!"

"I...wish? I wish my nights were spent in a filthy hellhole with the bint I'll be killin' come hell or high-water?" There was a long pause, his long, slender fingers stroking his chin in mock-thought. "You're right, love. This is a real ball-buster."

Buffy tried hard to ignore the rush of adrenaline that seized her veins. No matter what—no matter that she was standing in the middle of a dream, speaking to a vampire whose dust would very soon be in her past—she refused to let any incarnation of Spike get the better of her. If he bested her here, what hope did she have for reality?

Giles was always saying the mind fought ninety-five percent of the battle. And up until now, she'd thought he was full of old-man crap. Maybe this was her mind's way of letting her know her watcher wasn't as hopelessly hopeless as he appeared most of the time.

Maybe the way to beat Spike was to get to know him.

Buffy balked and winced. Okay, she'd seriously gone loopy. Even if that *did* make sense, this wasn't real. It was some crazy post-fight dream, starring the brand new bane of her existence. Not really much to figure out there. No matter how real it looked or felt. The motel room was about as real as the tooth fairy, and only half as believable.

"You're just a sore loser, aren't ya?" Buffy said when she realized she hadn't spoken in a few, awkwardly *real* moments. God, even her slayer dreams couldn't replicate the way a vamp's eyes burned while sizing up prey—and unless Angel was making a cameo, her dreams were *never* specific. Especially when it came to people—or devastatingly-sexy-but-oh-so-evil bloodsuckers—who were new to her life.

Spike's eyes were bright and lively, and god help her, but they swallowed her whole. For a minute, she could have sworn she was drowning in the ocean.

He had gorgeous eyes. Those gorgeous eyes had distracted her the first night—the night when he'd clapped and stepped out of the shadows. Instead of quipping and being her normal punny self, she'd done little more than stare blankly and fire inane questions. Thankfully he'd sported his bumpies tonight; there was no chance of getting lost in those eyes if he looked like every other vamp she'd ever dusted.

"Haven't lost anything," Spike countered, licking his lips. "I dunno how you're used to doing it, Slayer, but I'm not the wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am kinda bloke. When I start somethin', I intend to enjoy every sodding minute of it." He paused and ran those sinful eyes over her body in a way that had her twitching and feeling very much aware of her southern parts. "You're gonna be a right treat, you are. Can't wait to get a taste of you."

"Get used to disappointment."

He grinned. "Big talk for a chit whose *mum* had to ride into the rescue. There's a word for people like you, love. Whas'sit again?"

She rolled her eyes. "Oh please," she retorted, crossing her arms, her body wound tight. "Don't tell me strong, modern women intimidate you."

"On the contrary, there's nothin' better." Spike grinned, sucking hard on his cigarette. "The harder they fight, the better they taste."

"You're disgusting."

"Hello." He waved, his eyes narrowing. "Vampire."

"Yeah. And you wanna take a wild stab at how many of your kind I've turned into itty bitty dust particles in the past three years?" Buffy retorted, rocking on her heels. "I'm sorry—you just don't inspire me to push the Big Fear button. So you messed up Parent/Teacher Night. The big? Not seeing it. And hey! You even did me a favor. My mother's all with the impressed on how thoroughly your ass was handed to you by yours truly."

That much, at least, had the over-confidence in his sexy eyes melting into indignation. Buffy honestly wasn't sure which she preferred.

“Oi!”

She shrugged and swallowed. Even knowing it was a dream, she couldn’t keep herself from shaking like the proverbial damsel. It was stupid; Spike couldn’t reach her here—not when he was a figment of her very tired but endlessly overactive imagination. “Well, if you can’t handle the truth.”

“The truth?” he barked. “Your definition of *truth* must be a bloody kick. The *truth* is your *mum* is the only reason your corpse isn’t rotting in my freezer. If anythin’, you were outdone by a middle-aged and painfully average human. A human that could’ve gotten killed. She walked stupid into a situation and got lucky. Think that’ll happen again? Think she’s gonna be lucky every time? Think she’s always gonna be there to have the Slayer’s back?” He waited and smiled when he was rewarded with cold, angry silence. “It’s what I thought. Sorry, pet. That’s gotta smart.”

Buffy swallowed again, shoving her anger aside. And *boy*, was that a mistake. Anger was the only thing that kept her from admitting he had a point. Spike truly had had her at his fingertips, and she’d be one pulse short of a living slayer had her mother not stepped in and gotten all axe-happy.

There was really nothing to say in rebuttal, so she decided to throw his words back in face and hoping they stuck. “And here I thought you wanted to *savor* the hunt—hence the non-deadness that is me.”

Spike shrugged again, his lips massaging his cigarette like a lover. She did her best to ignore it. He was sexy enough without focusing on specific body parts.

“That’s right,” he agreed. “But if you think that means I would’ve turned away a freebie, you’re off your bird. ‘Sides, once this dance is over, I got me the next chit to off. And if I don’t get there in time, there’s always the one after that. The possibilities never end for me, see. That’s the good thing about slayers. One kicks it and the next one gets all Chosen and the game starts again. The only thing that changes is *you*—what you bring to the dance.”

His eyes did the rakey-thing again, and those *so* were not shudders racing down her spine. Nope. Next question, please.

“I can’t wait till round two,” he concluded.

"It's not like vamps to look forward to their dusty ending, is it?"

Spike chuckled and shook his head, and damn if he wasn't the most infuriating jackass she'd ever seen. Was there *anything* that unraveled him?

"You got spunk," he murmured. And gah, she should *not* react to him like some love-struck schoolgirl. His voice should inspire revulsion—not exhilaration. She should be clenching her fists in rage, not her thighs in excitement. Spike just grinned, undoubtedly knowing *exactly* what he was doing, and took a step forward. "I like spunk."

"Yeah. Now ask me if I give a damn."

The grin broadened. "Case in bloody point."

A small, pitiful growl tickled her throat and she threw her arms up in exasperation. This was definitely a downside to realistic dreams. She'd never been so annoyed while sleeping. "So that's it, then?" she demanded. "You came here to kill me, which you're determined to do by haunting my dreams and taking shots at my mother. Well, I—"

"Don't flatter yourself, pet," Spike intersected with a snicker. "Never said I came here for *you*."

She frowned, her anger melting into confusion. "But I thought—"

"What?"

"Giles said you hunt slayers."

Spike's eyes narrowed. "Who the bleeding hell is Giles, and how does he—"

"My Watcher, brainiac." Buffy rolled her eyes. "God, for someone who boasts as much as you do, you'd think you'd be able to pair an obviously British name to a very British occupation."

He scowled around his cigarette, then tossed it to the ground and stamped it out beneath his boot. "You think I'm gonna let you smart-off 'cause this is a dream, don'cha?" he said, his voice dangerously soft. "You think that I won't remember how much of a royal bitch you are, or let you off just because this isn't real. Got news for you, Slayer... vamps don't give much of a damn for logic or reason."

"Really?" She blinked. "Could've fooled me."

"I can keep you alive as long as I like, you know. Learned from the

sodding best.” He paused and grinned. “That’d be your honey. The giant fanged teddy-bear that walked you home t’night.”

Buffy rolled her eyes. “Please. If you think you’re gonna scare me with horror stories of—”

“You obviously haven’t heard any, else you’d be scared enough already.”

“Dream on.”

He snickered. “Would if I could, love. You’re not exactly a bloke’s idea of a good time. Besides the killin’ and all.”

“Wow...see, if I gave a crap about what you thought, that’d actually hurt.”

Spike just grinned again, damn him. She hated that grin. It was all with the condescending and the super annoying ‘I-know-something-you-don’t-know.’ How third grade was he, anyway?

“I can see why Angelus likes you,” he purred, his eyes doing the vertical dance once more. And no, she definitely didn’t miss the way they lingered on her boobs. Even in her dreams, guys were pervs. “He prefers his women with fight in them.”

Buffy shuddered, her mind automatically setting her down a path she didn’t want to travel. Ever since the Darla incident last year, she’d tried hard to both ignore Angel *and* his less-than-reputable past. And okay, so waiting around the Bronze for him wasn’t exactly the best way to go about it; nor was grinding against Xander to the point where she learned way more about the male anatomy than she cared to at the moment. None of that meant her intentions weren’t in the right place.

“The road to Hell is paved with good intentions, kitten,” Spike quipped.

“Ugh. Cliché much?”

He shrugged. “Clichés become clichés because most of them hold some truth.”

“Bite me.”

“Oh, I’m gonna. And if you’re a good little slayer, I might even make it fun for you. Just a little, yeah?” A dreamy look overwhelmed his eyes, and he shivered hard. “Ahh. And Angelus can have a front row seat. Watch his woman scream another bloke’s name before—”

“Ugh!”

He blinked. "What?"

"Scream your name? Are you writing a letter to Penthouse or planning my death?"

"You ever been bitten before?"

The second the words touched the air, the Master's mark on her throat began to burn. Buffy stifled a whimper and slapped her hand across the scar, trying to ignore the violent shudders that had her suddenly yearning for a waste-bin in which to vomit. "Yes," she choked, just barely missing the surprise that flooded Spike's eyes. "Yes...and there was...*nothing* orgasmic about it."

Cold silence followed, but she didn't care. Her mind had dragged her back to the Hellmouth. To the cavern she'd wandered into so stupidly. Suddenly, her arms were heavy with the weight of an invisible crossbow. Her legs were covered in a white gown. She fired one lousy shot and, for all her training, for all the vamps she'd killed and the monsters she'd defeated, she'd still lost. She'd lost without putting up a good fight. She fired her crossbow but she couldn't beat his eyes. With every blink, she saw him, and she lost all over again.

"Who?" Spike asked softly, pulling her out of her reverie. Of her dream within a dream. And as much as she hated him, she couldn't help the gratitude that flooded her veins the second her eyes met his again. "Who got a taste of you?"

"The Master."

God, why was she telling him this?

Because it's a dream. It's not real.

Didn't matter. It *felt* real enough.

"It'd be different with me," Spike said. And then he was close. God, he was so close. If he took another step, her breasts would be against his chest. And perhaps because she knew it was a dream, she didn't fight or step back. She didn't attempt to regain the space he'd stolen. The cold she'd felt in the cavern—in even remembering the cavern—was gone. Spike was standing right in front of her, and damn if he didn't smell as good as any man she'd ever met.

Dreams are deceiving.

"It'd be different," he repeated, running his index finger over her faded scar. "Master didn't much care if you got off, I reckon."

Her voice was suddenly hoarse. "A-and you would?"

"Oh yeah. That's half the fun, sweetheart." A pause. When he spoke again, his mouth was right at her ear. "I'd take my time with you. Slayers One and Two were business with just a dash of pleasure. You... you, Slayer...I think you're gonna be the other way around."

She swallowed. Hard. "Do you?"

"Didn't dream of the others," he replied. "Not at all. And yet you're here. In this room. With me."

"It's not real," she reminded him.

"All the more reason to enjoy you." Then he stepped forward again, and her breasts *were* pressed against his chest, and something of his—something very *hard* of his—was against her stomach. A flood of heat washed between her legs. All at once, she felt very hot and very...wet. And sticky. Like watching a dirty part in a movie, only magnified times a thousand.

"I'll make you beg for it, Slayer," Spike purred. "I'll strip you down and tie you up. Think you'll still hate me when I'm fucking you with my tongue?"

Oh. Dear. Lord. She was going to faint. God, she was going to totally do the girl thing and *faint*. In her own *dream*. In front of a hallucination of her current worst enemy. There wasn't enough mortification in the world.

But hell, could anyone blame her? Her face was hot and she was more than just a little lightheaded. Spike moved against her as he spoke, rubbing what *bad* to be his erection into her belly and gently running his hands up and down her arms. He was telling her how he was going to use her body before he killed her, and she was *responding* to him.

I'm sick.

"I'll bring you to the edge so many times you'll be beggin' me to take the dive."

She swallowed. "You wish."

"It's a promise, love. Not a wish. You're gonna love me before this is over. And the second that happens..."

For the way she gasped when he gently sank his blunt teeth into her neck, she could star in porno movies. It was a gasp to end all gasps

—one that could only be followed in shame. Only there was no time for shame. Her hands flew instinctively to his forearms as she arched her hips upward with foreign need. She was on fire—she was burning in ways she'd never burned before. And Spike was there. Spike's mouth was on her throat—on the bite mark the Master had left behind. He growled into her skin, evidently tossing whatever he'd been ready to say out the proverbial window.

This was sick and twisted and *God*, she needed more. She needed him to strip her pants off and feel between her legs. She needed him to do something to ease the fire he'd set loose in her body. She needed—

"Slayer."

She needed him to say her name.

And perhaps because she knew it was just a dream—that everything around her would return to normal the second she opened her eyes—Buffy just stopped caring. It wasn't real. Nothing was real. She couldn't be blamed for something that wasn't real. For doing something in her mind while she slept.

She couldn't be blamed for anything in here.

So she fisted his hair and dragged him away from her throat, ignoring the shared whimper of protest that tumbled through his lips. "It's *Buffy*," she growled, then attacked his mouth with hers. And immediately, any teeny sliver of doubt that this wasn't real was banished, because there was *no* way any man could *ever* taste this good. He was sin and decadence; he was lust and fire. He tasted of cigarettes and whisky, of blood and leather. He tasted of everything she'd always sworn she'd never want. He was danger. He was evil.

He was *hers*.

"Slayer..." he whimpered before sucking her lower lip into his mouth.

"Buffy," she growled again. "It's *Buffy*."

Spike nodded furiously then swallowed her in another kiss. "Buffy," he agreed. "Buffy."

"That's right."

He nipped at her lips. "Buffy."

"Uh huh." His tongue stroked hers with fire she'd never felt before. Not with any of the laughable boys from her old life; not from Owen.

Not from anyone. Not even Angel. Her dream-Spike blew every little girl expectation out of her head, and she knew without cause or reason that she'd never feel this again. Not in reality. Not with anyone but him. With Spike.

It was wrong but it was a dream. It was only a dream. Dreams *weren't real*.

Then something happened. Something that stole the dream from her fingertips. Something horrible enough to qualify as reality. Spike froze and jerked away from her with an angry growl, shoving her away.

"You think it's that easy?" he snarled, shoving her into the wall, his eyes blazing with yellow. "You think you're gonna distract me with—"

"Spike—"

"I don't do Angelus's leftovers, blondie. Not anymore." He backhanded her, and the smack rocked her head back with pain that felt anything *but* dreamt up. "You can't make me... I broke her. She's not his anymore. You can't make me forget that. You can't make me *want* you."

She?

Buffy blinked. "Spike, I don't—"

"And if you think you can tempt me with that juicy little pussy of yours just because it's *his*, you're in for a rude awakenin'."

"I don't—"

"I *don't* want you. It's a sodding miracle anyone does."

And with that glowing blow to her self-esteem, Spike whirled around and stormed into the hall, leaving her only with the thunderous echoes of his footsteps.

Footsteps that couldn't get away from her fast enough. Even in her dream.

Buffy had never been so grateful to wake up in all her life.

SHE DIDN'T KNOW how to react when she closed her eyes the next night and found herself in the motel room again. A part of her had expected it, had spent the day trying to dissect her encounter with Spike as she did with all her slayer dreams. Unsurprisingly, her efforts were to little avail. There really was no way to assign meaning to randomly meeting one's enemy in her subconscious. Spike hadn't spoken in code, and he'd told her nothing she wouldn't have figured out on her own.

The only thing she couldn't explain was the kiss. And truthfully, Buffy wasn't sure she wanted it explained. She'd already acknowledged Spike as a major hottie. As a heterosexual female, she was morally obligated to tip her proverbial hat to the hottest of the hot.

And Spike was definitely the hottest. Hands down.

However, gorgeous as he was, he wasn't the first sexy vampire she'd come across. There had been quite a few hotties, and now they were dust. That was that. She never gave them a second thought once they were gone. Why should she? The job occasionally necessitated slaying eye-candy, and pretty as they were, it was always easy come, easy go.

Her appraisal of the occasional hot vamp never went beyond appre-

ciation. Her appraisal had never translated into dreams of a sexual nature.

This all added up to being wigged. Very wigged. She'd never had a sex dream about a vampire—not even Angel. And even though her dream hadn't actually contained *sex*, it was still closer than anything she'd, erm, dreamt up. So finding the enemy attractive enough to slobber over in her sleep? Yeah, she was of the wigged. And kind of irked that the dream had ended before she could see where the kissage could lead. And then, naturally, irked with herself for being irked in the first place. Spike was the enemy—an evil, nasty vamp who dipped his hands in slayer blood every chance he got.

As of last night, her interest Spike transcended his current status as her mortal enemy and her appreciation for his hotness. And the more she tried to convince herself it was only a dream, the angrier with herself she became.

The day left her little more than tired and confused, and the night wasn't looking to be any better. And she really wasn't sure how to react when she found herself in the same room that night. The same motel room, down to the lamp on the nightstand. Everything was the same.

Spike stood next to the bed, looking at her as though she was expected. As though he'd been waiting for her for hours.

"Back here again?" he asked, his tone clipped.

Buffy licked her lips and shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "Looks like."

That was all he said. Silence stretched between them.

A long sigh rolled off her shoulders and she reclined wearily against the wall. She honestly didn't know if not talking was better than talking; while she *really* didn't want to think about what had happened last night more than she had already, ignoring it didn't make the tension in the room any less palpable. Spike was there, and dream or not, he was real enough to her.

He was real, and the fire he'd ignited in her belly had yet to fade.

God, she didn't know how she was supposed to deal with this. Spike had rocked her foundation. Spike had made her want him. How on earth was she supposed to dust someone she lusted after? Lusted so

badly her lips were still tingling and her panties were soaked at the mere thought of what they'd almost shared.

In the memory of a dream.

But it didn't feel like a dream or a fantasy. Not to her. Not during the day, and not right now. She was standing in a foreign motel room with her mortal enemy, and it felt real. It felt so real that she was having an increasingly harder time convincing herself that her body was actually in her bed. That she was wrapped in blankets and Mr. Gordo was tucked securely under her arm. She knew that, but it didn't make the motel room any less real.

Her life was *so* beyond screwed up.

The night passed in silence. Spike sat on the edge of the bed with his back to her. He didn't speak again. Neither did she. They just sat, together but apart. Not talking. Not looking at each other. Not even fighting because, on some level, they knew it wouldn't do any good. There was nothing to do in the interim but wait for the call of day to tug them back to a reality that made sense.

Buffy's nights continued like that for weeks. She lived her life as she always did, knowing Spike waited for her in her sleep. Sometimes they spoke. Sometimes they sat, divided by the awkwarddest of awkward silences. It was neither pleasant nor unpleasant. It was simply there. Her reoccurring but ever-changing dream.

Sleep had once been her haven—her place where monsters couldn't chase her, save the occasional prophetic dream. Now her dreams had breached into dual realities. There was nowhere she could turn for rest.

Strangely, Buffy never felt the need to mention her dreams to Giles. There wasn't anything to gain—no knowledge to uncover. Her dreams weren't prophetic—they simply *were*.

Moreover, the dreams were hers. And she wasn't in the mood to share.

So she lived as though nothing had changed, because ostensibly, nothing *bad* changed. In the day, she would go to school and train in the library as Giles riffled through dusty old books and told her how very much the world was doomed unless she stopped the rising of so-and-so. As Xander did his level best to annoy Angel whenever he was

around by bashing the vampire repeatedly over the head with a rolled up newspaper. As Willow hacked into city files and broke through firewalls. As the world went on around her.

The routine repeated itself every day until nightfall. Until Buffy sneaked a peek at the fading sun through the nearest window, stood up and told the Scoobies she had to patrol and disappeared until the next morning.

Her day progressed beyond patrols. Her day extended into her dreams.

It was every night. Every single night. Every night leading up to Halloween.

Then everything changed.



IT TOOK FOREVER TO FALL ASLEEP.

Buffy hadn't known how things would change the second she saw Spike again in reality. She'd expected to be unnerved, but beyond that, there was no way to predict how she would react. The dangerous thing, she knew, was to confuse the real Spike with the Spike she saw in her dreams. After all, they hadn't run into each other since Parent/Teacher Night. Everything she knew about him—in reality—came from what little information Angel was willing to divulge and the pages of Giles's dusty books.

She didn't know Spike. Not at all.

But in her mind, she'd spent a lot of time with him. A lot of *quiet* time, granted, but time nonetheless. And it was damned hard not to mix up the two.

Seeing Spike tonight, after Giles had assured her that Halloween was a day for all unholy things to rest, had thrown her off her game. It didn't help that he'd cornered her in an abandoned building while she'd been possessed by her girly costume. It didn't help that she'd seen something in his eyes—something beyond *you're about to be supper*.

She'd seen *something*.

But that'd been hours ago, and now she was in bed. She was in bed, shaken, and unable to sleep.

Because she knew Spike would be there.

Spike, who had leaned over her tonight with his fangs bared. Spike, who had rubbed his hard cock against her wet, burning body. Spike, who had looked almost betrayed when Ethan's spell ended and the Slayer returned at full-force.

Spike in reality. Spike in her dreams.

It took forever to fall asleep.



THE AIR SPLIT WITH A DEAFENING ROAR, AND EVEN BEFORE THE blurred objects in the room could form shape, she found herself slammed to the floor with a snarling vampire straddling her back-side. A snarling vampire who had absolutely no qualms in grinding his ferociously hard cock against her ass. He had her right arm pressed to her back and her left pinned to the ground before she could even think about punching him away, and when he leaned down, he made sure that she felt every inch of his body hard against hers.

"You think you can just do that?" he demanded, fangs grazing her earlobe. "You think you can walk away? You think—"

Anger heated her chest. Walk away? Hello! He'd been seconds away from sinking his teeth into her throat before Ethan's spell fizzled. Not to mention, *he* was the one who bolted. *He'd* left her after, oh yeah, trying to kill her.

"Not that it matters," she ground out, "but you're the one who—"

"I don't mean that, you infuriating bint!"

"Well forgive me for not reading your obviously unbalanced mind!" She held her breath as he flipped her over, and then—oh god—he was right above her. His legs had her thighs trapped and his cock was rubbing her intimately through their clothes. His eyes were wide and blazing with an addictive symphony of anger drenched in lust.

"You can't walk away from this," he growled, his hands settling on her nightshirt and ripping it away before she could squeeze out a gasp. And then she was lying there, beneath him, her naked breasts exposed to the perusal of his hungry, conflicted eyes. "You can't..." he contin-

ued, fingers tracing a soft trail up her abdomen. "You can't just pretend like *this* isn't happenin'."

"It's *not*," she fired back, though her voice wasn't nearly as strong as she would have liked. "It's not."

Her sanity was dependent on that knowledge. This wasn't real. None of it was. It wasn't happening. There was no universe in which she would find herself pinned under an angry, evil vampire, her breasts very naked and her nipples hardening under said vampire's gaze. This wasn't real. It *couldn't* be.

"I told you that first night," Spike growled, "vampires don't need rationality. We don't need logic. We just need a reason, big or small. Real or imagined." His head dipped, his tongue curling around one of her nipples, and pleasure beyond anything she'd ever felt burst through her body. Oh my *god*, this *had* to be a dream. It had to be. All he'd done was lick her boob and she was already hot and...

"Oh my god," she whimpered, thrusting her breast against his mouth. "Oh my god. Ohhh..."

"I was wrong, wasn't I?" Spike murmured, his hips moving rhythmically against hers so that his cock hit her center with every thrust. And *god*, if she got any hotter, her flannel pajama bottoms would melt right off. "Bleeding hell..."

"Wrong?"

"He hasn't touched you. Not like this." His eyes met hers just as his tongue came back into play, licking her nipple again before he reached a hand between them. "Angelus hasn't had his merry way with you."

A bizarre mixture of exhilarated indignation raced through her veins. "That's none of your—"

"I'm *making* it my business," Spike barked, his eyes flashing. "And he hasn't touched you."

"He's *touched*," Buffy retorted with anger she didn't truly feel, stifling a moan and thrusting herself wantonly against his cock every time he tried to pull away. Every inch of her was on fire, and only he could calm the flames. "He's touched plenty of times. He's touched so much—"

The floor rocked with the slam of his fist. "*Enough!*"

"Oh, not nearly."

"He can't have you, too!" he snarled before biting into her breast. "That greedy wanker can't have you, too!"

Pain splintered through her body, but it was secondary to pleasure. She was sick. She was certifiable. He was *biting* her, and all she could do was whimper and rub herself against his erection like some sex-crazed porn star. "Oh *god!*"

Spike released her with a growl, shaking his head furiously. "I knew it. I sodding knew it. I knew coming here was a *big, bloody* mistake." He punctuated this with several more punches to the floor, and she broke into nervous trembles. "I knew she'd...the second she learned..."

Again with the mention of this ever-elusive *she*. Who was *she*? And why was Spike so freaking preoccupied with her?

And why did Buffy give a crap?

The answer to the third question was a little easier to come by, but it didn't make her feel any better.

She swallowed hard. "Who?"

"Doesn't matter," Spike growled. "She's not here."

But she was. Spike had brought her with him; he always did. It was what kept him quiet most of the time—what had silenced him every night, save for the first. Whoever *she* was, she was a constant source of pain wrapped in what Buffy could only assume was love.

Only Spike wasn't with *her*; he was with Buffy. He was rubbing his cock against *Buffy's* soaking pussy, teasing *Buffy's* breasts with his mouth. But his mind wasn't with *Buffy*. His mind was with the other one. The woman who had learned something powerful enough to drive Spike into a jealous frenzy.

Which, consequentially, was enough to drive Buffy into a jealous frenzy.

There was nothing in her life that made sense right now.

"No," Buffy whispered, her voice trembling. She lifted her palm to his cheek, her insides rocking when he slowly raised his head to meet her eyes. And what she saw there—the grief and outrage freckled with specks of awe and wonder—was enough to level mountains. "No, she's not. She's not here, Spike. It's just me."

"Slayer..."

For long seconds, they stood as a house divided. Night and day.

There was something in his eyes that she'd never seen before; something beyond understanding. Beyond anything she'd ever touched. He looked so lost in that moment, as though every true thing he'd ever learned had been turned into a lie.

It amazed her, watching a war engage behind a man's eyes. And she saw him—saw how much he wanted to hate her, and how confused whatever *this* was had made him. She saw everything, and it as so tragic she found herself nearly moved to tears.

The moment disappeared and left only angered lust in its wake. Spike growled again, biting at her lips and freeing his cock in a blink. "It's you," he barked, his eyes bleeding. "Yeah, yeah, it's you. Some tarty slayer just waiting to have her pussy crammed full with—"

"Spike!"

He perked his brows, a leer stretching his lips. "With me, eh? Sorry, love. I don't fuck slayers. I *kill* them. You can't make me forget by pretending. By acting like you *care*."

Her eyes widened. "No. No, Spike, please—"

"You want me, Slayer? You wanna know how it feels to get fucked rotten by a vampire?" He bit at her lips again. "Angelus'll never show you. Not that poncy-arse excuse of a pup he's become."

"I didn't mean it," Buffy whimpered, hating herself for sounding so helpless. So pathetically *damself*-y and female. She wasn't a weak sniveling leaf of a thing—she was Buffy Summers, Vampire Slayer. And she wasn't the sort of slayer who cowered under vampires.

Cowering under a vampire in a *dream*? How pathetic was she?

"What's it you didn't mean, Slayer?" Spike demanded, crawling up her body until his cock struck her chin. "Never mind. I don't care. Open your mouth."

Buffy's body tightened with indignation. "Are you—mmmpff!"

"Might as well have some fun," he purred, swirling his hips and slowly dragging his length between her lips before slamming down again. "Seeing as this is *my* dream and all."

"Mmnauuah!"

"Got a hot little mouth, you do." A long moan ripped through the air, and he shoved his cock so deep into her mouth that his head brushed the back of her throat. "Bleeding hell, Slayer..."

Buffy's eyes watered, her body trembling with a combination of loathing and shamed arousal. The part of her determined to keep her psyche of this pseudo-reality faded away completely and everything became painstakingly real. The feel of Spike's erection pushing into her mouth, the hot whimpers tearing off his lips, and the humiliating way her body responded.

Mostly that last thing.

"Wonder if you're really this hot," he rasped, his thrusts growing harder. "Burn me right up, you would. Suck me, baby. Suck me hard."

She found herself obeying blindly, her tongue rising to caress the underside of his cock as it pumped in and out of her mouth, his balls smacking her chin with every drive. It was, admittedly, the strangest sensation she'd ever experienced. Something she always suspected she'd never wanted to do, no matter how much she loved the man in question. The whole thing seemed so degrading—a notion not helped by the fact that Spike had straddled her face and was shoving himself so far into her throat that she had to keep from choking.

This is humiliating, she thought, tears spilling down her cheeks. Spike had her pinned in her subconscious, and he was fucking her mouth.

I can't breathe.

But she didn't fight it. She couldn't.

There was a small, sick part of her that was enjoying it too much. Enjoying something she knew she shouldn't—enjoying the moans that tore through his lips and knowing that she was the reason. That she was giving him pleasure. And the knowledge that she was enjoying it—that despite the tears running down her cheeks and the hot blaze of disgrace searing into her skin—had her hating this for reasons that had nothing to do with Spike and everything to do with her treacherous body.

Why hadn't Angel ever made her feel like this? For all his gentle touches and his soft kisses, she'd never burned for him—not like she burned for Spike. The memory of Spike's lips on hers—false or not, dream or not—had followed her for days. And now with his cock in her mouth, with his hips slamming against her, she clung desperately to her outrage. Because if she wasn't outraged, what did that make her?

Sick. God, I'm so sick.

There was nothing preventing her from throwing him off her body. Her arms weren't pinned. She could have him slammed against the wall in a blink. She could kick him within an inch of his undead ass. She could make him pay for stripping her dignity and then some.

She could. And she would.

"So good," Spike whimpered, rubbing himself against her tongue. "Oh yeah, kitten. Just like that. Lick me good."

Buffy mewled in complaint, her disobedient body relaxing and growing pliant under him. The feel of him thrusting inside her mouth had somehow crossed the boundary from invasive to something she didn't want to fathom. And before she knew what was happening, a treacherous hand had reached between the monster's legs, her fingers grazing his ball sac with an odd combination of curiosity and nervousness. The male anatomy was such a foreign thing to her; beyond the crude drawings left on her classroom desks and the unimaginative pictures the school-board okayed for her textbooks, she was left to juvenile, however amusing euphemisms. And while part of her held out on the possibility her exhausted imagination was running away from her, the larger part—the part that was beginning to doubt this was a dream at *all*—knew the sensations, at least, were very real.

Spike's cock was in her mouth, his velvety head stabbing the back of her throat with every vicious thrust of his hips. Even if the room around her remained imagined, that much was real.

"Oh *fuck*," he gasped, bucking hard against her exploratory touch, his hips rotating to create friction against his balls. "That's so good."

Buffy blinked rapidly. "Reary?" she asked around him, and nearly jumped out of her skin when he answered her with a warm chuckle.

"Yes, love. Really." Then, without warning, he lifted off her, his erection slipping out of her mouth. And to her surprised embarrassment, the first thing that ran through her mind was a scream of protest.

Again divided between realities. There was no way she'd ever lament the loss of Spike's boy-parts down her throat. Nuh uh. Talk about the ickiest of the ick. Especially when he'd forced her to take him in.

“Bleeding hell, I’m such a git. Such a sodding arse,” he mumbled, rolling away from her, wrapping his hand around her upper arm. “I’m sorry.”

More blinking. Had he really just apologized?

“You really haven’t, have you? Fuck, I didn’t... You really have never taken it in your mouth before.” It wasn’t a question, though his eyes brightened as though realizing something important—something he hadn’t truly believed before. And then, to her amazement, his face fell with something that looked a lot like shame. A vampire...shamed.

For what he’d done to her.

It didn’t last, of course. Spike remembered himself before she could speak, before she could focus too long on the concept of remorse from an evil thing. And in a blink, any hint of compunction was gone, and he was looking at her again. Not with guilt or pride, but with calm understanding.

“That’s right, innit?” he prompted. “Slayer...”

Buffy’s skin went hot and she nodded slowly. She hadn’t taken it anywhere, much less in her mouth. She’d thought her lack of experience was common knowledge, if only because a virginal high school student was more than a rarity. Even in small towns, she figured she practically had it tattooed on her forehead.

A long, tortured moan tore through the air. Spike’s eyes fluttered shut. “I’m a git,” he murmured. “I’m such a bloody git. Your first time...it shouldn’t’ve been like that. Not with me. Not with...shouldn’t have been...but Christ, why the bleeding hell do I even care? It’s not like this is real, right? It’s not like...I don’t...”

She found the torn confusion in his voice oddly comforting.

His brow furrowed and his fangs receded, his eyes melting from yellow to blue as they deepened with realization. “You’re...you and Angelus have never...”

Buffy fidgeted self-consciously. “Not like it’s any of your business.”

“You just had my prick in your mouth, Slayer. I’d say it’s become my business.”

“I didn’t ask for that!”

A slow, devilish grin tickled his mouth. “Maybe not,” he agreed, his eyes raking the length of her. “But you loved it.”

It was her dream, so she should be able to control how fast her heart was beating or how flushed her skin became. "Ugh! You wish you...perv guy."

Spike's eyes twinkled. "Don't have to wish," he replied, licking those sinful lips of his. "I can smell you."

Oh god. Buffy's blood ran cold, her thighs pressing together instinctively. He could really smell that? She *smelled*? Being all hot and bothered made her *smell* hot and bothered? There wasn't a big enough rock to crawl under if that was the truth.

Because earlier tonight, pinned under Spike with his demon eyes boring into her, his fangs glimmering in quick flashes of moonlight, she'd never been so turned on in her life. Had Angel and her friends not been present, she might have done something embarrassing—like explore Spike's lips to see whether or not her dreams had been accurate.

"You've really never been touched?" Spike repeated expectantly, running a hand down her naked arm. And just like that, she remembered she was sitting beside him with her boobs all perky and on display. However, before she could throw her arms protectively over her chest, one of her breasts was in Spike's palm, and her resistance melted at the slightest brush of his fingers against her nipple.

"You're purity," he whispered, almost dazed. "Bleeding hell, Slayer, you're..."

The note of near reverence in his voice was such a step away from anything she'd heard from him, and it had her shaking harder than she wanted to admit. It would be so easy to cave. The way he was touching her...the look in his eyes...the tremble in his voice. She had no idea what had happened or why. Why he was suddenly looking at her like she'd been touched by Heaven when, just a few minutes ago, he'd been more than happy to force himself into her mouth. And god, his behavior was doing a number on her mind. She was confused about him and confused about her confusion. There should be no inner debate. There shouldn't be anything but revulsion, but she couldn't hate him. Even after this.

He was a monster but there was more to it, and it'd be *so* easy. So easy to forget he'd hurt her. Forget he was a vampire—a vampire with a

rap sheet filled with slayer-killage, not to mention obsession. He also had another woman in his life—one he loved.

Something sharp jabbed her heart.

“I’m not pure,” she whispered.

“Bollocks. I’m a vampire, love. I know somethin’ about impurity.” Spike smiled a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “You’re nothin’ *but* pure.”

She didn’t know what, but something had changed. Gone was the heartless bastard of before; she was sitting with a completely different man. One who looked at her with something beyond hate-driven lust. One who looked at her with...something.

“And you...like pure?” Buffy asked, wincing. “I mean...vamp and all, right? It doesn’t seem like pure’s—”

“I...” Spike blinked and shook his head, meeting her gaze again with tentativeness that surprised her. As though he was trying to reconcile thought with feeling. She could almost see a battle unfolding—one she couldn’t touch, merely witness.

Their eyes remained locked for a long time. So long that Buffy forgot she was half-naked, and that Spike’s hand remained at her breast. However, the silence splitting them made her painfully self-aware, and before she could stop herself, her gaze had dropped to his lap. To the hard cock lying across his stomach.

“Ohh—umm...”

Spike grinned, his other hand dropping, curled fingers stroking his dick. “You liked it before, didn’t you?” he murmured. “You can fight me all you want, sweetheart, but the truth’s a little harder to hide from, innit?”

And quickly—very quickly—her conscientiousness returned. “I didn’t—”

“Did so. It’s all right to like it, kitten. There’s no one here but you and me...for some bloody reason.” Spike sighed. “And we can’t even trust that much, can we?”

“You don’t think it’s a dream?”

“I don’t know what I think anymore. Feels real...that’s for bloody sure.” He paused, then released her breast so abruptly she couldn’t

help the long moan of complaint that hissed through her lips. "He hasn't touched you," he murmured, grabbing her wrist and bringing her hand to his cock. "He hasn't... That makes you mine, kitten."

Buffy exhaled slowly, her wide eyes enamored with what she was seeing. God, with what she was doing. With little to no provocation, she found herself curling her fist around his length, getting a feel for him in her hand. He was so thick. So...well, big, for lack of a better word. And though she had nothing by which to offer a basis for comparison, she had the idea that Spike's size was the sort of thing that could give most guys an inferiority complex to end all inferiority complexes. Or perhaps he just seemed large to her—she didn't know. All she knew was his erection was in her hand and it filled it to all proportions.

He'd just said she was his. She belonged to him. A smart slayer would argue with him. A smart slayer would put up a fight. A smart slayer would let him know, in no uncertain terms, that she could never *belong* to an evil thing.

She somehow doubted, though, that any of her dead sisters had been in her position. Dreaming herself a new reality with a vampire out to kill her. A vampire whose hand was covering hers, coaxing her to pump his shaft. A vampire whose eyes kept flickering from her naked breasts to the sight of her hand pulling at his cock.

No. No other slayer had experienced this. This was something that belonged to Buffy, and Buffy alone.

Spike moaned, thrusting upward in time with the strokes of her hand. "Oh god," he whimpered. "That's perfect, that is."

"What is?" she whispered. "What—"

"Just keep like that," he murmured, flashing her a reassuring grin. A grin she didn't catch; she was too mesmerized by the movements of her hand. How could something so small give anyone such pleasure? All she did was touch him, and she'd somehow rendered him into a babbling vampire. A babbling vampire whose babbles made her hotter by the minute. The whimpers and gasps spilling through his lips had her insides burning almost to the brink of pain. Her pussy was drenched and her nerves were buzzing, and if he didn't touch her soon, she was sure she'd melt into a puddle of slayer-goo.

"Fuck...you're so warm," Spike gasped, his eyes rolling up. "So... *god*, so perfect."

Perfect?

"Need to come. Need..." Again, he curled his fingers around her wrist, halting her movements. "Touch me where you did before," he ordered, his voice hoarse.

"Where

—"

He guided her hand to his testicles again. "Squeeze me gently... Oh god, yes." A flash of pure euphoria washed across his face, and he threw his head back with a long, tortured moan. "Now your mouth. Put your mouth on me."

Buffy blinked. "I—"

"Just like before, love. God, *please*." His eyes widened in desperation. "I'll tell you when to pull away, yeah? I won't come in your mouth. I just...you're so hot. I need—"

There was every chance she would regret this tomorrow. Dream or not, doing what he asked pushed everything past *borderline* to *real*. Made it official that this was something she wanted, too. And she did—she wanted it here. In this place composed of nowhere. There wasn't a world outside these walls. There wasn't anything but a motel room, and something kept bringing her here.

Something kept bringing her here. She was hopeless to do anything but answer its call.

Spike pulled her hair out of her face as her mouth dipped toward his cock, his gentle touch doing little more than confusing the hell out of her. But she didn't stop to think—she was too hungry for what he offered. Instead, her tongue tentatively curled around the tip of him, slurping him between her lips.

"Oh god," he whimpered, arching upward and urging his cock deeper inside her mouth. "You're so hot."

"Mmmm..."

"I'm not gonna last," he gasped. "Need to come. Need to come so bloody bad. Squeeze me, kitten. Don't be afraid to hurt me. Not gonna break."

She nodded, the hand at his balls remembering itself. Her mouth was tentative in her explorations, aided by the gentle thrust of his hips. She had no idea if she was doing this right, or if there was even a right way to do it. But she found herself dancing with him in no time—following him whenever he started to slide away from her, determined to keep him where she wanted him. Her tongue rubbed his underside almost roughly, then took time to skim the length of him as he pumped himself between her lips.

She liked this—this feeling of control. She liked having Spike writhing because of her. She liked knowing that she could reduce a being of such power and authority into a whimpering mess with only her tongue and lips. Hell, she was even growing to like the taste of his skin. All thoughts of perversion or *wrong* were tossed aside. This wasn't degrading at all.

Not when she got to do it the way she wanted to do it.

Of course, that much could be called into question with one simple word.

"Stop!"

Buffy froze, her wide eyes trailing upward. Her mouth, however, remained stubbornly locked around him. She'd stop when she damn well felt like stopping, thank you very much.

"Stop!" Spike gasped again. "You gotta stop. Gonna come. You don't want—"

Oh. And he made her stop for *that*? Why? Did he think she couldn't take it?

She'd show him.

Eyes narrowed in defiance, Buffy huffed and sucked him in as far as she could. What she couldn't take into her mouth, she rubbed with her free hand. She drew him in until his head was once again pressed to the back of her throat. And, without ceremony, she began swallowing hard around him. He'd liked that enough before and something told her *this* would send him over the edge.

Spike's eyes went so wide it nearly looked painful. "*Buffy!*"

So *that's* what it took to get him to remember her name. She merely grinned around him and kept on swallowing. She swallowed as he bucked wildly off the floor. As he shook and moaned. As he spilled

himself into her throat, making a prayer of her name with every need-less breath that left his lips.

This had sealed her fate. Her life wouldn't be the same after this. Reality didn't matter anymore. Not with Spike looking at her as he was now. Like *that*.

"Buffy," he gasped. "My god."

Everything had changed. It'd happened so fast, but everything had changed.

And there was no going back.

SPIKE HAD BEEN ready to do something to her before she awoke; Buffy was certain of it. The foggy look in his eyes had melted from shock to awe, flecked with sparks of kindness, then fired with lust again when he'd sniffed at the air. He'd licked his lips with that sultry tongue of his and opened his mouth to speak...

Then her mother's fist had pounded on her door and the dream-world around her had vanished. Somehow, the night had run away from her. One minute, she'd been with Spike and the next she was back in her room, and woefully alone at that. There were no eyes burning into her. No sexy accent whispering naughty things in her ear. No Spike. No Spike anywhere. And aside from her mother's persistence that she haul her behind out of bed and in the shower before she was late, all was quiet.

Buffy wasn't sure how she made it through the day. While logically she knew she'd done nothing wrong, she couldn't help the way her insides flushed with guilt whenever she thought of Angel or...well, Angel. It wasn't like she could control her freakishly realistic might-not-be-dreams.

It was the realism that ultimately did it for her. After last night—after waking up with a lake of fire between her legs—Buffy was all but

convinced there was nothing *fake* about her time with Spike. Everything was too real—too specific. There were no crazy turns or random idiosyncrasies. Even the room was the same. Always the same. Dreams were *never* that detailed—she didn't care if she lived on the helliest of hellmouths. Something was going on. She spent every day in training learning about Spike and every night in Spike's company. There was nothing fake about it. Nothing fake at all.

She wondered if Spike thought of her this much when he was awake. She wondered if he thought of her at all.

And if he hadn't thought of her before, she wondered if he would now. Today. Especially today. He'd been ready to do something to her. Something undoubtedly naughty but very much of the good. There'd been no hatred in his eyes. No loathing. Nothing but confusion and undeniable sparks of desire. Buffy knew desire when she saw it. She might be a biological virgin, but there was no way she was a mental one. Ever since Angel had come into her life, she'd given sex more and more thought—not necessarily sex with *him*, because other than a few tasty kisses, they hadn't shared anything. Well, she'd danced like a bitch in heat against a very aroused Xander just to drive Angel crazy, but that didn't necessarily make them soulmates. It made her a tease. A big, lousy tease.

Since Spike had barreled into her life, she barely had time for Angel anymore. Her thoughts were occupied by a different vampire. And now that they'd shared something—something that had started out as outright violation but led to something soft and aggravatingly undefined—she didn't know what to think. All she knew was she couldn't wait to go to sleep.

She couldn't wait, but she dreaded it all the same. There was no telling what the night would bring. What daylight and hours away from Spike would do to his mood. He might decide he was disgusted with himself for letting her touch him—for letting her take control of something that was supposed to be brutal and degrading. He might say nothing to her at all, as had been the norm for weeks. There was no telling with Spike. He was unpredictable.

There was an easy solution to this, of course. Just tell the Watcher. Tell Giles that her nights were no longer hers, and hadn't been since

Spike had arrived and started messing everything up. Tell Giles that, until last night, she'd thought everything to be purely a dream, but she'd learned things—felt things—no dream could replicate. She could tell Giles, and he'd hit the books. He'd either find a prophecy or an antidote or something to explain her very strange life in a very bookish, clinical fashion. If she told Giles, there was every chance she'd never have to see Spike in her dreams again.

And that was why she kept her mouth shut. She wasn't going to cave. She wasn't going to run. Oh no. Spike would be there tonight.

There would be no pushing the pause button. No running away.

Even if every nerve in her body buzzed with dread.



BUFFY DIDN'T KNOW HOW SHE KNEW THE WOMAN SHE'D SEEN ANGEL with was Spike's elusive *her*—she just did. Granted, the whole Angel-talking-to-a-vamp-without-dustiness went a long way in piecing the puzzle together. There was no questioning the woman was of the undead nation. Angel was weirdly weird about his family, or whatever crazy Anne Rice term vampires used to describe those in their bloodline. He hadn't even attempted to take out Spike the few times they'd faced each other—not in an 'ashes-to-ashes-dust-to-dust' way, anyway. Perhaps it was some bizarre side-effect of the soul. Because Spike and Dru were his...offspring, or whatever, Angel felt responsible for the lives lost at their fangs.

One thing was for certain: if the woman she'd seen with Angel was Spike's girlfriend—or the one he loved in his vampy way, there were serious issues just waiting to boil over. Because the way she'd mooned over Angel hadn't been platonic. There was serious lust there. Big heaps of fat, serious lust. The vamp-woman would've stripped naked and screwed Angel under the monkey bars if he'd asked.

And for whatever reason, Buffy didn't care. She was climbing into bed after a rather uneventful patrol—save the vamp soap opera—and she couldn't care less that her alleged honey was out there with another woman.

Probably because she knew she was going to see Spike tonight.

It was no longer a question of *if*, and if she was truly honest with herself, it never had been. Oh sure, she would go through the motions of pretending he might *not* show up in her dreams, knowing always, of course, that he would be there the second she shut her eyes. They'd been doing this for weeks now. It was their standing date. He would be there. And he'd either be nasty or wonderful or completely silent. There was every possibility, after last night's explosive encounter, that he might not say anything at all. That the silence to which she'd begrudgingly grown accustomed would once again dominate her evening.

She didn't want that. And she wasn't sure she wanted him to talk, either. Well, okay, she was anxious to see him, but she didn't know how she should feel about that. About her obviously ill state of mind if she could anticipate spending yet another night in the company of a killer. A killer whom, not twenty-four hours ago, had shoved his cock in her mouth and pounded against her face so hard she was genuinely surprised she hadn't awoken with a sore jaw this morning.

He'd been so angry last night, so incredibly angry, but it hadn't lasted. And by the time the night was rolling toward its conclusion, he'd looked at her as though she were precious. As though she'd been touched by God.

Last night had left her confused. Confused and more than confused. And knowing that she would have to see Spike and face even more confusion made her dread sleep but pine for it all the same.

Oh yeah. Her life was screwy.

But for some reason, she couldn't bring herself to change it.



SPIKE WAS ALWAYS THE ONE WAITING. THE ONE SITTING ON THE BED, staring intently at the corner where she just materialized. It was something she'd come to depend on—the promise of his presence. Because no matter how confused these nights together had her, there was some measure of comfort in them as well—even nights as volatile and potentially damaging as the last.

There was so much in her life that didn't belong to her. This did.

With as twisted and dangerous as it was, it was real. And it was hers. No one could take that away.

Spike was, as usual, on the edge of the bed, his hands clasped and his eyes bright. He didn't wait for her to collect herself. Instead, he opened his mouth and said, "I'm sorry." And it took everything that she had to keep from falling over.

"You're what?"

"I'm sorry," he said again.

"You are?"

"Last night...I wasn't myself, Slayer. Not till..." A long, tortured laugh tore through his throat. "I'm sorry, all right? I shouldn't've done it. Never mind *why* I shouldn't've done it—I just shouldn't've." He was quiet for a beat, though he couldn't keep from twitching under her scrutiny. "Let's just leave it. Yeah? Do you need to know every sodding detail?"

Buffy licked her lips and exhaled slowly. Great. Two seconds here and she was already trembling like a tectonic plate. "Every detail...of what, exactly?" she asked. "I know the details of last night. What other details are there?"

Spike opened his mouth to reply, then paused and frowned. There was nothing for several long, endless seconds.

And then something happened. Something very strange.

Spike laughed. He really laughed. Softly at first, and then hard. He laughed until his body shook. He laughed until his chuckles grew so high in pitch she would have questioned his sanity were she not already questioning her own. It was both relaxing and unnerving, seeing Spike laugh. Not knowing if he was amused or devastated. Not knowing why she really cared, and fearing the answer to her own questions.

"We're a bloody pair, aren't we?" he asked, spreading his arms. "I don't know what to do, Slayer. Fuck me, I've run outta ideas. I go for violence, and you kiss me. I try to ignore you, and you...you just sit there...with me but not with me, yeah? Can't bloody well wish you away. And then last night, I tried to... God, I don't even know what I was tryin' to do. I just...seein' you, and then *seeing* you...I snapped." He exhaled, his shoulders rolling back. "And why the *bleeding hell* do I care? Why have I wracked my buggering brain tryin' to get over the idea

that I might've hurt you? You're the enemy, right? I should wanna snack on your innards, but the thought of what I did..." A tortured, pitiful laugh filled the air. "If there was any bloody justice in the world, you'd be six sodding feet below me now and I could forget... I could just move on."

He was talking circles around her, muddling her already confused thoughts into a pounding headache. "Move on?" she asked, trembling. There was nothing in Spike's body language to warn her that she might be in trouble. Plus, she didn't even know if he could hurt her here. "I don't understand..."

"I can't get you outta my bloody head," he whispered, his eyes falling shut. "Doesn't matter where I am. Who I'm...who I'm with. It's wrong. I'm not some nancy puppy with a soul stuffed up my arse. I don't *want* to think about you, but what ole Spike *wants* doesn't matter anymore. You're *haunting* me, Slayer. You're with me all the sodding time, and I can't get away. When I wake up, you're there. When I eat, you're there. When I sleep, you're there. You're *always* there. *Always*." He paused. "In a hundred years, I've never looked at another woman. I might be the only monogamous vampire in the bloody world, but I've never *wanted* anything else. Even when *she* did. And suddenly you're... suddenly you're all I think about."

"I don't mean to be," Buffy whispered, hoping against hope he wouldn't hear the lie in her voice. The lie that betrayed her uncertainty—the part of her that was torn between loving and hating this. "I have no idea what's going on. All I know is, I go to sleep and I'm here."

"Me too," he replied miserably.

"So you think it, too?"

Spike glanced up, arching an eyebrow. "Think what?"

"That...well, that we're sharing dreams. Or that...it's real?" She bit her lower lip uncertainly, quivering at the shadow that fell across his face. "I mean, obviously not *real* real. Because...I'm very much with the tucked in my bed right now. A-and you're...wherever you are."

He shook his head hard. Too hard. Hard enough that she knew immediately he'd given this a lot of thought. More than likely, he'd figured it out long before she had and was rather content remaining locked in denial. "No," he whispered furiously. "That's impossible."

"One of the things I've learned while living on the Hellmouth: nothing's impossible."

"I don't—"

"She was with Angel tonight." Buffy froze, her eyes widening in horror. Where the words had come from, she didn't know—she just had to say something. She had to say something to get him off this kick where he thought he needed to remain faithful to a faithless whore-vamp *even* in his mind. And granted, announcing something like that was probably not the best move, but she needed it out there. She needed him to know.

"She what?" Spike rasped. He didn't bother to ask to whom she referred. It was there—one of the many unacknowledged elephants in the room. "H-how do you know?"

"I saw her. Well, I'm guessing it was her. I don't know." She licked her lips, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. "But she was with Angel and he wasn't...you know...killing her." A cold beat of silence stretched between them. Buffy swallowed hard and slowly raised her right hand to demonstrate an approximate height. "Yay tall. Thin. Dark hair. Very...umm...pretty."

"Shut your gob!" Spike barked, though she knew immediately it was more out of hurt than anger. "She's a fucking goddess."

Buffy brought her hands up. "I didn't—"

"You're not worthy to lick the dirt off the bottom of her shoes, Slayer. Not even worth the blood in your body."

Each word slashed a deeper cut into her flesh. "I didn't mean to... look, she was there. I saw them. I—"

"With *Angel*."

She nodded. "Yeah, she was with Angel. I'm... I don't know what I am anymore. I just...I thought you should know."

"You thought I should—"

"Yes!"

The world spun off its axis. One second, Spike was glaring at her and panting with fury, his ocean eyes blazing with streaks of yellow as he attempted to rein his demon in; the next, he'd stormed across the room, captured her face between his hands, and smashed his mouth to hers. And that was it. That was the proverbial *it*. Everything

around her melted. Spike's tongue slipped between her lips, and with a long whimper, she became his completely. There was no taste in the world that could rival him, and the more she took, the hungrier she became. Boundaries blurred and her moral compass all but vanished. The longer she was with him, the less she cared about *right* and *wrong*. This couldn't be happening unless it was at least *partly* right...right?

The part of her that gave a damn was growing smaller and smaller. Perhaps none of this meant anything—she didn't know. All she knew was that Spike was pressed intimately against her, stroking her tongue with his as his lips made love to her mouth. His hard cock rubbed against her pajama-clad pussy, drawing small, involuntary whimpers from her and stirring the fire he'd started that first night back to full glory. Her skin was hot all over. Her blood rushed with excitement. She was wet and burning at the same time, and while the torture was sweet, her body begged for relief.

Spike was the only one who could give it to her.

"Slayer," he whimpered, slipping a hand between them, his fingers dancing in featherlike strokes across her flat stomach. "God help me, but I want you so much."

"Mnnaguh."

Okay, so that wasn't a word. Was she actually expected to speak coherently as he kissed her lips off?

"You taste so fucking good," Spike sucked her lower lip between his teeth. "Could snog you for hours."

She didn't know what that meant, but with that tone, he'd have little difficulty talking her into anything.

"Christ, how you torture me," he murmured, his sliding fingers beneath the waistband of her flannel pajama bottoms. "I want you every second. Every sodding second of every day. You've bloody well bewitched me. Want you wrapped around my cock. Wanna make you cream so good, you'll be ruined for anyone else. You'll be *mine*."

"Ohhhh my god."

"You want that, don't you, Slayer?"

"Buffy," she choked, fisting lockfuls of his hair. "It's Buffy."

Spike's eyes glazed over, his index finger sliding farther southward.

"Buffy," he murmured. "Buffy...you're mine, you understand? Angel doesn't touch you."

She knew the demand would sound irrational in the light of day, but god, she could care less at that moment. His hand was slipping closer to where she needed him, coating a desert of cold relief over her otherwise burning skin. "Okay," she cried. "Okay."

"Say it, Buffy. Lemme hear it."

She threw her head back and moaned, Spike instantly pressing a series of hot, wet kisses down her throat. "Yours," she whimpered helplessly. "Spike...oh my god..."

"Smell so sweet."

"Guh..."

"Wanted to taste you last night. You disappeared."

Buffy shook her head. "I woke up."

"Don't do that."

If it were only so simple. "Don't wanna. Wanna stay."

Spike pulled back sharply, his eyes blazing. "You wanna stay here?" he asked, trembling suddenly, the awed look she'd admired the night before pouring again across his gorgeous face. "You wanna stay with me?"

Buffy whimpered and nodded, thrusting her hips forward in hope of luring his hand lower. He was barely touching her—she needed him to touch her everywhere. "Yes," she breathed, but she'd already forgotten the question. "I—"

It was a good thing he moaned and covered her mouth with his again because she hadn't the slightest idea what she was about to say. Only that it would likely have been a babbling mess of incoherency. He melted her with his kiss, his hands abandoning the pursuit of her girl parts to seize her hips and angle her into the sharp thrust of his denim-clad cock. "I gotta taste you," he murmured between kisses. "Gotta know how purity tastes."

"Oh god."

"Wanna sink my tongue into that pussy. Make sure no one else has gotten you first."

"Oh *god*."

Spike pulled back, his eyes twinkling. "Are you stuck on repeat?"

"I have no idea," she answered honestly, bluntly, her mind fogged. "I'm burning up."

"I'll bloody say." After one last hungry kiss, he pulled back abruptly and shoved her back until her legs hit the mattress. He was on her again the second she fell, covering her with his body, running his hands up her abdomen until he had a mound of Buffy-breast in each palm. "These are mine," he growled, sucking at one of her nipples through her thin camisole. "No one touches them."

"No one."

He grinned in satisfaction, and before she could blink, cold air touched her skin and her camisole was no more. "Good," he purred before flicking his tongue over her sensitive skin. "You're so fucking perfect."

"Perfect?"

"My perfect, hot little slayer." His lips moved down the valley between her breasts, hands fisting the hem of her flannel bottoms. "Gonna get a good look at you now." He brushed another kiss across the underside of one of her breasts. "My slayer."

The possessiveness in his voice only made her hotter. Buffy whimpered and nodded eagerly, lifting her hips as he stripped the fabric down her legs. And then, for the first time in her life, she was lying completely naked in front of a man. A man whose cock she'd tasted. A man whose kisses still burned her lips. A man who was her enemy.

Her enemy...

"My god."

There was something in Spike's voice that rattled her insides. Buffy shivered and looked up just as the back of his knuckles grazed her bare skin. He was staring at her pussy like a man possessed, his eyes searing with lust. "Buffy..." he whispered. "You..."

She flushed brightly when she saw what he was looking at. "Short skirts. High kicks," she explained. "I...you know, it just seemed—"

"So beautiful."

Buffy paused and arched an eyebrow. "It's beautiful? Well...that's... that's, umm, nice, but I've never—"

Spike's gaze flickered upward, his heated eyes swallowing her

whole. "Believe me, love," he whispered. "It's beautiful. Sexy as hell, too."

"And for some reason, cheaper than just a bikini wax." Her skin was literally going to catch on fire if she became any hotter. "You really like it...?"

He grinned and rubbed his cheek against her hairless pussy. "So soft. So bloody sweet. Do you taste as sweet as you smell?"

"Spike..."

"Let's find out."

Then, without ceremony, he plunged his tongue deep inside her, and the world around her dissolved into a sea of color. Sparks detonated across her skin as an inhuman moan ripped through her throat. Her body was aflame, her blood bubbling with elation so pure it had to be illegal. And before she knew what she was doing, she'd closed her thighs around his face, bucking her hips to persuade his tongue deeper inside her pussy. "Oh my god!" she gasped. "Oh my god!"

"Mmm..." Spike purred, grinning a purely evil grin, his devilish tongue withdrawing from her aching, wet opening before diving in again. "Take it I was right? No one else has had you here?"

"Spike...oh god, please!"

If anything, his grin grew wider, his left hand slipping over her hip. "You like this, baby?" he murmured, pulling back just slightly and licking his lips. "Fuck, you taste good."

Her face flamed. "I...do?"

Spike grunted but didn't reply, dragging his tongue around her clit now, and *holy hell*, that was incredible. "I'm right, aren't I?" he growled, his fingers at her opening now. He raked his gaze up the length of her writhing body until their eyes locked. "No one's ever done this to you before."

Again, she had to wonder if he really expected a coherent response. Either way, the answer that rolled off her lips wasn't in any language she knew. She supposed she should consider herself fortunate that Spike was fluent in tangled, unintelligible moans of pleasure. Fortunate and very, very jealous. He'd staked his claim on her, but after this was over he'd wake up with another woman at his side.

This wasn't all hers. Spike had taken possession of her body and if

that wasn't enough, he was wheedling his way into her heart as well. But he would never be hers. He was only with her to pass the time. And *god*, she hated herself so much for caring. For thinking about what would happen in the hours they weren't together. For knowing, once she left here, the part of her that had been divided before she arrived tonight would no longer be in question. Even with the brutality he'd subjected her to the night before, the softness he'd shown her afterward—coupled with the way his mouth was making love to her now—had absolved him of any wrongdoing in her heart. And she couldn't give a damn what that made her. How sick it was. How *wrong* it was. She didn't care. Not right now. The part of her that wanted so badly to hate him had died, and the only thing left to do was wait until her heart was good and broken.

Spike was a vampire first in his eyes. He hated this thing between them. He hated it so much. And even though his mouth was caressing her now, she knew how much this tenderness had to disgust him. Tenderness for *her*. Tenderness he normally reserved for another.

This wasn't permanent, but it had left a permanent mark. All she could do right now was enjoy it and hope it wouldn't hurt too much when he remembered who he was, and how easy it would be to kill her now.

Buffy sucked in a breath and moaned his name aloud, her hips arching off the bed as he edged a finger inside her pussy. The things he did to her...no one would ever touch her like this. No one. He'd crawled inside her skin and made himself at home. Her life would never be the same.

"Bleeding hell," Spike breathed into her, lapping at her clit, swallowing her with his eyes when she cried out again. "You taste divine."

That was the second time he'd referred to her taste. The idea that she even *had* a distinctive taste had her skin melting off her bones with a strange combination of humiliation and intrigue. However, for the way he was suckling her juices up like a man starved, she decided that he could have as much of her so-called divine taste as he liked. "I...oh... oh my...Spike..."

"No one else tastes this pussy," he growled, pushing another finger inside her. The pressure was so sweet. And then he had her swollen clit

sucked between his lips, and a wanton, womanly cry touched the air in a voice she barely recognized as her own. “No one, Buffy.”

“Unnnhg!”

“Angel even thinks of getting this close to you, and the wanker’s dust. You hear?” He indulged in long, sensuous laps of her clit. “This honey’s mine.”

She wanted to stipulate if Angel couldn’t come near her that Spike’s vamp-hoe was similarly off-limits. But those words wouldn’t come; she nodded instead, stifling a sob and thrusting her pussy against his mouth, pushing his fingers deeper inside her.

“You’re so bloody tight,” Spike whispered between flicks of his tongue. “Can’t wait to feel you around me. Swallowin’ me. Burnin’ me so good.”

“Oh god.”

She was desperate to keep her eyes on him—addicted, as she was, to the sight of his gorgeous face buried between her legs. And now that she was all but convinced this was real—or as real as the dream allowed—the thought that he was truly licking at her forbidden flesh was nearly too much to handle. Even in the height of popularity, Buffy had never seen herself as the sort of girl guys would want to do this to; she’d listened in envy to friends back at Hemery as they discussed the raunchy interludes they’d enjoyed with their respective boyfriends, never thinking it would happen for her. Not even when she’d met Angel. Now Spike was sucking her so hard she was sure she would combust. There’d be nothing left of her after this.

“You’re gonna let me in here, aren’t you, Slayer?” Spike murmured, releasing her clit with a parting lick, his fingers slipping out of her aching hole as his tongue dipped inside her again. “You’re gonna wrap this delicious flesh around my cock. Both in here and out there. I’m gonna need to taste every inch of you.”

The idea alone made her sob. She’d let him have her; she knew she would. But it’d leave her ruined for anyone else, and all too soon he’d run back to the one he *really* wanted and she’d be left nursing a broken heart.

This had happened too fast. She’d lost herself too damn fast.

“You gonna let me fuck you, Buffy?” he rasped, pushing his fingers

back inside of her pussy and drawing a wet path back to her clit with his tongue. "You gonna let me show you how good it can be? You gonna let me make you mine? *Completely* mine?"

God, she already was. Hadn't he proven that already?

"Wanna fuck you so badly. Need to feel this delicious pussy on my cock. Squeezin' me till I bloody pop." He sucked hard at her clit, the thrusts of his fingers coming faster now, his eyes brightening with every cry that erupted from her lips. "So gorgeous, you are. So bloody gorgeous."

"Spike...I..." She trembled so hard she nearly cried, her cells compounding closer and closer to the ambiguous edge of something she'd never felt before. Shapes blurred around her before her eyes were blinded by white, her nerves quivering and ecstasy. "I...oh..."

"Come for me, baby." He licked rapid circles around her clit. "Come on my tongue. Drench me good."

Then, without warning, the bones in his face shifted and his fingers slipped out of her. He pressed his thumb to her clit and plunged his demon tongue so far inside her, she saw proverbial stars. And that was it; Buffy threw her head back and made a chorus of his name, her hips thrusting madly off the mattress. Her body sizzled and exploded, doused so deep in never-ending waves of epic *yes* that she was panting in easy seconds. It lasted forever but it was over too soon. She felt Spike sucking at her pussy, felt his thumb still pressed to her sensitive clit, and nearly yelped in a twist of pleased pain. Sweat lined her brow and her chest ached with the heavy weight of her gasps. And by the time the world returned to her, she was dizzy with sensation.

Spike remained where he was, resting his cheek against her belly and gently running his fingers between her pussy lips—touching her but not. Cooling the flames he'd set inside her body, but keeping her dangerously close to the boiling point at the same time.

She was lost. God, she was so lost to him.

It was a cruel world that awaited her beyond the dream. Right now, it took everything she had to keep from dissolving into a mess of tears. Should Spike ever discover just how much she truly belonged to him, he'd use the information to cut her down until there was nothing left. Until the notch he wanted on his belt was firmly in place. Until she was

nothing but a name in a Watcher's Diary—a historical warning for future slayer generations.

Buffy shivered hard and begged the cosmos for strength. She could cry over this all morning. Just not now.

Please not now.

"I don't know what this is, Slayer," Spike whispered, spearing the silence. He brushed a small, tender kiss across her stomach. "It's either killin' me or bringing me to life...and fuck if I know which."

She wove her fingers through his hair and sighed, but said nothing.

If she spoke, she'd betray herself.

Even more than she already had.

NOTHING in her life was normal. Nothing. Not her school, not her job, not her friends—hell, try as she might, even her mom was very much of the *not normal*. Nothing in her life fit the bill of an average teenage girl. So it wasn't all *that* surprising when an old would-be-friend turned out to be a sleazy, double-crossing, I-wanna-live-forever type of baddie. He'd wanted to be immortal so badly he'd actually tracked her down and made a deal with the devil behind her back. A deal that would render her very much of the dead and ensure his body continued walking, never mind the incarnation.

Buffy had yet to decide whether or not she was lucky Ford had decided to go to Spike. The jury was still out. Even now, sitting on the edge of her bed, the night's events playing over and over, she couldn't decide if she was grateful that Spike's was the face she'd stared into tonight.

The electrical current that raced through her body the second their gazes clashed still had her bones shaking and her skin buzzing with exhilaration. From the second he'd barreled inside, everyone else around them had melted away, and it was only him and her. Only Spike and Buffy.

And when she closed her eyes tonight, he'd be there. Spike would be there. Waiting for her.

Spike had gotten close enough to kill her tonight, but he hadn't. He hadn't killed her when he could have. He'd looked at her very much like a predator, and not like the passionate lover who caressed her at night. Not at all like the man whose touch followed her with every step. And yet, there wasn't a part of her that didn't quiver at the thought of what awaited once sleep settled over her.

Everything was a blur. All Buffy knew for certain was one second, Ford had been behind her, trying to knock her out by means of a crowbar to the head. The next an explosion had rocked the bunker and suddenly she was surrounded by a cluster of fang-happy vampires.

The interruption hadn't slowed Ford at all. He'd barely blinked. The feast on the idiot-wannabes had been about to begin, and she hadn't been able to stop it because her hands were tied by a human madman with nothing to lose. It was the sort of anxiety that could propel the feeblest minds into an arena of unexplainable will and strength—and though Ford's freakish upper-hand had been more due to the element of surprise, it still had her shaken that she wasn't able to take him out.

Perhaps because he was human and she wasn't used to dealing with human evils. Thus when he'd had a crowbar arched high above his head, his eyes flashing with mad desperation that could make murderers among saints, her mind had blanked. Royally blanked.

Buffy knew, logically, that she would have rolled away or kicked Ford in the gut or done something to defend herself at the last second. She did. Recovery was a huge part of the fight, and certain allowances had to be made when fighting someone who used to be a friend. Someone she used to crush on. However, even knowing she would have rolled safely to her feet regardless hadn't made the possessive snarl that speared the air any less tingle-worthy. The next thing she'd known, Ford was gone, tackled to the ground by a furious vampire.

"You don't touch her!" Spike had roared, dragging the boy to his feet and tossing him hard into the nearest partition. "How dare you touch her!"

She would've been touched had she not been so rattled. But she

hadn't had enough time to mull it over—Spike had forgotten about Ford the second the would-be villain passed out, and instead turned his yellow eyes to her.

"Slayer," he'd rasped.

There hadn't been time for thought. No time to consider how much she loved what that mouth did to her after the world fell asleep—there were people to save. Stupid, stupid people, but people nonetheless. Buffy had barely blinked—she'd lunged at him, fists swinging, legs kicking. Everything had gone on instinct, pain-recognition blinking out entirely. She'd known he was hitting her—that his fangs were close to her throat and it wouldn't be a mistake if he nicked her skin.

The logical part of her brain had screamed he wouldn't hesitate in killing her. The emotion-driven female wasn't so sure. In fact, the emotion-driven female had gotten her jollies in thrusting her hips against Spike's at every opportunity, enjoying the way his eyes widened and his lips curled into a sneer before he'd thrust back.

And just like that, reality had melted away. Suddenly she hadn't been in a bunker at all; she was against the wall in their shared hotel. The place they met every night. She had been looking into the eyes of Dream Spike, only with the added thrill that it was real. It had been a dream come to life. She had been living her own fantasy—caught in the murky waters between illusion and reality.

Then his hands had slid under her thighs, and they were moving together against the nearest wall. Buffy straining and arching against Spike's hard body, whimpering helplessly as he'd ground his hard cock against her aching center. She didn't know when the predatory snarls rumbling through his throat had turned into small growls of pleasure, or when the anger had drained from his eyes, leaving her alone under the weight of pure hunger. All she'd known—at that moment—was it was real. It was something outside of dreams. This was Spike in the Real World. Spike in the Real World was rubbing his cock against her pussy. Spike in the Real World had her trapped between himself and a wall, and he had done things to her without touching her—things that would have her screaming in something which definitely *wasn't* terror or pain very quickly.

Assuming, of course, the Scoobies didn't show up. Which they had. The Scoobies, plus one watcher and a vampire with a soul. And then the world had come tumbling back, and Buffy had been smacked with a hard dose of reality. She'd remembered then where she was—and what she was doing. More importantly, what she was *not* doing. The wannabes had become vamp-chow as she'd let the ringleader dry-hump her against a wall. She'd let Spike play her close to an embarrassingly large orgasm as people around her bled.

Spike had returned to himself almost at the exact same minute. The shades of would-be tenderness flecking his eyes had vanished just as quickly, replaced with a furious roar as he'd tossed her coldly to the ground.

That had been hours before, and her body was still throbbing. All of the groupies—Ford included—had walked away with their lives. Angel had grilled her about what had happened with Spike, but she hadn't had any answers. She barely knew what had happened with herself.

She was so confused. The rest of her was just terrified.

Terrified and very much turned on.

If these dreams didn't stop blurring reality for her, she was going to get herself killed. Herself or someone else.

Perhaps it was time to talk to Giles. Perhaps.

Only she hadn't the strength. Not tonight. She didn't want to think anymore tonight.

She just wanted to rest.



CONVICTION VANISHED THE SECOND THEIR EYES CLASHED. HEAT blazed across her skin, coaxing the fire he'd started just a few short hours ago back to a raging inferno. Logic faded in a blur of ravenous lust. She just knew she needed him. Badly. And now.

A whimper accented in her voice peeled through the air, flavored with huskiness she'd thought only worldly, experienced women could produce. It was both foreign and familiar. Both a comfort and a thrill.

It wasn't her but it couldn't be anyone else. It was Buffy personified—trapped between reality and fantasy.

Right now, she was in the dream, and she needed him.

"Spike..."

Her vampire's answering growl only made her hotter. His chest was pressed against her breasts the next instant, his strong hands clamping around her upper arms. A hoarse, "Need you," whispering across her skin just before he smashed his lips to hers. And *god*, how could she be expected to want to be good when sinning was so delicious? He consumed her without trying, his tongue exploring her lips in a way that promised to compromise all her secrets, his mouth moving against hers as though he was reciting poetry. He was making an opus of her body, and she was helpless to follow his lead.

"So bloody hot, you are," he growled, releasing her just long enough to render her nightshirt into two ruined pieces of fabric. Whereas she would have been unbearably self-conscious under his eyes just nights before, Buffy found herself thrusting her breasts into his waiting hands, biting back a long moan when he pinched her nipples. Then his mouth was at her ear, the cool vibrations of his voice shaking her to her core. "Wanted to fuck you so bad tonight."

Buffy's knees nearly buckled. "Oh god."

"Made me forget myself. Made me forget why I was there." He dipped his head again, pressing a series of burning kisses down her throat and over her skin until his mouth wrapped around one of her breasts. His left hand fell between her legs, fingers dancing along her hip with feather-light strokes that betrayed his intent. "Part your legs for me, baby."

Buffy tossed her head back and obeyed. "Please," she gasped. "Need..."

"Oooh, no knickers?" he teased, his eyes lighting up. "Naughty girl."

She nodded urgently and croaked another, "Need," in a voice that hardly sounded like hers.

"I know what you need," Spike snarled, nipping at her mouth, spreading her pussy lips wide. "You're just beggin' for it."

"Oh god!"

He drew back. "If you wanna receive, love," he purred, tapping her

clit with his index finger, a smirk stretching his lips at her answering mewl. "You need to give."

Her hands immediately flew to the clasp of his jeans, whipping his belt free and tugging at his zipper with a fervor that would have embarrassed her had she given a damn. She didn't—the only thing she cared about was the fact that Spike's thick cock was in her hand, and now she could try to make him pant and moan and want her as much as she wanted him.

She could make him love this enough—these stolen hours between night and day. She could make him love *this*. She could show him. She could show him that she was so much better than the vamp-hoe who shared his bed when they weren't together.

She could. She *could*.

"Bloody hell," Spike panted, his brow falling to her shoulder. "Buffy..."

Buffy paused then with a frown, her hand slowing. Something wasn't right. This wasn't right. She needed something else.

Spike's head shot up. "You bloody tease."

"Your shirt," she explained quickly. "Off."

He froze and arched an eyebrow. "Off?"

"And your jeans."

"You want me..."

Her skin flamed, but she didn't care. Spike was giving her more and more confidence to ask for what she wanted. "Yes."

A thoroughly illegal grin stretched his lips. "Ooh, what's this?" Spike drawled, running a hand down his chest until the tips of his fingers were lightly stroking the base of his cock. "The Slayer wants to ogle my sexy bod?"

For the river that flooded between her thighs, she was amazed she was able to keep standing. Or remember how to talk. And even though the last thing he needed was an ego boost, Buffy found herself nodding nonetheless. "Yes. If I'm naked, you have to be naked. This is a naked dream. I deem it a naked dream."

"Well, by all means." He winked and reached for the hem of his tee, pausing to run his tongue over his teeth in the way he knew by now drove her out of her mind. "Wouldn't wanna break the rules."

"Absolutely," Buffy agreed. And then her voice abandoned her. Spike was standing before her naked. Entirely naked. They'd never been entirely naked together before, and the intimacy of the moment nearly brought her to her knees. It was a big move for her—a very big move. She didn't know if he'd understand or care about how big a move this was, so she kept it to herself, this last stage separating girlhood from womanhood. A boundary she was increasingly certain she wanted to cross with Spike, no matter how wrong it was. "These rules are...very...ummm..."

"Important?"

"Yes. That word."

Spike's smirk broadened and he extended his arms, baring himself proudly to her appreciative gaze. "Well, here I am," he purred. "Like what you see?"

Like didn't begin to cover it. Buffy was breathless, terrified, and beyond turned-on. Spike was, in a word, a masterpiece. The sort of man who didn't exist but on romance novel covers and in Playgirl centerfolds. The sort of man who was always on the arm of a power-model in a string-bikini—not with *her*. Not with average-except-for-the-slaying-thing Buffy Summers. From the slab of marble from which his chest had been carved to the thick-roped muscles in his arms to the flat, kissably-toned stomach right before the proud protrusion of his cock...yeah, he was pretty much perfect.

But she couldn't tell him that, and she couldn't keep silent. She went for something in the middle, but all that came out was, "Buahh..."

Spike chuckled and stretched, clearly soaking up every second. She knew she should stop now before his head grew so large he floated out of the room, but hell, she couldn't help herself. Her almost pivotal moment was being shared with a Greek-god. Who in their right mind could blame her?

"Wanna try again?" he asked teasingly.

"I—ummm...wouldn't kick you out of bed for eating crackers, that's for damn sure."

Spike's eyes flickered and he took a step forward, suddenly very close, the head of his cock brushing her stomach. "I can assure you, Slayer," he murmured, and sighed when she wrapped her hand around

his length again, “when I’m in bed with you, crackers’ll be the last thing I eat.”

“Spike!”

“And you’ll be screamin’ that a lot, too,” he drawled, and brushed a surprisingly soft kiss across her lips. “Such a hot little hand. Stroke me faster, pet. Feel so bloody good...”

“Like this?” she replied breathlessly, pumping him harder in time with the gasps rolling through his chest. Despite his enthusiasm, she was still buried under virginal insecurities. “I...I don’t...”

“That’s perfect, that is. You’re so hot. So bloody hot.” He brushed his lips across her chin. “Never knew anyone could be as warm as you.”

Buffy flushed. “Spike...”

“Feel so good. Just like that. Stroke me just like that.”

She did as he asked. God, she’d do *whatever* he asked. She didn’t ever want to stop touching him; not with his eyes glazed and his lips kissing sonnets across her skin. Not with these precious minutes with him isolated in pleasure and warmth—in something she could pretend was tenderness until the harsh light of morning brought her back to reality.

“Wanna fuck you so badly,” Spike murmured, nipping at her ear, his fingers slipping between her labia once more and over her clit. “You have any idea what you did to me tonight? How it felt to have your legs around me? Knowin’ it was you? Knowin’ it...it was real?”

Buffy gasped, tightening her hand around his cock. Truthfully, she didn’t want to think about what happened in the bunker—lest she be sent upon a downward spiral of self-examination—but the memory of him pressed against her was enough to banish her convictions.

Unfortunately, Spike either didn’t pick up on her reluctance to reflect on what had happened tonight or didn’t care. He pulled back slowly, his twinkling eyes consuming her whole. “You wanted it too, didn’t you, kitten?” he asked. “You can’t lie to me. Your scent...you were bloody drenched. So hot and ready for me. You wanted my cock inside your tight little cunt, didn’t you? And when you got home...you couldn’t wait to fall asleep. You couldn’t wait to be here so we could do this.”

She both loved and hated the truth in his words. There was nowhere to hide in here. "Spike..."

"Tell me you want me," he whispered.

He really wasn't going to let it rest until he had her dignity in a jar, was he? Buffy whimpered, her head falling to his chest where her mouth quickly occupied itself in bathing his skin with hungry kisses. "Spike..." she breathed again, skating her teeth over one of his nipples. "God..."

"Tell me you love this," he murmured. "Tell me you love what I do to you. Tell me you live for dreaming..."

Buffy offered a jerky nod, her mouth impulsively lunging for his. God, she loved the taste of his kiss. The way he moaned and melted into her—the way his tongue danced with hers as their lips moved together. He kissed her like he was starved, and she was the only one who could quench his thirst.

"Yes," she cried into his mouth, ignoring the protest of her conscience. "Oh, yes..."

He growled and bit her lower lip, his hands closing around her upper-arms again as he dragged her toward the bed. Then she was on her back, splayed before him with her legs spread and her wet pussy aching with need. Her heart thundered and her blood raced. From the way he regarded her, pumping the length of his cock as his glazed eyes raked down her body, she knew what he was thinking. God, she *wanted* what he was thinking. She wanted to know what it felt like to have a man inside her—to have *Spike* inside her. She wanted to push herself beyond that final threshold. She wanted it—but the part of her that was terrified and still very much a child couldn't reconcile womanly wishes and desires. Not now. Not easily.

Especially with things so confused.

"Fuck, but you're gorgeous," Spike rumbled. "Such a pretty pussy. All pink and wet..."

"Spike—"

"So bloody wet for me."

"Spike...I...I don't think...I can't...with the actual...ummm." Buffy blushed hard, averting her eyes from the disappointment that flashed across his face. "I just..."

"You want me," he countered.

"I do. But we tried to kill each other tonight. We tried—"

Spike frowned, jutting his chin for the ominous motel-room door. The door that led nowhere. The door that, for all intents and purposes, served as an emergency escape hatch. "Out there, yeah," he agreed. "But—"

And just like that, the illusion shattered. It was that easy for him, she supposed. Easy for him to compartmentalize his life in segments—what *was* in here and what *was* out there. But she couldn't do that. She couldn't have sex with Spike in here only to have him try and kill her the next time they met eye-to-eye. She couldn't. It would break her completely.

"Love, in case you didn't notice, neither one of us got very far."

"Yeah, but for how long?" she asked, suddenly flushed with a self-consciousness that had her reaching for the pillow at the head of the bed. Spike didn't prevent her from covering herself, and she was glad. This wasn't the sort of conversation she could have naked. "I can't... Spike, I can't be...with you in here and live with you trying to ruin me out there. I can't."

"Slayer—"

"You wake up next to someone else. I don't. I don't... Since we started...this, I haven't even *looked* at Angel—"

Spike's nostrils flared. "And you better not."

"But—that's exactly it! You expect me to be faithful to...whatever the hell *this* is when you were not too long ago screaming about how much better what's-her-face is." Buffy sat up on her elbows on an impulse. It was hard to argue with someone while lying naked on one's back, pillow-covered or not. Granted, sitting up brought her to eye-level with his cock, which did little for her resolve, but she managed to power through. "I don't know what we're doing here. I don't. But I can't sleep with you in here and then look you in the eye tomorrow when you're trying to kill me. I'm not built like that."

"We can't even be sure this is real," Spike replied weakly, though something new had washed over his face. As though her words brought to light issues he hadn't considered, which boggled her because it was all she could think of anymore. And it hurt to think how hard she'd

agonized; that it didn't even bother him to make such demands on her while living as he pleased. "We can't—"

"If it weren't real...do you think we'd both react to each other like we did tonight?" Buffy asked. "I mean, you're hot, sure, but I'm not in the habit of jumping my enemies while people around me are getting hurt."

Spike arched a brow. "Is that what this is about?"

"Everything is what this is about! I can't... How can you ask me to remain faithful to a dream on the outside if what we're doing isn't real? And yes..." She held up a hand, anticipating his argument. "I know. Logic. Vampires. Not mixy. Believe me, that memo was very much gotten. But it's not fair. It's not *fair*, Spike. You're with...*her* and I'm... I'm just here. While you're with her. Waiting to fall asleep. Hoping you don't kill me so I can still see you in my dreams. Do you have any idea what this is doing to me?"

"Buffy...I..."

God, he looked so torn—torn between comforting her and screaming in anger. Torn between taking her in his arms and laughing her out of the room. Torn between so many things. Ultimately, Spike sighed and rolled his shoulders back. "I didn't... Fuck, I...I don't know what this is."

"Neither do I."

"And honestly, pet, I don't think there's a way I *could* kill you now. I want to want to, but I don't. You've mucked up my head so bloody bad. All I see anymore is you." He swallowed hard, pain lighting his eyes. "And I hate it, but I love it, too. I love knowin'...you're here when I sleep. I don't know what this is."

Buffy's vision blurred with tears that came from nowhere, relief purging her body. "Really?" she whimpered. "Really, Spike?"

He smiled half-heartedly. "Yeah. Really."

"Then... I don't know," she murmured. "I just don't know anymore. We need to find out once and for all if this is real. I mean...at this point, I'm pretty damn sure it has to be, but...is there a way to signal each other?"

Spike snickered. "You don't think dry-humpin' each other serves as—"

“Well—”

“I mean, if you wanna try that again, by all bloody means, don’t lemme stop you.”

She made a face at him. “No...it shouldn’t be something like that. It should be something...like a code word? Or a phrase? Or something. Something you and I wouldn’t say otherwise. Not to each other, anyway. And not while fighting, which survey says we’ll be doing.”

He grinned. “You’re bloody glorious when you’re fighting.”

“Don’t try to change the subject.”

“I’m not. Just stating a fact.” Then, impulsively, he wove his fingers through her hair and dipped his head to capture her lips, and the tenderness behind his kiss sealed her heart’s fate. If this was real then she truly belonged to him. Heart, body, soul. He owned her completely. There was no going back from this.

“How about...”

“Hard day’s night,” Spike said. He hadn’t released his hold on her, and she wasn’t about to ask.

“The Beatles’ song?”

He shrugged. “Seems as good as anythin’, right? Unless you figure yourself the type to spontaneously burst into a musical number in the middle of a fight, which, while right entertaining, doesn’t seem likely.”

He was right; she’d suggested a code and he’d provided one. One that wasn’t likely to come up in any other context. And if it did, they could discuss another code in another dream. For now, though, it was perfect. It was *perfect*.

“All right,” she whispered, nodding. “That works.”

“All right. Next time...” Spike tugged her forward again for another kiss, his free hand turning back to his cock. “This time, I want—”

“I can’t—”

“Won’t enter you. I jus’...” He glanced down almost apologetically, released his erection. He paused, glanced into her eyes, then drew the pillow away with slow intent that had the fire in her blood roaring again. In seconds, he was cupping her pussy, his fingers massaging her still-soaking folds, sliding over her slick flesh until the pad of his thumb was rubbing lazy circles against her clit. “I want... Lemme try this, yeah? We’ll stop if you don’t like it. I just...I just need to feel you.”

“Feel...?”

“I’ll make you feel good, kitten,” he purred, dropping to his knees quickly, his face level with her pussy. One long lap of her slit, and she melted. “I’ll make you feel so good.”

“Oh, I don’t...”

“Lemme have this one thing,” Spike said softly before tonguing her clit. “Lemme...”

There was no way she could deny him anything. It was a sad realization, but it didn’t make it any less true. If he’d kissed her and told her he wanted to make love to her, she would have caved, reservations aside. And it killed her to know she could be so weak where anything was concerned, much less an evil vampire she didn’t have any prior claims on. He didn’t belong to her, not like she did him.

She feared she was halfway in love with him—in love with a dream. A dream that wasn’t a dream. A dream that couldn’t love her back. And yet, all the knowledge in the world couldn’t make the feeling go away.

That didn’t stop her, though, from squealing a panicked, “Spike!” when he kneeled over her on the bed, his cock nestled between her vaginal lips, his balls resting against her anus. “I—”

“Trust me, baby,” he moaned. “Just...lemme feel this.”

She held her breath but didn’t reply; waiting, every nerve in her body on fire. She waited with wonder as he sighed in pleasure, hooked his arms under hers and leaned forward until his brow was against her shoulder. Then he began moving his hips sliding the length of his cock against her pussy, and the world around her dissolved.

“Oh my god,” Buffy gasped, scratching at his shoulders. “Oh my god.”

“So hot. So bloody hot.”

There wasn’t an inch of her that didn’t burn and sizzle. His balls slapped her ass with every thrust of his hips, his cock massaging her wet flesh in a way his hands never could. Spike’s arms were around her and his brow was at her shoulder. If her heart pounded any faster it was sure to break through her chest.

She was holding him and for that moment, she could almost believe he was hers.

“Fuck, Buffy...”

“Unhh...”

“You really don’t know how much power you have over me, do you?”

He didn’t let her mull the thought over; his weight was gone the next instant, his cock again in his hand. “Need to come,” he gasped, sinking two fingers inside her with his other hand, thrusting in time with the strokes he gave his cock. “Can I...?”

“Spike?”

“Your belly.”

She nodded before she realized she didn’t know what he meant, and then it was too late. With a trembling moan, he spilled himself on her skin, and the sight, coupled with the look on his face, was enough to trigger her own orgasm. She tossed her head back and thrust her hips madly against his fingers, wave after wave of ecstasy claiming her whole. It was over before it began but seemed to last lifetimes, and the effect was so dizzying she feared she might lose consciousness.

Lose consciousness in a dream.

“You’re so gorgeous,” he murmured. He reached for her almost absently, his fingers spreading his spendings across her skin. “So bloody gorgeous when you come.”

“God...”

Spike exhaled slowly. “I wanna do this to you out there,” he continued, rubbing the sticky fluid up her abdomen until he was cupping her breast. “I want to touch you like this...out of this room. Out where it’s...and it’s drivin’ me outta my bloody mind. Thinkin’ of you like I do. Wanting the things I do. I’m going barmy and it’s all your fault. And I can’t stop...I can’t do anything. You’re consuming *everything* and I want...”

She sucked in a breath, her eyes fluttering shut. He didn’t finish his thought, and she didn’t press the issue. The more he said, the more he professed, the more she had to lose. The more stake she put into a future they would never have. The love he’d never feel for her.

“Buffy...” The note in his voice was near-reverential, his sticky fingers pinching her nipple once before trailing down her flat stomach. “I’m marking you, baby. I’m markin’ you all over.”

He was. She’d made him come, and he was marking her body with

it. The part of her that should have been disgusted was completely overpowered by the thumping of her heart and the resurging ache between her thighs. She'd been relegated to nothing more than a possession, and she didn't care. She didn't care what loving this made her.

"Do you think of me half as much as I think of you, kitten?" he asked hoarsely as he gently rubbed his cum over her clit. "Do you spend your days wishin' you were here? Waiting for the sun to go down? Tell the truth, now."

"Oh god!"

"That's not an answer, love."

Buffy found herself screaming, "Yes!" before her scrambling mind remembered the question. "Oh god, yes!"

"Do you get hot in class? Thinkin' of...this?"

His right hand slid up her stomach as his other worked her pussy. And it was too much. God, it was too much. She was already slick and aching from what they'd just shared, and now he was going to make her come again. All the while, he utilized his power over her to unlock all her dirty little secrets.

"Spike...please!"

"Do you?"

She nodded. "Gnnaaugh!"

His breathing hitched. "You're close again," he rasped, his thumb caressing her clit as his eyes swallowed her whole. "You are, aren't you?"

"Oh my *god!*" she whimpered, thrusting her hips against his hand, tears of pleasure scalding down her cheeks. Fire raced through her veins, hot spots of white blinking the room out entirely. Then it was only Spike. Spike's fingers pushing inside her drenched pussy, coating her insides. Spike's thumb torturing her clit as Spike's hungry eyes consumed her entirely. He moaned when she moaned and gasped when she gasped, and when she trembled into another blinding orgasm around his fingers, her cry of release was nearly drowned out by his pleased sigh.

It lasted forever but was still over much too soon. The world slowly blinked back, and she discovered herself snuggled in Spike's arms, her

head cradled at his shoulder. His fingers danced idly down the length of her arm, his hard breaths unmaking her completely, but he didn't speak, and she was glad. If he spoke, she'd be forced to talk as well, and she didn't know what to say. She doubted she could form words which made sense in any rational language.

She didn't know what had just happened. Her mind was numb, her body sated and wonderfully worn out. From the fight. From her inner civil war. From the phenomenal heights she'd reached and the fear of the inevitable fall.

The fall, however, could wait for now. She wouldn't think about what the next fight would bring. She wouldn't.

Spike was with her now. And if it killed her, she would make it be enough.

HER NEXT ENCOUNTER with Spike came at the expense of another crack in her slowly breaking heart. Their dance seemed a perpetual one-step-forward-two-steps-back, only the backward steps, in her case, felt more like chest-crushing shoves. Each night following their post-bunker encounter had only postponed the lost cause that was her impending emotional devastation. And now, locked in the hold of the vampires Willy the Snitch had on his payroll and guarded by the Taraka assassins, her eyes were immediately drawn to the gorgeous woman at the altar of the church. She hung nailed palm-to-palm to a near-naked Angel, who looked as beaten and pitiful as Buffy felt.

Willy had never had a prouder day in his life, she reckoned. He was leading a group of vamps and approaching a master vampire with what he thought was leverage in tow. However, from the irritated snarl stretching Spike's lips, Buffy could tell this was going to quickly spiral downhill for the local pain-in-the-ass. But she didn't care. She couldn't. Her eyes were on the prize—her vampire lover, her so-called vampire boyfriend, and the vampire woman who stood between them.

It was only somewhat comforting when Spike's eyes wavered a bit upon meeting hers.

"It's payday, pal," Willy said cheerily. "I got your slayer."

Buffy fought the urge to snicker. Perhaps it was all the quality time she'd spent with Spike that made her so apt at reading him. More likely, the human at her side was an incredibly dense tool who wouldn't know a pissed off vampire from a hole in the ground.

A point which was proven nicely the next second. "Are you tripping?" Spike barked, stopping just short of lunging for the barkeep's jugular. "You bring her here? *Now?*"

"You said you wanted her," Willy replied, his face crestfallen, his voice trembling and a nervous hand combing through his hair.

"That's *not* what I said!" Spike snapped. If Willy wasn't careful, he truly was going to end up with a ripped throat and minus one heartbeat. "How's it that you don't get this? Dru's ceremony—"

"Look, see, there's a bounty on her head, and in case you hadn't noticed, buddy, I ain't exactly equipped to hold a slayer. Cages, yeah—kept Angel there from escaping. Slayer's different business. You wanted her—I heard it. Here she is."

If anything, the repetition of Spike's so-called desire only infuriated her vampire even more. And had Buffy not been preoccupied with formulating an escape plan that included Angel in the flesh and not in the ash, she would have been devastated, rather than mostly crushed.

In that instant, she needed to distract herself from Spike's obvious disdain. She needed to think of something—anything—to get her mind on track. Thus she settled her eyes on Angel, and before she could stop herself, his name had rolled off her lips almost mournfully.

It wasn't her intent, but her whisper was enough to ensnare Spike's attention. And no, she didn't revel in the flare of jealousy that brightened his eyes. Not at all. This wasn't the time for such things.

God, she was *such* a mess with priorities that were *so* all over the place.

"Yeah," he snarled, taking a step in her direction. There was nothing fair about this. The last time he'd been so close, she'd had his cock in her mouth and his balls in her hands. And tonight, if they both survived this, they'd come together in the same passionate fury that always followed their fights. He'd whisper things to her that he'd forget come morning. Things she knew he meant when he was with her, but *only* when he was with her.

Things she still wasn't entirely sure were real. They hadn't yet gotten the chance to try out the code. From the look on Spike's face, tonight wasn't going to be their night. Presuming he cared enough to tear his mind from his precious Drusilla's revitalization ritual to give his nighttime lover any thought. Presuming she was right to begin with, and her dreams were true and not just *dreams*. But god, by now, if they weren't real then something was wrong. Something was very wrong.

"It bugs me, too," Spike continued casually as he tossed a careless glance over his shoulder. "Seeing him like that. Another five minutes, though, and Angel will be dead, so...I forebear." His words were enough to snap her back to the present—and give herself yet another reason to kick her own ass for having her mind constantly with someone she should have dusted by now were it not for the fact she was hopelessly in love with him.

"Spike," she protested softly, only to have her arm tugged tighter by one of the vamp cronies behind her.

Perhaps it was the way she said his name, but a strange light flooded Spike's eyes. Nothing she recognized, but at this point, anything different was good.

"Gotta say, Slayer," he drawled before running his tongue over the sharp point of one fang, "thought you'd spoil the party, but havin' you here...watchin' your honeybear boil away to nothin'...knowin' your last kiss really was your *last*." His eyes flared at that, and her heart leapt into her throat. "Well...you mighta just saved ole Willy's life. This is... oh, what's the word...*delicious*."

Stupidly, her first instinct was to clarify her relationship with Angel. "Hold on. We haven't—"

And oh thank *god*, the cavalry arrived. Another second and she would have embarrassed herself to the point where death would have been the better alternative. A back-flipping Kendra burst into the sanctuary, and the next thing Buffy knew, the vampire lackeys were on the ground and she'd been thrust against Spike, the force of her impact knocking them both to the floor.

Kendra didn't waste any time—she was at Buffy's side the next second. And thankfully, the presence of a responsible doesn't have-

naked-dreams-about-vampires-who-wanted-her-dead slayer succeeded in screwing Buffy's head on properly. She didn't allow herself to enjoy the feel of Spike's body against hers—she was on her feet again the next second, and more than ready to hand his ass to him if he so much as glanced at her neck in a way she didn't like.

Kendra's overly ostentatious but very welcome entrance, however, had captured Spike's attention.

"Who the hell is this?" he barked, tossing Buffy an almost accusatory glare as the other slayer seized him by the shirt.

Somehow, said glare had no effect on her. "It's your lucky day, *Spike*," she spat.

"Two slayers!" Kendra announced proudly before decking his jaw.

"No waiting!" Buffy added, jabbing his oh-so-kissable gut with a very angry fist. And there would have been more where the first came from had her spider-senses not directed her back to the gun-happy bitch and the other paid cronies.

The Order of Taraka. The assassins who didn't quit until their target was dead.

"Why?" she demanded, wiping her eyes and cursing herself for being so damned pathetic. She hated weakness, and she'd never felt so weak in her life. Not as a child from a broken household, not as a hormone-riddled teenager, and certainly not as the Slayer. Yet Spike, whose tenderness made her melt as much as his harshness made her bleed, could render her into a babbling stereotype in seconds.

She hated being weak.

And yet, hating it didn't stop it.

"Why, Spike? I...I thought..."

He could barely look at her.

"Do you hate me so much?"

"No," he replied hoarsely, though his eyes betrayed a hatred for himself at the answer. "Buffy, I..." He paused. "Dru. She...she's the one. She did it. Sent 'em after you. Saw it in her Tarot cards. A nice distraction to keep you outta the picture so..." He broke off and grew disturbingly silent. "I told her...told her not to. Told her you were mine to...she didn't take kindly to that. To you being... bloody hell. Kitten, I didn't—"

"Giles says I should lay low. Run. I've never run from a problem. Not once. And I'm the Slayer."

"You just are. Your watcher's right. These are nasty buggers, baby. Brutal, nasty buggers. And yeah, you're strong...stronger than any one of them...but you never know where they're comin' from. Just...lay low till I can work out a way to get the hit called off."

Buffy froze, not daring to hope. "You...you're going to—"

"Course. I've been lookin' for a sodding loophole since she let it out that she'd sent them after you at all." He captured her face in her hands and kissed her tears away. "Told you. Fuck, I told her. You're mine. And until I figure out what that means, exactly, I need to keep you nice and warm and alive." Spike smiled softly, dipping his mouth southward, nipping at her breast as a sly hand delved between her legs. "And here. Right here."

Obviously, since their probably-real discussion, Spike hadn't been able to make any progress on calling off the hit. Crazy-cop lady had still found the time to swing by school during career week and shoot a few rounds through a crowded hallway.

At first, the crazy-cop lady had proved frustratingly strong for a human. There was no way the human members of the Order of Taraka were relying on natural strength. Either she was chugging steroids or there was some demonic power infusing her veins. Crazy-cop lady paid her back every punch, every kick, every *everything* Buffy threw at her. It was damned irritating, and had Giles and company not stormed in and taken the recovering vamp-cronies by surprise, she might have been in a world of hurt.

As it was, the Scoobies' entrance gave Buffy the upper-hand she needed. Her knee butted hard with the cop's not-so killer abs, rendering the woman breathless and completely unprepared to block a kick to the face.

"Now now, Sarge," Buffy quipped, feeling oddly punny, "something tells me this isn't within the definition of legal protocol."

Okay, so it wasn't the puniest of the punny. It was still more than she'd done in weeks.

And it provided much needed amusement points. How a faux cop could look so offended at something so stupid, she didn't know. All she cared about was the fact she'd just dealt out the winning hand. When

the cop rushed back at her, swinging a blade out of her sleeve, Buffy barely blinked. She ducked, rolled, and ducked again. She knocked the cop to the floor with a quick sweep of her legs, and sent her staggering into the wall when she tried to get up. It was nice, after feeling weak and pathetically girly for so long, to toss around a super-being—by methods unknown—like a rag doll.

Kendra, however, wasn't having the same luck with Spike. And while Buffy was relieved she didn't have to do something thoroughly embarrassing like save the stupid vampire's life, she wasn't about to have responsibility for a slayer's death on her shoulders.

Therefore, as Kendra scrambled back to her feet following a powerful kick to her stomach, Buffy made a quick decision.

Better to forfeit the easy opponent to make sure everyone stayed alive.

And non-dusted.

"Switch!" she yelled, dropping to the ground.

Kendra didn't hesitate. She rolled over Buffy's back and was on her feet just in time to send the now-recovered cop into the wall again.

Buffy barely noticed. Her chest heaved, sweat stung her eyes, and Spike was in front of her. And then everything stopped. Everything. At last, though the chaotic world swirled around them, they were alone. She was alone with Spike—Real Spike. The Spike she'd dry-humped in a bunker because reality and fantasy were too close to fusing together.

She needed to know if *her* Spike lurked somewhere within those demon eyes. She was *so* certain he was; she only had enough doubt left to make her question herself, and she was *so tired* of questioning herself.

The sign. The code. One of us—

"I'd rather be fightin' you, anyway," Spike drawled.

What an odd time to get turned on. And yet, she couldn't help herself. A smirk quirked her lips and she nodded. "Mutual."

"You're makin' a hard day's night outta my work."

It happened so quickly she nearly tripped. Buffy honestly didn't know what she'd expected. A dramatic pause. A flickered brow. A wink. There was nothing but the words. The words she'd longed to hear

since the night they'd decided on a stupid code in the first place. Any lingering doubt was banished.

The moment stretched forever. Spike was panting almost as hard as she was, studying her like she would crumble if he blinked. Real Spike and Dream Spike were one, and all she wanted to do was run into his arms and beg him to make the badness go away. To wipe the snarl out of his eyes in favor of the kindness she'd come to treasure.

Reality wasn't as forgiving. Spike was commanded by a different set of rules outside their dream-world. He couldn't take her in his arms—chances were he wouldn't even if he had the option. Not out here.

"Spike..."

His name rolled off her lips before she could help herself. The silence between them was too damn much. She'd had enough silence to last her lifetimes.

Spike's eyes widened and a strange sense of calm washed over him. "Buffy..."

Her knees almost buckled and tears flooded her eyes. God, it really was real. This was *her* Spike. In the real world.

What did it mean? What did any of this mean?

And even in the midst of her mind-crushing confusion, she found it reassuring that Spike didn't seem to have the answers either. Everything was in question now, and suddenly there were no absolutes. The awkward stretch of quiet between them likely lasted only seconds, but everything slowed around her. She knew the Scoobies were in danger. Kendra was handling the cop. Giles was firing rounds off his crossbow. Angel was slowly dying. She knew it all, and the period between knowledge and action seemed endless. She couldn't move. She was literally frozen in place—staring at Spike as the world around her provided a true definition of slow-motion.

Spike looked at her for a long moment, then he turned slowly to face the altar, to the place where Angel and Drusilla hung together. He paused again, glancing back to Buffy, his gaze heavy and lost. She wanted to say something to comfort him, but there was nothing to say. The world was crumbling around them and all they could do was stare.

Perhaps, then, it wasn't so surprising when they reached a unanimous decision without saying a word. They turned on the same note,

falling into a quick stride toward the altar. Spike slid the ceremonial dagger out of his girlfriend's palm; Buffy occupied with the leather-skin belt which bound the vampires together. They worked in silence; Buffy ignored the half-dazed questioning looks Angel fired her way, and Spike ignored Drusilla's power-drunk glare. Nothing seemed to matter at that point—nothing save collecting their mutual people and getting as far away from each other as possible to figure out what the hell had happened. To get to neutral ground until they saw each other again.

"Tonight," Spike said shortly, tossing her a quick glance as he hauled Drusilla into his arms. "We'll talk tonight."

Her heart leaped. "Tonight," she agreed, catching Angel as he fell.

The church was going up in flames. Kendra quickly ushered everyone out, but Buffy couldn't move. She remained paralyzed with shock, not to mention bogged with the weight of an intensely weakened vampire. Thus she sank to her knees with Angel slung half-dead in her lap. And while she knew she had to move, the whole of her was too numb to take action.

It was real. This thing with Spike was real. The dreams were real.

Then her love for Spike was real, as well.

Oh god.

Spike was currently carting his girlfriend—his real girlfriend—to safety, and Buffy was in love with him. And too freaked out that knowledge to even consider the possibility that Kendra would take it upon herself to stop Spike from escaping. She glanced up just in time to watch what appeared to be an old paint can smash into Spike's head, and she watched in horror as he staggered and hurtled into an ancient pipe organ. Debris crashed and the fire spread, and then it was over.

The scream that peeled off her lips when the organ wailed in protest, wavered, and finally collapsed upon her fallen vampire brought the silence that had haunted her to life. Everything around her stopped. Everything.

Buffy barely noticed. Cold tears rained down her cheeks. Every nerve in her body ached. Her ears were ringing.

Spike was gone.

Spike was gone.

And all she could do was weep.



OF ALL THE SCENARIOS SHE'D ENVISIONED FORCING HER TO BREAK the news to Giles about her nocturnal activity, it had never been because her heart lay in ruins. Never because the vampire she was in love with—the evil thing he was—had died at the hand of another slayer. These were things she couldn't possibly have known. Things that didn't seem real, even as they had unfolded right before her tear-crusted eyes.

The thing about Giles was one could never pinpoint how he'd react. She'd expected anger and yelling and a lot of glasses-polishing. She'd expected him to hurl a few *what-were-you-thinkings* coupled with *I-can't-believe-you'd-keep-something-like-this-from-mes* at her feet. She'd expected anything aside from what she received.

A handkerchief. A glass of water. A promise to keep her secret a secret.

An inquiry. Was there anything he could do?

An answer. No, but thank you.

All Buffy wanted was to get home and sleep. When she slept, she'd see him. He'd be there. She'd know he was all right.

But she didn't tell Giles that.

Once she got home, she skipped her nighttime-preparation routine entirely. No post-fight shower. No brushing her teeth. No checking her wounds to make sure she'd stopped bleeding. She didn't even change into pajamas. She dove into bed and wrestled with her thundering heart, waiting for sleep to come.

It happened just before dawn. Her eyes finally became heavy and reality faded into nothing. And when she stepped into their motel room only to find it empty, Buffy burst into tears, crashed to her knees, and cried herself awake.

BUFFY DIDN'T WANT to go to sleep the next night. The fear of entering the room alone was all consuming. While she remained awake, hope likewise remained alive. Hope that she was wrong. That Spike had either left the dream-room before she'd arrived, or he'd been knocked unconscious, and therefore unable to reach her. Did it even work that way? Was sleep equitable with unconsciousness, or was she kidding herself?

False hope at this point was better than no hope at all. The church had gone up in flames with Spike and Drusilla trapped beneath a pipe organ. He'd told her they would talk. They'd only just discovered, once and for all, the dreams were real—that they were shared and *real*—and they needed to talk. They needed...

Buffy stayed home from school that day. She couldn't bear the thought of facing her friends or running into Angel while patrolling alongside Kendra at night. She feared her irrationally unbalanced emotions would overcome common sense, and she might do something monumentally stupid like throttle the other slayer until she passed out. And while the thought held more than its fair share of appeal, she couldn't blame Kendra for what had happened. Unlike Buffy, Kendra had done her job.

Kendra hadn't known that Buffy was in love with Spike, and even if she had, it didn't matter. Buffy being in love with Spike didn't exonerate his sins or make him any less of a monster. Rather, in some way, it made *her* a monster as well because she didn't care. She didn't care *what* he was. She'd come to know the man inside over the past few weeks, and her tired heart loved the tender creature who resided within an otherwise vicious beast. She loved him without rhyme or reason, and she wasn't about to deny herself the truth when the truth was all she knew right now.

Of course, rationality prevailed over the inner hysteria. Rationality bogged with fatigue. And since depression kept her pretty much bed-ridden all day, by the time the day-lit sky faded into darkness, Buffy conceded the battle to fatigue, and she fell into a deep sleep.



HIS HEAD JERKED UP THE SECOND SHE BARRELED THROUGH THE dream-motel wall. The second their eyes clashed, the most potent wave of relief she'd ever felt flooded her veins, weighing down her legs and choking her throat with a sob that could have suffocated her. For a wondrous second she could pretend nothing else mattered. Not the degrees of separation between them, not the blood in his past or the ghosts in her future; not even Drusilla, whom he'd risked everything to save all the while making love to Buffy's body with his mouth and hands at night. All that mattered was he was alive. Spike was alive.

"Spike! You're...you're here. You're really here." She threw her arms around his neck and buried her face in the crook of his neck, shaking hard as sobs of pure white relief commanded her body. "I was so scared. I...I didn't...I didn't know. God, I'm so sorry, I didn't know..."

Spike stood still in her arms, breathing hard as she shuddered against him, though she couldn't be sure if his trembles were genuine or mere echoes of her own. He had yet to touch her—rather stood there in her awkward embrace, not speaking. Not speaking as she sobbed her weight in tears and silently whispered her gratitude to the stars.

"I didn't know," Buffy choked again. She couldn't stop shaking. "I didn't know. I didn't...I was there and then Kendra...she..."

"Kendra?" Spike echoed softly, his voice washing over her like the answer to a prayer. "The other one?"

She nodded miserably, unable to meet his eyes. "She didn't know."

"And that matters, pet? You really believe your chum would've given a bleeding rip if she *had* known?" Spike exhaled slowly and nudged her brow with his. The edge in his voice was offset by the way he tenderly ran his hands up her back. "She's a slayer."

"I know. I know. I didn't..." Buffy shook her head hard. She couldn't take it anymore. She needed proof he was real. She needed proof she wasn't hallucinating within a dream. So she pulled her head back enough to press her lips to his. It was hard to keep herself from dissolving into tears again the second his tongue met hers, the instant his cool, familiar flavor filled her mouth. She whimpered into his kiss, trying hard to consume him whole. She wanted to crawl up inside him as he had done with her—she wanted him to feel *this*. She *needed* him to feel this. Feel the thundering beat of her heart and taste the tears on her lips and realize how far gone she was. How there was no turning back now. Not for her, and dammit, not for him either.

She loved him too much.

"Buffy..." Spike reached behind his neck, wrapping his hands around her wrists. "Slayer...stop."

Her eyes flew open. *Slayer?*

"Wh-what is it?" she asked, hating how her voice shook, hating how he could see everything she felt when she saw so little. Even when he whispered small adorations into her skin and told her how beautiful she was, she knew so little of him. He said he was consumed with thoughts of her, but she couldn't believe it. He said he spent his days thinking about the night—about the few glorious hours they'd be together—but she couldn't believe it. Not if he was willing to sacrifice everything to save another woman. Not if he was still sharing Drusilla's bed.

Spike shook his head, his gaze dropping to the ground. Then almost as an afterthought he glanced up again, looking for all the world as though he'd only just then realized she was in the room with him. A

pregnant silence filled the air, fragranced only with their lingering breaths. She felt so open to him—so exposed. He stood there searching her eyes and she knew he saw everything.

There was only some gratification when he raised his hand to her wet cheek and she felt how hard he was trembling.

"All this?" he whispered, voice hoarse. "All this...this is for me?"

Buffy nodded. "I didn't know, Spike," she replied, hating the crack in her voice. She felt so vulnerable, and there was nothing she could do about it. "I didn't know what happened. I-if you were alive or... And when I fell asleep, you weren't *here*. I didn't know what to think."

"Knocked out, love. That's all. Bloody large board hit my noggin and the lights went out. I'd wager, anyway, if I'd kicked it good and proper, you wouldn't've come here at all."

She flushed, feeling foolish for not having put that much together herself. "I...I didn't..."

"Dru's back to full strength," he said, his tone low. "She's...she's back. Just as she was before the bloody mob got their mitts on her in Prague. I did what I came here for." He glanced down. "Sides this thing with you, of course. I'd always reckoned I'd have your head the second Dru was back to..." He trailed off and turned away, jaw clenching. "Your girl put me in a bloody wheelchair."

Buffy froze. A wheelchair?

"It's nothing permanent. Just snapped my back when the ceiling came down. Nothin' a few months won't fix."

She sensed he was being flippant out of self-preservation, therefore she likely didn't help by blurting, "*Months?*" in a tone that was nothing but incredulous. It'd taken two weeks for her first post-calling broken bone to heal. The idea that Spike could be trapped in a wheelchair for months when he was a super-being had her thoroughly stunned.

"Yeah," he drawled. "It was a bloody big organ."

"Spike, I didn't—"

"I know you *didn't*, love. But Christ, we were both off our bloody game, weren't we?" He shook his head hard, taking a step away from her. "We haven't been—"

"What are you saying?"

"You've made me lose focus. Everything used to be so clear.

So *sodding* clear, and now..." Spike sighed and turned to face her again. "It was simple, yeah? Come to Sunnyhell, drain the Slayer, rip her stuffin' out for mine and Dru's celebration dinner. Then you start invadin' my dreams and everything becomes muddled. You've *mucked* up my life, Slayer. I'm thinkin' things I...I'm thinking..." A near hysterical laugh ripped through his throat. "I'm thinkin' things that'll drive me as barmy as Dru if I don't get my head in the clear."

He might as well have plunged his fist into her chest and ripped out her heart. It would have been less painful. Her chest thundered. Her mouth ran dry. Her eyes flooded with tears but she didn't have the strength to cry. A thousand whispered nothings began a cruel replay through her tortured mind—things he'd said to her, promises he likely hadn't even realized he'd made. Promises forged by his hands. Promises he'd sealed with his mouth. Promises living on action without words.

Damn, she was such a fool. She hadn't thought herself gullible enough to hope—she'd thought she'd done a good job in setting herself for the inevitable fall.

"I...I thought..." She sniffed, hating herself more and more as seconds ticked by. "I thought...you said you wanted me."

Spike offered a stoic nod. "I do, love. That's the bloody problem."

"It wasn't a problem before!"

He whipped his head up, disbelief etched across his face. "You really think that?" he demanded. "Are you daft? It's a bloody miracle I haven't staked myself for wantin' you as badly as I do. For thinkin' of you like I do. For lyin' awake, wishing myself asleep just so I can touch you. You're everywhere. You're in everything I do. Everythin' I say. Every sodding thought that crosses my buggered brain is consumed by you." He broke off and shook his head with a humorless laugh. "I oughta just get it over with. Snap your neck, drink my fill, and get the bleeding fuck outta Dodge before you wiggle any further into my head. Maybe *then* I'd get a moment's peace."

"You don't mean that. You told me—"

"Oh, I'd feel right bad about it. Don't get me wrong, love, you're gonna be a bloody hard bird to get over no matter which way the pendulum swings. I'll prob'ly dream of you for centuries." Spike paused

and motioned between them. "But this? This'll only get one of us axed in the end, and it damn sure isn't gonna be me."

"But you told me...you *told* me..." She didn't care that she was crying now. She didn't care that her broken heart was on display. That he saw just how lost in him she was. He was gutting her, and she couldn't stop the bleeding. "Y-you told..."

"Slayer—"

"If it means *nothing* to you, then why—"

"Because it *does* mean something!" he roared, his eyes blazing yellow. He looked at once like he wanted to both strangle her and kiss her lips off, and that he hated himself for not knowing which. "That's the sodding problem, or haven't you been listening at all, you deaf bint? It *means* something. How in god's name did you get in?" He slapped a hand over his heart. "Fucking you should've been easy. Should've been a bloody cake walk. Hell, should've been a bloody riot. I didn't ask for *this*! For all these..." Spike broke off again. "I wake up a half-man in my princess's arms, and whose name do I say? Who do I ask for? Who do I *want* there? You're ruining me—you're ruining *everything*—and it ends now. It all ends *now*."

The scene before her blurred again, and she fought to maintain balance. There was nothing to say—what *could* she say? Her nights had thrived on the promise of Spike's every touch, every kiss, and she'd lost herself without realizing the battle was over. How could she hope to remain so distant when he'd insisted on becoming so close? He'd ruined her, slowly and deliberately, and now he was furious with her for what she'd done to *him*.

And all she'd done was love him.

How long they stood like that she didn't know. The air was cold against her skin. Her cheeks were stained with tears her sore eyes couldn't stop shedding. She was naked in front of him in ways she hadn't been before. He'd finally exposed the last part of herself that she'd tried to keep secret. It was her fault for falling in love with him, but it was his for allowing it to happen. For being so wonderful in their sanctuary—for making her believe, even reluctantly, she had reason to hope beyond dreaming.

Then something changed. Anger melted from the room—the cruel

face of Real Spike replaced with the tender touch of her dream lover. And when he said her name, it took all she was to keep the pieces of herself from shattering all over again.

The sudden softness in his voice was an illusion, she knew, but it didn't make her shiver any less.

"Buffy..." He was right in front of her before she could blink, taking her face into his hands and kissing her tears away. "Buffy...God, please don't cry."

If anything, his plea only made her tears come harder. "What do you expect?" she demanded. "I didn't mean to mess up your life, Spike. I really didn't. I don't understand what's happened."

Spike shivered, shaking his head. "I can't make heads or tails of it either, love," he replied softly.

"You said you couldn't kill me now. You told me—"

"And that's supposed to make it better, then? You're the sodding *slayer* and I..." He broke off with a heavy sigh, his eyes worn and tired. "I asked for *you*, Buffy. In *her* arms, *you* were who I called out for. I don't *want* this! God, do you have any idea how easy it'd make things for me if I *could* kill you? Do you have any idea how much I *want* to want to..." Spike tore away again with a sardonic chuckle—a chuckle which quickly melted into something sounding suspiciously like a sob. "I didn't ask for this."

"And I did?" Buffy demanded. "I've tried *so hard* to give you space. I've let you rant about owning me and I've... I've given you *more* than I've ever given anyone. I've shared with you *more* than I've ever shared with anyone."

His eyes flashed with anger. "Slayer—"

"You told me...I've done everything you wanted me to do, Spike. *Everything*. And—and you have the audacity to think it's all about you? That this hasn't been killing *me*?" She jerked her head hard, another flood of tears raining down her cheeks. "It's *destroyed* me. Knowing that it was all from my side. That coming here was just another option for you in case your *real* girlfriend didn't put out. Knowing I was endangering the lives of *everyone* I know because I couldn't...kill you. Hell, I couldn't even *fight* you. And I wanted to hurt Kendra so bad the other night for doing what she did...and the kicker

is, she was right! She was right to do it! You're evil and a killer and it's *killing* me!"

The fire died in his eyes a bit, but she couldn't stand it. Not when she knew there was nothing behind it. "Buffy—"

"How *dare* you come in here and tell me I'm ruining your life! That *I'm* the one confusing things for you. I didn't ask for this, either. But I've let you rule me. I let you make me *yours*. I let you...I did *everything* you wanted and somehow *I'm* the reason..." Buffy turned away, shaking hard. "Don't pretend it's been just hard on you, Spike. I've sacrificed everything for this—for whatever you're willing to give me. And I died the other night when the organ fell."

She honestly didn't know what happened. One second she was standing there talking to him—saying things she shouldn't, admitting all her secrets—and the next, Spike clamped his hands around her forearms and his mouth was ravaging hers. And that was it. The last part of her clinging to sanity died. He couldn't keep doing this to her. He couldn't keep hating her with words and loving her with his body. She tasted none of his previous outrage. Nothing of the hatred he'd so eagerly strewn across the room at the expense of her wounded heart. She tasted only Spike—only his sinful lips and silken tongue. She tasted desperation and despair, heartache and hope. She tasted her tears and swallowed his whimpers with hunger she couldn't deny, even as every inch of her crumbled.

He was going to kill her. Perhaps not the way he'd intended, but he was. He was going to kill her by making her love him. Her love for him was going to kill her.

"Slayer," he gasped between kisses, sucking greedily at her tongue. "Buffy. What have you *done* to me? What *would* you do to me if I let you?"

She hated the sting in her eyes and the exhausted scent of tears tainting the air. She was so sick of crying. So damned sick.

And she was tired of running. She was tired of dancing around this issue. Around him. Around everything. Perhaps—just perhaps—if he knew how she felt, things would change. Perhaps he would realize just how lost she was. How his kisses broke her apart while attempting to piece her together. Perhaps.

It was a moment of weakness. Nothing more. But she had to see.

There couldn't be anything left to lose.

"I'd love you, Spike," she whispered, forcing herself to hold herself upright, even as his mouth froze against hers in shock. Then she couldn't look at him—couldn't touch him. Couldn't be held when he knew. It was out now and there was no getting it back.

His answer came in one word. One word.

"Slayer—"

Slayer.

The final piece of her chipped away. Buffy dissolved in pain and jerked herself awake the next second with a crushing sob.

There it was. It was all out there. He knew.

And he'd use his knowledge to destroy her.



BUFFY DIDN'T WANT TO KNOW WHAT SHE LOOKED LIKE APPROACHING Giles the next morning. Her eyes were raw and red, and fatigue claimed every muscle in her body. She was jittery from the coffee she'd forced herself to drink and so exhausted from avoiding sleep she feared she might collapse.

But she couldn't sleep. She couldn't face him again.

"Buffy?" Giles asked, setting his reading glasses atop the ancient volume of text he was studying, his eyes wide with concern. "What's wrong?"

A hard smile stretched her face, making her lips ache. "Wrong?" she repeated. "What makes you think anything's wrong?"

"School doesn't start for another ninety minutes, and I know you're not here for training." He paused meaningfully. "Is it Spike?"

Giles didn't need an answer—merely mentioning the vampire's name had her exhausted eyes watering all over again. God, if she cried one more damn tear...

"I need something," she said, avoiding his gaze. "I need... I need something that'll keep dreams away."

"Away?"

Buffy bit her lip and nodded, praying he didn't ask questions.

Admitting her feelings to Spike had cost her everything—admitting them to Giles, beyond what he already knew, was beyond the pale. “I just...I need something that will let me sleep without dreaming.” She shivered hard, fighting for control. “Help me?”

“Of course.”

It was his eyes that did it. The kindness. The compassion. The love. Giles loved her. He was her surrogate father, and he loved her. Of course he would help.

It felt so good to know she was loved that there was nothing left to do but cry.

THE PENDANT GILES unearthed for her worked like a charm—which, Buffy supposed, was the point. At night she'd slip the chain around her neck and awaken the next day refreshed, rejuvenated, and thoroughly dreamless. There was no Spike to break her down. No Spike to caress her skin with his hands and mouth. No Spike to fill her heart with unspoken promises. No Spike to destroy her with what he knew—the mocking realization that she'd allowed herself to fall in love with him when he couldn't love her back.

There was no Spike. Only rest.

And she missed him and hated herself for missing him so much.

The couple of weeks following the incident at the church were uneventful. Patrols were uneventful, school became a tedious pattern of repetition, and her friends avoided her without bothering to explain why, though it wasn't like she needed a diagram. Her mood following Spike's incapacitation—following the night he'd told her how much he hated what she was doing to him—hadn't been exactly inviting, and they were still stunned silly over her reaction to the pipe organ collapsing.

Though she knew she should be hurt over their avoidance behavior, she couldn't be moved to give a damn. While her nights remained

uneventful and her sleep undisturbed, her mind refused to keep from returning to the vampire who owned her heart.

The things he'd said...the terrible things he'd said.

In the deafening quiet, Buffy couldn't help but wonder what would have changed. How things might have been had Spike not invaded her dreams the night he attacked her school. Had they proceeded as enemies. Had she been able to view him as her foe and not her lover.

Spike was a formidable opponent with or without an emotional advantage. Perhaps she wasn't the only one who had been holding back because of this thing they shared. Perhaps she was only alive because Spike couldn't bring himself to kill her. Not with his hands. He certainly didn't mind destroying her with his words, but he'd had chance upon chance to end her life and he'd turned away before he could go through with it. If they weren't sharing dreams, would one of them be dead now?

Was she only breathing because Spike liked the way she moaned for him? And if so, what was going to happen when he healed? When her patrols were no longer quiet and uneventful?

Buffy shivered and wiped at her eyes, side-stepping a headstone as she turned to go home after yet another boring patrol. Only a few vamps tonight—all fledglings and no challenge. Angel didn't even bother lurking around anymore. Not that she blamed him, of course, given cold shoulder she'd shown him in recent weeks. Ever since the dreams began she'd practically ignored her would-be boyfriend, even in the beginning when Spike's touch came with brutal force rather than the tenderness she'd fallen in love with. The tenderness that had died when the organ crashed.

Tenderness Spike hated himself for giving her.

It would have been kinder if he'd attempted to rip her throat out, acted like a monster in deed as well as words. Give her reason, real reason, to hate him so she could kill him.

Except she already had a reason. He was a soulless monster, responsible for who-knows-how-many deaths and the owner of a guilt-free conscience. He was the embodiment of everything she hated—everything she'd been tapped to fight and destroy. He was unrepentantly evil, and he flaunted it every chance he received.

But somewhere inside the killer was a man. A man the demon hadn't been able to silence. A man who was very human—a man who touched her and smiled at her and kissed her lips while stroking her clit and murmuring how beautiful she was. There was nothing *inhuman* about the Spike she'd fallen in love with. It was the dichotomy between the two facades—polar opposites composing the same being. Both sides of him played an essential role in who he was.

The man wanted her. While her body ached with the sting of his rejection, while her eyes were raw from crying, there was no doubt in her heart that Spike wanted her. He just wanted her to be his complacent mistress; he wanted her to be the woman he turned to whenever Drusilla didn't feel like putting out. He wanted her to be someone with whom he could enjoy sex, and the fact that she was a slayer, whatever he said, played a significant role. If she was plain ole Buffy he wouldn't give a damn.

So beyond the physical, this was about screwing a slayer. He loved the idea of forbidden fruit; he just didn't love the idea of loving the fruit itself.

Cool night air blasted her damp cheeks. Buffy shivered, crossing her arms, her eyes glued to the ground as she walked the memorized pathway home. Perhaps she was looking too hard. Perhaps there *wasn't* anything special about her after all. Sure, she could slay vamps with the best of them, but what did she really know about being female? About being a woman? Her past was scattered with so few instances dealing with mature relations with the opposite sex. Her boyfriend back in Los Angeles—what a joke. All she and Tyler had ever done was fight about how she wasn't willing to put out, even if all the other kids were doing it. He'd accused her of being a cold fish, among other things—all show and no action. She'd been advertised as a bargain, he said, but the product itself was broken.

At the time, Buffy had written him off completely as a jackass who wanted sex and didn't know how to take no for an answer. Her ego hadn't suffered a bit; she had been, after all, one of the most popular girls in school up until she'd been branded a pyromaniac. Even then, though, Tyler's words hadn't cut at all. It wasn't like she *wanted* to be a pyromaniac—she'd had no choice. She was of the Chosen. The One.

The Slayer. Vampires were bad and needed to be killed and she maintained that fire was the best way to slay when drastically outnumbered.

That night, she'd glimpsed into the eyes of her own mortality and realized how easily her life could end. But she was still alive. Three years running as the Slayer—not that she held the record or anything, but it wasn't anything to sneeze at. She was still alive. She was alive enough to eat, drink, breathe, and cry. She was alive enough to climb into her room by virtue of the tree outside her window—the one seemingly planted with the specific mindset of sneaking out of the house. She was alive enough to strip out of her clothes, take a quick shower, don her favorite jammies and climb into bed. She was alive enough to slip a chain around her neck and finger the pendant cradled between her breasts. She was alive enough to wish for morning so her mind wouldn't be occupied with these disturbing thoughts. So she wouldn't stay awake all night wondering if her lack of femininity and her overabundance of slayer was truly the problem Tyler had indicated it was.

Her experience as Woman Buffy had ended the night she'd dusted her first vampire. Merrick had taken the part of her designated for learning how to love and be loved, handed her a stake in turn, and told her that her future essentially belonged to him. Thus when she'd arrived in Sunnydale, she'd known the rules of dating—how to play the game—but there was always the niggling voice in her head promising a lack of any sort of future. The Inner Woman had failed her with all the boys who initially showed interest. There was Xander, though she couldn't see herself dating him unless it was essential to populate the planet after a nuclear holocaust. There was Owen, who had loved the Slayer and thought the Woman was a ditz—even if he was too nice to say as much. And there was Angel. Angel who, at first, had only seemed interested in the Slayer; it hadn't been until much later—even after initial kissage—that she'd started to believe he might want the Woman too.

Buffy didn't know how to play the game. The Woman was at a loss, ruled entirely by the Slayer.

How could she hope to compare to a vampire who *wasn't* defined by who she was because vampires didn't have these ethical dilemmas?

How could she measure up to a woman who knew *exactly* how to be a woman?

She didn't know. Perhaps she wasn't meant to know.

All she knew for certain—right now—was her night would be dreamless again, and again she would awaken refreshed but miserable.

She wondered if Spike still dreamed himself into the room. If he thought about her while he was there, or if he was grateful she'd finally made her exit.

She wondered how long she had until he walked again.

She wondered.

And slept.

But didn't dream.



SHE STOOD IN FRONT OF THE MIRROR FOR A LONG TIME, STARING into her eyes until the objects in the background faded into a mass of shapeless color. Until her pupils no longer looked like pupils and her face became so unfamiliar she barely recognized herself.

Buffy had experienced her share of bad birthdays. This was definitely the worst.

She didn't know why seventeen felt like such a right of passage. Like something pushing her over that final threshold, screaming if she hadn't learned how to be human yet—a woman yet—her later years held little hope. It wasn't like anything special happened when one turned seventeen, other than admission into rated R movies. Well, legal admission—the sort that came without having to flash a flirty smile and bat her girlish eyes.

She'd never heard of anyone having an age-crisis at seventeen. Perhaps she was a freak. All she knew now—standing before the mirror and staring down at a stranger—was she'd hurt someone she cared about. Someone she might have loved had things gone differently.

And she'd done it because she'd wanted to feel like a desirable woman rather than a heartbroken child. After all, if she hadn't learned

how to be a woman by the time she was seventeen, there was no hope for her in the empty years to follow.

Angel deserved more than that. He'd been so patient with her. So kind and understanding. He hadn't pushed her for an explanation over the Spike debacle, even though she knew he knew something. He hadn't asked her on dates or tried to kiss her or anything to suggest he was still interested in her as a woman, if indeed he ever had been. No, after the initial period of avoidance was behind them, Angel had tentatively emerged from the shadows as her patrol buddy. Her friend. Someone who made her feel protected in a world where she was increasingly aware that Spike's immobility would soon be a thing of the past, and then she'd have to face the man she loved in real time.

She didn't know how she knew Spike was still in town—she just did. She felt him everywhere she went. Tonight was no exception. Tonight, in fact, had shoved her over the edge.

It was no excuse for what she'd done.

Buffy shivered, her reflection blurring. She had no idea how she'd be able to face Angel again. God, she didn't even know what she'd been trying to accomplish. Maybe that she'd feel better, which was ridiculously laughable. Never before had she hit such a low. She was dirt—she was lower than dirt. She'd scrubbed her skin four times now since arriving home and she was still smothered in filth.

At least before, her suffering had been her own. Now she'd dragged Angel into it as well. She'd hurt a friend because she'd wanted to feel.

Mostly, though, she'd wanted retribution. Spike had practically forbidden her from looking at Angel back when he'd given a damn. And part of her—the largest part—wanted to hurt him. Wanted to know if touching Angel would make Spike bleed the way he'd made her bleed. If he'd feel any of what she'd felt the past few weeks when he learned she'd been intimate with a man who wasn't him.

Buffy hadn't given Angel her virginity. That part of her, even now, felt reserved for Spike. Her heart couldn't fathom anyone else. But she had touched Angel the way she'd only previously touched Spike. She had pretended he was someone else. She had pretended she could love him, and it had come through loud and clear in her performance.

There in a cemetery, Buffy had gotten on her knees, taken out his

cock, and practiced some of the moves she'd learned from Spike, all the while thinking about how much Spike loved it when she sucked on him. Her scalp burned from where Angel had woven his fingers through her hair, her ears rang with the echoes of his throaty grunts. He'd been all passion, and she'd been somewhere else. Her heart wanted someone else.

And that was why, though she'd been sorely tempted, she'd kept from giving Angel her pussy. Instead, she'd let herself be hauled into his arms and kissed in a way that should have made her forget her own name, but she'd barely felt it.

Angel had cupped her sex and asked if he could return the favor. She'd feigned a headache and promised him a raincheck she knew she'd never accept. He'd told her he loved her. She'd felt like vomiting, and had bolted home.

She was a monster. She'd given Angel a second of happiness and now he expected more. Of course he did. And now here she stood—gazing down the stranger living in her mirror and wondering if her skin would ever be clean.

Wondering if Angel could ever forgive her for using him as heartlessly as she had—once he found out, of course. Once she was brave enough to tell him it hadn't meant anything to her. That she wished she could love him but she didn't. That in a moment of stupidity, she'd tried to validate herself as a woman by hurting someone who probably didn't give a damn whose cock she sucked. And if he did—if Spike did care—it was only because his mistress was his property and he didn't like sharing with the other kiddies.

Buffy was so wretchedly disgusted with herself she could barely move. Yet somehow, she managed to drag herself to the shower one last time. Managed to change into her pajamas and climb into bed.

Her eyes were so heavy she fell asleep the second her head hit the pillow.

The pendant, buried under a stack of birthday cards, was forgotten.

PERHAPS IF SHE'D been able to swallow her gasp, she could have wished herself awake.

Spike's head shot up, his ocean-deep eyes burrowing into her with an intensity that knocked the wind out of her. He was sitting on the corner of the bed, facing the wall that had served for weeks as her entry point to their secret rendezvous, and the minute their gazes clashed, she felt every inner protest ram into relief. God, she wanted to run into his arms and sob as he rocked her back and forth; she wanted to scream at him and beat on his chest and demand to know why he'd let her fall in love with him. She wanted to do so many things.

Mainly, she wanted to wake up.

Spike bounded to his feet. "Where the bleeding hell have you been?" he demanded, storming forward.

Every cell in her body rocked closer to explosion. His proximity coupled with her tired, guilt-ridden soul had tears spilling down her cheeks in a blink. Buffy completely shut down, her back colliding with the wall behind her. Her body was torn—split with the agony of loving him and how much loving him had cost her. She couldn't look him in the eye. She couldn't stare into the face of the man who would be her

killer. Her muscles were numb and her will was worn—she couldn't fight him if he attacked, and she couldn't hide herself.

He would tear her down and there was nothing she could do to stop him.

"Oh no," Spike snarled, seizing her chin and jerking her face upward. "You don't get to do that. You don't get to disappear for three sodding *weeks* and then play it coy with me. Where the *fuck* have you been?"

Her skin buzzed and her body trembled. "Can you blame me? After last time...you wanted this."

"Bollocks."

"You said—"

"Bugger what I said! I didn't—"

And that was it. The last straw. Buffy could no longer hold her weight—everything came crashing down. Her legs buckled and she would have collapsed were it not for the sudden presence of Spike's hands at her hips. The flood behind her eyes broke free on a sob and everything around her blurred.

"I can't do this," she cried, her voice something between a whisper and a wail. Her throat was raw from sobbing already but she couldn't stop. "I can't. You're killing me. You tear me down and then touch me like...like I matter. Like I matter to *you*. You accused me of ruining your life and then...and now you're angry with me for leaving you alone? I did exactly what you wanted! I've given you *everything*. And it's killing me. Seeing you is killing me. Not seeing you is killing me. These last weeks—"

"Buffy—"

"I've alienated everyone. My friends. Giles. God, Angel..." Cold stabbed her insides and she buckled again and was again supported by her vampire's commanding hands. "I'm going to hurt him so bad—"

Spike went rigid. "What did you do?"

Though she barely heard him, the ready answer rolled off her lips. "I wanted to forget you. I wanted to get back at you. I wanted to *feel* something."

"What did you *do*?" The growl in his voice snapped her back to reality. "Bleeding hell, Buffy, I'll kill him. Did you let him fuck you?"

"No. I couldn't do that. But I thought about it." And then, just because she wanted to make him bleed, she added, "I blew him," in a voice that sounded anything like her own.

Spike's answering roar of fury was immensely satisfying, though it left her feeling hollow. He threw his fist through the wall beside her head, the bones in his face shifting as his fangs descended. "You're *mine!*" he snarled. "I'll fucking kill him. I bloody swear it, the wanker's dust. No one touches you. *No one!*"

"Yours?" Buffy repeated, a half-insane laugh ripping off her lips. "Yours, Spike? When? When you decide? During the time you think I'm *not* ruining your life? I wanted to make you *hurt*. You're *killing* me and you *don't care*. You only care that I won't be here to screw when your real—"

"Stop it!"

"—girlfriend isn't in the mood. I wanted to hurt you...I knew Angel would hurt you, and I wanted to hurt you. But instead I'm going to hurt Angel...and me. I hurt *myself* more than I hurt you. I—"

"*Stop it!*"

"I—"

He cut her off by smashing his lips to hers, fangs and all. And the last string of her will snapped completely. Two roads converged in a yellow wood and she tore down each path with equal conviction. There was no fighting him—her heart hadn't the strength and her body hadn't the will. And at the same time, though, she understood she couldn't battle her way back from this. Not from his sinful kisses or the mockingly tender way he caressed her skin. Not from the gentle murmurs he rumbled against her lips or the way he trembled when he purred in pleasure. She both loved and hated him for it—for not allowing her refuge from this thing that was destroying her.

Then something happened—something she couldn't have predicted. Spike tore his mouth from hers, a sob choking his throat as his demon face melted away. And when their eyes clashed again, there was nothing of the hatred that had haunted her since their last disastrous encounter. Nothing of the biting resentment. There was nothing but sorrow bathed in regret. He looked, for all the world, as though she had just tossed him a final lifeline.

"Buffy," he gasped, the ocean in his human eyes finally spilling forward, crystallizing into tears. "My god, I'm so sorry. I'm *so* sorry."

Incredulity stole any sort of response from her lips. There was nothing she could do but stare.

"I didn't mean it," he babbled, seizing her cheeks and bathing her face in soft kisses. He consumed her like a man starved, drinking her tears and leaving her burning with want beyond hunger. "Not like I wanted to. And yeah, I know what I sound like. Those ugly tossers who hit the women who love them, and I bloody hate myself. Never thought I'd be here, never... You make me want to be human, love. To deserve you. And I couldn't handle it. But this? I can't stand this."

Her voice broke. "Spike—"

"These last weeks without you..."

"It was what you wanted!"

Spike shook his head and tore away, the tears cascading down his cheeks mesmerizing her. For whatever reason, she'd thought him incapable of crying—for her, anyway.

"I didn't know what I wanted," he replied, his voice barely audible. "All I know is I can't do rot without you. Every night I've...your face... your eyes. I know I've buggered everything, love. I know it. But I can't..."

"You...and Dru—"

He shook his head again, harder this time. "There is no *me and Dru*. Not anymore."

Something hard fell within her. Of course. Now it all made sense. If Drusilla was through with him, he had nowhere else to turn. No one at *all* to fill the empty space beside him. And since Spike knew how Buffy felt about him, coercing her into his bed would take little to no effort.

She wanted to scream at the world's injustice, but all she could do was swallow hard. "There's not?"

"No. I can't..." A long, weary sigh rolled off his lips. "My life is sixes and sevens 'cause of you. I know you didn't mean for it to happen, kitten, but it's the way things happened. I look at her and all I see is you. Fuck me if I can make a lick of sense of it. She makes like she really wants me for the first time in years, and I *don't* want *her*." He was

shaking so hard she thought he might crumble away right before her eyes, but when he managed to glance up, there was resolution she'd never seen before. "I *don't* want her. And I've *never* not wanted her. *Never*. She's been my *everything* for over a century. She rescued me from mediocrity...she's my *maker*, and every time she touches me, I can't fucking take it 'cause it's not *you*." A long still beat settled between them. "She's not you. She's not what I...she's not you."

Buffy exhaled slowly. "What are you saying?"

"What am I..." Spike broke off, visibly grasping for control. He was quiet for a minute before a strained laugh tore through his body, and he turned away from her at last, running a hand through his hair. "I dunno. I don't know anythin' anymore. You've taken me up, Slayer." He paused. "*Buffy*. There's nothin' left of me. You're buried so deep inside that all I can think about anymore is you. I've been outta my mind...thinkin' about you. Knowin'..." He paused again, another long sigh rolling off his shoulders. "Knowin' what I said to you. What it did. Watchin' you cry and knowing I was the reason. I've wanted to stake myself so many times because of it. And the bitch of it is...I wanted you to hate me. I wanted you to hate me 'cause I couldn't hate *you*, no matter what I tried. No matter what I said. I thought if I shoved you hard enough, you'd let me be. My world makes bugger all sense if I don't want Dru. If she's not *my* everything." Spike stopped shortly, his eyes glazed over and haunted. "And she's not. Not anymore. I hurt you, and that's torn me up. Knowin' that..."

Buffy couldn't help herself; she burst into tears. The shapes around her again swirled and blended, and she couldn't make anything out anymore. The rush of emotion from the rollercoaster he'd sent her on. The catastrophic events earlier in the night—making herself hurt because of Spike, and hurting someone else in turn. And now she was here. She was in the room she'd avoided with the man who owned her heart, and he was telling her things she hadn't allowed herself to fantasize. Things beyond surreal—things her heart desperately wanted to believe, but her brain wouldn't allow.

"Oh, Buffy..." He cupped her cheeks again, kissing her with a tenderness she hadn't hoped to touch again. "God, I'm such a berk. Please don't cry."

He could beg all he wanted; her tears weren't exactly under her control.

"I'm so sorry. So sorry for everything." She felt him sigh against her; felt the gentle kiss he brushed across her brow as his hands slid down her throat and shoulders until he wasn't holding her at all anymore. Until they were separated by degrees—degrees which felt like miles. "I never meant for this. I swear it. You've just... You've consumed me. I didn't know how to handle it."

"And now what?" she managed between sobs. "You know how to handle it and you're sorry? Okay...but what happens when I forgive you and everything's...back? What happens when you start hating me again? I can't take it, Spike. I know I'm not the kinda girl you want. I know what we have is only in here—"

"I don't want that."

"Now," Buffy agreed, nodding hard. "I was...before the accident, you were so—"

"Slayer, the accident changed my life."

"Mine too."

If she lived forever and a day, she would never forget the astonished look on Spike's face. It was something he'd known, of course. Something she'd told him the last time they spoke—something she'd told him before he ripped her to shreds. But there was a fine line between knowledge and understanding—a line one would only know after traveling both paths. In an instant, Spike understood. He understood everything, and she knew because she watched him understand it. She watched light fill his eyes, coupled with guilt and sadness.

"I'm so sorry, baby," he whispered, his eyes fogging over again. "I didn't wanna hear it. I was so selfish. I didn't wanna hear how it ruined you. All I know is I woke up wanting you. *Needing* you. I needed you to be there with me. I asked for you. It changed everythin'. I didn't know what we'd been playin' at before. I didn't know things had changed for me. And it kills me to know what I said to you..." He clenched his fists, his eyes falling shut as he struggled to maintain his temper. "I sent you to *him*."

"I wanted to hurt you."

The words weren't meant to cut, but she couldn't help the satisfied

rush that raced down her spine at the pain behind his eyes. Buffy didn't consider herself a vindictive person—she really didn't. But she wasn't far enough away from what had happened to detach herself from her reactions. He'd hurt her and she wanted him to hurt in turn. Her wounds couldn't be healed with pretty words and silken kisses. Not when she'd felt herself teetering at the very edge of all-consuming despair.

"You succeeded," Spike replied softly. "The thought of you..."

"I hated it."

His jaw clenched. "Good."

"I just needed to feel like...like I mattered." Another trembling sigh rippled off her lips. "Like I was worth anything. As a woman, you know? Not a girl or the Slayer or Buffy or a human or whatever. You're the first man I've ever done *anything* like this with. In or out of dreams, this is...and maybe I'm no good at it. Maybe I'm missing the part that makes me all with the feminine. But I—"

"Oh god."

"—needed to feel like someone wanted me. You didn't...I didn't think you did. And Angel—"

A growl split the air as Spike cupped her face again, this time anchoring her mouth into his molten kiss. There was no condemnation in his touch, no revulsion and certainly no hatred. His tongue worshipped hers as his thumbs caressed gentle circles into her cheeks.

"Buffy..." he whispered, his voice strained. "God, I've missed you. I've missed you so much. Come in here every night...hoping you'd come back to me. Just..." He broke away, pressing his brow to hers. "Just hoping I'd have the chance to tell you I didn't mean it."

"But you did," she protested.

"No, I...I was so angry with myself. I didn't wanna feel this. Not for you. Not for anyone but...and now I'm torn up with wanting to go to you so I can make things better in person." A half smile stretched his lips. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to sneak out on wheels?"

Buffy couldn't help it. She giggled, and damn it felt good. "And here I thought if you ever sought me out again, it'd be to kill me."

"No. *God* no." Spike kissed her again hungrily. "Never. I swear it. You own too much of me. The second I'm outta that sodding chair..."

He paused, considering. "Guess I better ask this, though it scares the piss outta me."

"Ask what?"

"Slayer, you're well within your rights to kick me in the nuts and dust me. All of this has been on me, and I get that. I want you but I... understand if you can't. If I hurt you too much." He shook his head. "Tell me you hate me. Tell me to leave you alone. Tell me to get out of your town and I'll do it. I'll do whatever you ask. Anything you ask."

Buffy's breath hitched. The immediate answer, the one she wanted to give him, was, of course, the opposite of what he'd said. But she stopped herself from blurting her forgiveness because he was right—he didn't really deserve it. After the last few weeks, this volleying back and forth, feeling worthless as a slayer and as a woman, she knew going back to him was stupid. That she would be like the women she heard about who refused to see the faults in their abusive partners. Those who slapped and yelled but were *oh so sorry* the second a bruise began to form. Never had she thought she'd find herself in a situation even fleetingly similar to those.

But as similar as they seemed, this wasn't like that. Spike was a vampire without a soul who was supposed to hate her, hurt her, kill her. And he'd pushed her away because he didn't want to do those things. His nature was to be evil and sadistic, but here he was, fighting it. And he had been fighting it ever since their first night together.

"You hurt me," she said softly. "A lot."

He nodded. "I know."

"I won't be hurt again, Spike. I won't let you do this to me again."

"Good." He nodded again, the action firm. "I'm a monster, love. I know it. But you... I want to be better. For you. I don't know why you let me do this, but I want to deserve it. I want to deserve *you*, Buffy. Because god help me, I'm yours."

There were a thousand things she knew she should do, and an equal amount she knew she should avoid. A thousand things the following days could well teach her to regret. But right now—for this fleeting second—he belonged to her. He belonged to her *because* he believed it. The coming days could destroy her and might well, and maybe she was being stupid, but she couldn't stop. If he belonged to her, she was

going to take advantage of it. This could be all she ever had and she sure as hell wasn't going to take it for granted.

Buffy whimpered and wove her fingers through his hair, attacking his mouth with hers. She bit at his lips and waged war on his tongue with her own, devouring his taste. Memorizing the feel of his skin beneath hers and the cool sensation of his hair against her fingertips. Spike was stunned motionless for about three seconds before he growled and seized her hips, thrusting his clad cock hard against her center.

"Fuck, baby."

"Spike..."

He lifted her in his arms and the next thing she knew, she was on her back on the bed, Spike showering her throat with kisses as he slid his hands up her thighs. "I've missed you so much," he whimpered again. "So much."

"Really?"

Spike glanced up. "Really," he murmured, nodding in a way that seemed crippled with grief. "I was wrong. I was so wrong. About everything. You're not the sort of woman a man can just walk away from, kitten." He sighed harshly, resting his head against her belly and slipping a hand under the hem of her nightshirt. "I hurt you, and I'll spend the rest of my life makin' up for it."

Her pulse raced. In any other context, the words would have sounded hollow, but her girlish heart couldn't help but believe me. Right now with his fingers gently caressing the wet crotch of her panties, with his cheek rubbing against her as his lips pressed a series of kisses against her clothed stomach, she caved. This was the Spike she'd never thought she'd see again. The Spike she thought had died the night the organ fell.

"Memories of your taste have haunted me," he whispered, sitting up and slowly drawing her sleep-shirt up her body. He hesitated just before baring her breasts. "Buffy?"

"Yes."

Spike growled again and cupped her pussy with his right hand, his other tearing the sleep-shirt away. And the second cold air met her bare skin, a long whimper scratched his throat and he wrapped his

hungry mouth around one of her aching breasts, cupping the weight of the other in his palm. "You're so beautiful," he murmured around her flesh, the hand between her legs bunching the stretch of cotton protecting her pussy to the side. Then his fingertips were teasing her slit, his thumb sliding over her clit and rubbing her with such tenderness that she wanted to weep all over again.

"Ohh..."

"So beautiful." He left her breast with a soft kiss, his lips mapping a slow path down her abdomen, coating her skin with kisses. "Want you on my tongue. You'll let me, won't you, Buffy?" Spike didn't bother waiting for a response, instead ripping her panties away for good, burying his face between her thighs and inhaling sharply, licking her drenched flesh with a contented purr. "I want you always," he murmured. "I was a goner the second I saw you. Shoulda figured it then."

She swore, arching her hips off the bed. "Please."

"Please?"

"Just...please. Before you..." She tossed her head back and whimpered, spreading her thighs wider for him. "I need..."

Spike licked his lips, his hands framing her pussy. "I know what you need, baby," he replied softly. "You want my mouth on you?"

Electricity fired her skin. Buffy whimpered and nodded desperately, rolling her hips under him. "Oh yes."

"Your scent has haunted me. And your taste..." He trembled, dipping his head to run his tongue up her slit. "Fuck, your taste. A man can grow addicted to this taste. God knows I have." He flicked his tongue over her clit and grinned when she moaned. "You have no idea what it was like...comin' in here night after night. I wanted to stop but I didn't know how. I didn't know...and I didn't know if you were alive or dead or hurt or just...I wagered you found a way." He wrapped his lips around her clit again and sucked hard. "A way to stay away from me. But I didn't *know*, did I? There was no way to know."

The idea that she could have worried him at all made her insides warm. "You were...really?"

"I was really what?" he mused, spreading her pussy lips wide to lick at her pink flesh.

“Worried.”

Spike’s eyes slowly trailed up her body until they were locked with hers. “You get enough time, pet, and everythin’ runs through your mind. Every scenario. Every possibility. I was angry at first. Bloody outraged.” He paused again, his gaze returning to her pussy as he slipped two fingers inside her. “Love this,” he whispered. “Love watchin’ you drench my fingers. Love watchin’ a small part of me disappear inside you.”

She really hoped he wasn’t saying anything important because the explosion of pleasure rocketing through her body had her ears ringing with the shrill of her own screams. It’d been so long. Every night seemed to eclipse a thousand years. And here she was again—spread naked on the bed before the man she loved as he worshiped her pussy and told her everything she thought she’d never hear.

“You’re so soft. So wet.”

“Spike...”

He smiled gently and dipped his head again. “I was angry at first,” he repeated. “At you...but really at me. I’m not an idiot, love. I knew what I’d done the second you were gone. What you said...the look in your eyes...” A still beat settled between them and Buffy shivered. She didn’t want any reminders of what she’d said—not now. And evidently, Spike didn’t either, because instead of calling her on her admission, he turned his eyes to his thrusting fingers with a delighted purr. “I got worried after you didn’t come back. I dunno what I thought...maybe just a day would do it for you. But then you weren’t here the next day. Or the next. So...yeah, I started thinkin’ of everything that could’ve happened. And how it would’ve been my fault.”

“Your fault?” Buffy repeated softly, her brow furrowing. “How?”

Spike arched a brow and licked his lips. “You know how,” he replied, his eyes not leaving her pussy, seemingly entranced by his thrusting fingers. “I wanna be in here so badly. Know I mucked it up. Know I don’t deserve it. But god...I wanna feel you around my cock.”

“Spike—”

“I know, love. And I can wait. I’ll prove it to you. I’ll prove I deserve this. Doesn’t matter how long it takes. I’m here now. Not gonna do anythin’ to muck this up. Not again.” He slowly retracted his

fingers from her warmth, and his moan of protest at the loss of her silken walls around his flesh nearly outdid hers. "I'm here now," he murmured again before sinking his tongue inside her. "I'm here, and I'm not goin' anywhere. Not unless you want me to."

There had been a few patchy incidents in her past when the words *too good to be true* provided an accurate summary for what she was feeling. All fell short to this moment. To Spike's tongue thrusting deep inside her, drawing her juices into his throat as his fingers manipulated her clit and driving her to the proverbial edge. He'd wormed his way through every conceivable barrier she'd attempted to construct, and he'd done so without so much as batting an eye.

She loved him, and her body wanted him inside. More than the explosive feel of his tongue thrusting into her aching hole and his fingers massaging her clit. She wanted to cross the final threshold. She wanted him to mark her, and the rapidity of her surrender had her questioning every facet of herself.

But she didn't care. Spike was with her now. Her wounded heart was healing.

"Not going anywhere?" Buffy demanded, weaving her fingers through his hair. "You promise?"

Spike glanced up, breathing raggedly, and the sight of his glistening mouth made her tremble. "I promise, Buffy," he whispered. "I'm yours. I'm all yours. And I'll—"

"What about Dru?"

She was amazed she was able to say the woman's name without spitting nails. Especially now. Now when she was vulnerable to him in every sense of the word. Emotionally. Physically. Entirely. She was naked and spread, his head perched between her thighs, and he literally held her in his hands.

"I told you, kitten," Spike said at last. "Dru's not a factor."

"But—"

"She's *not*. I don't let her touch me, and she's stopped trying." He sucked her clit between his lips with a delighted whimper, his eyes rolling back when she cried out and thrust her pussy against his face. "I know...I can't manage without you. Not anymore."

Buffy blinked rapidly, doing her best to ignore the sparks of ecstasy

shooting through her veins. He was much too good at distracting her. "But what if—"

"What if nothin'. I mean it."

"Even—"

"Slayer, when I'm healed, I'm leaving. I'm leaving her completely." He paused and let the words settle, his eyes challenging her to question him. When he was satisfied she understood, he smiled and raised himself up on his arms, slowly prowling up her body and making sure she felt every thick inch of him through his jeans. "I dunno what I'll do yet," he continued, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and thrusting his hard cock against her wet flesh. "Where I'll go."

"Go? I don't want you to go."

Spike gave her the most heartbreaking smile she could have imagined, and reached up to brush wayward strands of hair away from her face. "As long as that's true for you, I'm going nowhere. Three weeks away from you and I nearly lost my sodding mind. I can't leave. I'm not gonna be fool enough to let you go again. Far as I'm concerned, you're it."

"I don't—"

"You love me."

There it was. The unspoken cloud of tension between them finally exploded. It was out. Her throat ached. Her heart pounded. Her eyes watered. But there was nothing but warmth in his gaze. Nothing to suggest her heart was about to be trampled for the unpardonable sin of loving him. Perhaps, then, it really was that simple. Perhaps things could be fixed that easily. Perhaps all he'd needed was distance and time. Perhaps her disappearance really had impacted him, and in a manner she couldn't have predicted.

"Spike..."

He brushed his lips across her brow. "You love me," he whispered.

Tears spilled over her eyes without warning. She was so damned sick of crying. "I do," she whispered, her voice sounding like a shout to her ears. "I didn't mean to, but I—"

"You give me somethin' that precious and I..." Spike shivered hard and pressed his brow to hers. "Buffy..."

"I'm it?" she asked breathlessly. The question was delayed, but she

needed an answer nonetheless. And though she hated how hopeful she sounded, there was no helping herself. She needed to know.

He kissed her sweetly and nodded against her lips. "Oh yes."

And the tears swelled again. Lousy tears.

"Really?" she repeated, her voice cracking.

"*God*, yes." He punctuated every word with a kiss. "I told you—lesson bloody well learned. I'm not doin' this again. I don't care what it costs me anymore. What it makes me. That it's wrong. Whatever I said before, I can't imagine anythin' worse than what I went through when you weren't here, and I'd rather not try."

"You don't mind?" At his frown, she cleared her throat and clarified, "The *me slayer, you vampire* thing. I don't understand how it could go from being the most important thing to not important at all...but...you really don't mind now?"

Spike paused at that, his eyes suddenly clouded with contemplation. "I can't say that," he conceded a second later, his hands seizing her shoulders when she tensed beneath him. "Buffy...I'm still a vampire. I'm still evil at heart. I'm still tryin' to wrap my mind around how you could've wheedled your way in so deep without me noticin' until...until it was pointed out to me. I honestly dunno what we were playin' at before. I dunno what I thought. And maybe I was hopin' it wasn't real just as much as I wanted it to be real. When it was just my dreams, there wasn't nearly as much on the line." Spike broke his eyes away from hers, a long, heavy sigh racing through his body. "It's gonna take time for me. I wanted to hate you more than anything, but I can't. You've still bugged up my life but I don't care anymore. I dunno how I went from bein' so in love with Drusilla that the idea of..." He stopped talking when he realized how still she'd become, choosing his words carefully. "...and that was a large part of it. Coming to terms with the idea that my love for Dru wasn't what I thought it was. It couldn't be...not if it was so easy for you to sneak in."

She was both singing with hope and bleeding from reopened wounds—she couldn't stop listening but she couldn't bear to hear another word. "Spike, I can't—"

"Just listen—"

"I don't—"

"Slayer, I'm still workin' through this myself. It's not gonna be an easy ride whichever way we mount it. All I know for certain is I need you."

There was no disguising the tremble in her voice. "Need?"

Spike grinned. "Haven't you gotten that through your thick skull? That's all I know right now. The rest...I wager we'll figure it out as we go along."

And there was really nothing more she could ask for, was there? While the words she longed to hear remained absent, what he'd given her would have to be enough. He was with her, peppering her skin with soft kisses and moving against her body. He was with her because he needed her—because this was where he wanted to be. Because he'd chosen her.

Then something amazing happened. Spike pulled back and flashed her—*Buffy*—a nervous grin. "Is that... Is that somethin' you can accept for now? I know it's not what you want just yet, but god help me, I'm tryin'. I—"

In cases like these, there was no better answer than grasping a handful of hair and tugging him down to her lips, swallowing him in an eager, demanding kiss that left nothing of her behind. It was enough. It was more than enough. It was a promise for something she never thought she'd touch. This was everything. Savoring his kisses and knowing there would be something to come back for tomorrow. Devouring his whimpers as her tongue declared war on his mouth. There wasn't enough of him—she needed every bit of what he had to offer inside. He kissed her with a mouth that knew her intimately, and as she thrust herself against the hardness at the apex of her thighs, her blood rushed and she knew she'd crossed the final barrier.

It was quick. So quick. But he had no reason to lie to her. Not when he knew he already had her love.

"Spike," she gasped between kisses, jerking his shirt up his back, giving up and ripping it off. "I want..."

"Tell me," Spike replied, his wandering lips wrapping around one of her nipples, his hand again finding her breast. "What do you need, kitten?"

"You," Buffy whispered with borrowed confidence. "Inside."

THE SILENCE that followed would have suffocated her had Spike looked at her with anything short of wonder. He was perched between her naked thighs, his hard denim-confined cock pressed against her pussy, and staring at her like she had been kissed by sunlight.

"You..." he said after a few thick seconds, choked with emotion. "You want..."

She nodded, certain her thundering heart would break through her chest at any second. "I...I need—"

"I didn't..." Spike held her eyes a minute longer before ducking his head, shaking. "Christ, love, I didn't think...you know I meant it, right? Everythin' I said. I meant every blessed word. I didn't say it so you'd let me...I'm not gonna turn back into a heartless prat if you don't let me fuck you. I'm—"

"I know." The words were braver than the sentiment behind them. In all honesty, Buffy didn't know what she believed. Too much of what he'd said sounded like her every fantasy come to life. She was half convinced her lack-of-dreams had sent her into some sort of dream-overload—into a world where the dreams she entertained mirrored reality so closely she could fool herself into believing everything actu-

ally would be all right. But then again, the openness in his eyes was something she hadn't seen before.

He'd taken her before without caring how she felt. He'd forced his cock between her lips back when she'd thought she hated him. If he wanted her pussy so badly, he could have taken it without whispering promises across her skin. Evil or not, soulless or not, Spike wasn't the sort of man—or vampire—to lie about things like this. He was brutally honest in everything he did, as her healing heart could attest.

Even if he never loved her, she knew she could give him her body without regret. She belonged to him completely—trying to be with Angel had only proven as much. She couldn't give any other man her virginity when she knew it belonged to Spike. And right now, under the tender caresses of his fingertips, the moment felt right. Perhaps it was rushed, but her mind was made up.

Buffy exhaled slowly and shivered, forcing a smile to her lips and hoping her nerves weren't as exposed as she felt they were. She cupped his cheek and nodded. "Spike—"

Apparently, though, he saw whatever he needed in her eyes, for he didn't let the words escape her lips. With a growl, the indecision in his gaze faded completely and he smashed his mouth to hers, his teeth scratching her lips and his tongue attacking hers with raw, desperate fervor. She barely had time to kiss him back before he deprived her of his mouth again. "I won't let you regret this," he growled, nipping at her throat as he made his way down her body without ceremony. He bit her breast with a fevered moan, sliding a hand between them to free his cock. "I promise, baby, I won't."

She tried to answer; she really did. What came out, though, sounded like, "Inooougghh."

Spike grinned up at her, and the mischief his eyes only made the ache between her legs more pronounced, though she wasn't sure if it was for the look he gave her or the way he sucked on one breast tender before turning to the other. "Sorry, sweet. Didn't catch that."

The playfulness in his tone had the weight on her heart lightening by the second. "Jackass," she retorted, her voice cracking as his hand found her pussy again, his fingertips running up and down her slit as the rest of him fought to get his jeans down his legs. How he managed

to manipulate her breasts, finger her pussy, and get himself mostly naked all at the same time was beyond her, but she wasn't about to question it. She was just grateful for vampiric ingenuity.

"I just love makin' you incoherent," he replied, flashing a quick grin. "I've missed that look. The way your eyes get all wide. The little sounds you make." He released her without warning, his hands finding her wrists and encouraging her to sit up as he rose off the bed. "Lemme look at you, baby," he murmured. "I've missed looking at you."

Buffy licked her lips, her eyes following the eager bob of his erect cock as he pulled his jeans off completely. Yeah, she'd missed looking at him, too. She'd missed everything. She'd missed the way he smirked when she moaned. She'd missed the arrogant glow of his eyes and the matching words that rolled off his oh-so-talented lips. Most of all, she'd missed the way she could make all of the above vanish in a blink just by wrapping her hand around his erection.

"Oh fuck," Spike gasped, tossing his head back and thrusting his hips forward. "Please..."

"You've missed this, too?" Buffy asked, her eyes fluttering to his face, heat reddening her cheeks. She didn't know where her boldness was coming from, but she wasn't about to shut it out. She needed to know he'd missed what she could do to him on top of everything else. Just as he missed her body and, hopefully, the brain that came with it. With as non-feminine as she'd felt, she needed to know, as a female, that she could make him as crazy as he made her. "Have you missed my mouth on you?"

Spike's eyes widened. "Buffy, please!"

She smiled and licked his silken head before her mind could interject, and the answering whimper that ripped through the air made her blood rush with heat. "I'll take that as a yes," she replied before wrapping her lips around him completely. She didn't draw him all the way into her mouth, enjoying the tortured bliss on his face. Knowing she could have him moaning for her by this alone...

But she didn't stop him when he fisted a handful of hair and thrust his cock deeper. "Fuck, you're so hot," he moaned, sliding his length between her lips until only his head remained within her mouth. "So...God, Buffy..."

She didn't know what she expected, but it wasn't to be released. It wasn't for him to pull his cock away from her. The next thing she knew, he had her back against the mattress again and Spike was on his knees, his hands slipping under her hips and lifting her pussy to his hungry mouth once more. "Missed this cunt," he growled, then slid his tongue up and down her slit before he wrapped his lips around her clit again. "Missed your clit. Missed how you moan for me."

"Oh my god!"

Spike grinned and spread her lips. "You're so perfect here," he whispered, running his index finger up and down her exposed, slippery flesh. "So wet. So pink." He eased his finger inside her, shuddering when she whimpered. "You're really gonna let me in? Gonna drench my cock?"

"Yes! Yes, please!"

"I dunno how this is gonna work, pet."

That much sliced through the fog and Buffy sat up, a nervous titter racing through her. "Then we're in trouble," she replied, her voice shaking. "What do you—"

"In here. Your virginity isn't..." Spike frowned, and while she hated the absence of the sultry smirk, he kept her body on fire by the steady thrust of his finger, soon accompanied by a second. "It's so bloody hard to remember this isn't really happenin'." As though it was the most natural thing in the world, he dipped his head every few seconds so he could suck on her clit. "That you're not really here...burning my skin off my fingers with your heat and tremblin' beneath me."

Buffy swallowed hard. It was beyond difficult to focus on what she knew was a very good point with him turning her into goo. "Is this... not good enough?"

His eyes widened. "Have I ever done anythin' to make you think that?"

Those were dangerous words. He'd done a lot to make her feel inadequate, but at the same time, he knew he was on uneven ground. Furthermore, he was right; he hadn't done anything to make her think the dream-world wasn't enough for him and to be truthful, that had been a big part of the problem. The dream-world *was* enough for him, or it had been. And it had *never* been enough for her.

"No," she whispered, "but—"

"It hurts, baby," he whispered, his eyes dropping to her pussy, his wicked tongue licking his equally wicked lips at what he saw. "The first time for girlies...it hurts. But I don't know how it works in here. If it'll hurt for you here...and out there."

"Hurts?"

He nodded and licked her clit again. "For sweet little slayers," he agreed. "Not for badass vamps."

A shudder raced down her spine, even as she lifted her hips to meet the eager thrusts of his hand. "That." Pant. "Isn't...fair."

Spike smiled softly. "I know."

Electric sparks burned her veins. "So girls...get...the short straw."

Spike chuckled and nipped at her wet flesh, stretching her inner walls wider to accommodate a third finger. "They don't teach you *anythin'* in school, do they?" he mused, grinning.

"Sperm. Egg. Baby. Basics."

"So they leave out the fun stuff," he clarified. "But yeah, love...it hurts for girls the first time. But here... I dunno if it'll hurt here. If all outside rules applied, I'd be in a chair and not movin' around. It's not... it's not real in here. Not in the way we want it. We're not...it feels real." He trembled and licked her clit again, his fingers curling inside her. "God, it feels real. But you're not really here. You're really in your sweet little beddy-by...and I'm—"

"With *her*," Buffy ground out, her hips bucking.

"No."

"But—"

"Slayer, we're at different sodding ends of the factory." Spike sighed and gently eased his fingers out of her pussy, leaving her wet flesh with a parting lick. "She got sick of me whimpering for you in my sleep. Doesn't matter, of course. I left her bed before she got the chance to kick me out. She just started goin' on about how you're sunlight and how I'm lost to you."

"You left?" Buffy repeated, sitting up as he rose to his feet. "You left before she—"

"You're not my consolation prize," Spike said firmly, taking her hand and encouraging her to turn as he dropped to the mattress. "I'm

here 'cause I want *you*. I don't want her. And I'm pretty sure we went over this."

"Pardon a girl who was told she'd ruined your life for being a little insecure," she retorted wryly.

Spike stiffened but didn't reply, instead settling at the head of the bed, his back at the headboard, his legs stretched out. The eager protrusion of his cock rested proudly against his stomach, his hungry eyes raking down her body as she prowled up the mattress. "There's nothin' to be insecure about," he murmured, palming her breasts as his mouth found the soft column of her throat. He moaned against her when her belly rubbed against his erection. "Nothin'."

"It's going to take me a while," Buffy replied, her anxious hand slipping between them, eager to feel his length against her palm again. "A long while."

Pain flashed across his face, but he did not object. "I know."

"But I trust you." It was a dangerous admission, she knew, but it was true. He'd always been honest with her, even when it hurt. And now he knew she loved him. He knew her virginity belonged to him. He might as well have it all.

"You trust me?" he gasped, jerking his hips forward. "Oh, Buffy..."

"I know. You don't deserve it."

"I don't," Spike agreed with a nod. "Guess I'm lucky you love me."

Buffy inhaled sharply. Were it not for the veneration in his eyes—the look that told her just how much those words meant to him—she would have felt she was being mocked.

But she wasn't. Spike took those words seriously. So she didn't say anything, rather contented herself with his whimpers as she stroked his cock. There wasn't anything to say—he knew she loved him and he also knew he didn't deserve it.

Not now, but he was trying to make up for it.

"Buffy..." Then he seized her wrist again and gently coaxed her hand away from his erection. She would have pouted had he not immediately urged her upward until it felt like she was perched just above his balls, the base of his cock nestled against her crevice and his hard length rubbing her belly. And without warning, it occurred to her it was about to happen. While she would awaken in her own bed with

her virginity more or less intact, it didn't make what was about to happen less real. Not to her.

Nothing they'd done in here had been false. Nothing.

He slipped a hand between her legs, his other snaking around her waist. "Hold onto my shoulders, kitten," he purred, "and lift up just a bit."

She felt so open—so exposed. Her legs were open and her wet flesh was pressed intimately against him. True, they'd been like this before, but the effect refused to fade with time. And now, for the first time, she would take a man inside her. Not just any man: Spike. The man she loved. The *vampire* she loved. Tomorrow morning she would go to school and be with her friends and pretend nothing had changed because, really, nothing would have changed. Nothing except *everything*.

"Lemme know if it hurts, baby," Spike whispered, bathing kisses down her throat, the hand at her back caressing her ass as the other positioned his cock at her sopping opening. "We'll go as slow as you need."

Buffy hadn't known what to expect with her first time. She wasn't the sort of naïve little girl who dreamed of making love with her soul-mate on a bed of white silk sheets amidst a scattering of rose petals. Until Spike, she hadn't known if she was capable of the sort of love shared between lovers. Love had been such an abstract concept. And while she knew she was capable of love itself—she loved her mom, her friends, her Watcher, and when he wasn't a jackass, her father—the idea of romantic, physical love remained something she craved but never thought to touch. Now with the head of Spike's cock slipping inside her as he panted hard against her breast and gently stroked her clit with his thumb, every previous notion, every careless word she'd ever assigned to the art of lovemaking was washed away in a torrent of ecstasy.

"Oh my god," Buffy gasped, her nails digging into his forearms.

"Just a little more," Spike replied, his voice strained, the hand at her back urging her ass to meet him. It was only then she noticed how stiff her legs were, how tension had locked every muscle in her body. She fought to overcome fear—to beat down the inner voice that

promised she would never be good enough. That she would never be *feminine* enough. Not soft where he needed her to be and not firm where he liked his women firm. Perhaps she would make the wrong move and be laughed out of the room, bringing her worst fears to life.

After all, if she couldn't make this work in a dream, what hope did she have at achieving it in reality?

Buffy was determined not to let her fears rule her. Not with every inch of her doused in pleasure. With a trembling breath, she forced her vaginal muscles to unclamp, drew in a sharp breath, and impaled herself on his cock completely. White blinded her eyes and every cell in her body cried out in ecstasy. The faint sting of discomfort faded almost instantly—left only with the feel of him, large and thick inside her. Stretching her in ways she'd never thought she could stretch. His smooth skin cradled against her molten walls, cooling her fire while simultaneously stroking the flames to new immeasurable highs.

Her back arched and she rolled her head back. "Ohhh," she cried. "Oh...my god."

"My god," Spike echoed, his head hitting the headboard, his eyes squeezed shut. "So hot. So fucking hot, you are." His chest heaved and he opened his eyes, swallowing her in his heated gaze. "Are you all right, kitten? Any pain?"

"I...I..." Buffy shook her head, her chest crushed with the weight of her gasps. "No. No. Oh god. *Oh god.*" She bit her lower lip hard and wiggled her hips, determined to create friction, needing to feel his flesh slide against her. "I just...I feel...*full.*"

The words sounded ridiculously cheesy to her ears, especially coated in her voice, but it didn't make them any less true. Whatever discomfort she'd felt initially had only been the shock of invasion—the surprise of having Spike inside her body. She'd thought, on some level, the explorations of his fingers would have prepared her for this, but *god*, she'd been wrong. So incredibly wrong. And now that she had him inside her, she felt at last that she *did* own him—at least a small part. There was a part of Spike within her that no one else could touch now. Even if, despite his best wishes, he broke her heart, there was no way any other woman would ever get what she had now.

"You feel so good," Spike whispered against her lips. He poised his

thumb above her clit, massaging her softly. “You’re so hot. You’re so bloody hot. I knew...I knew it. Knew you were hot, but *god*...” He caressed her lips with his before slipping both hands around her hips to cup her ass. “Need you...Buffy...”

“What?”

“Move...ahhh...” He flashed a reassuring smile as she lifted herself off his cock, held for a hesitant second, then sank back down again. “Ohhh, yes. Yeah, that’s it. Just like that, baby.”

This was another thing she’d never envisioned in her first time. While she was fully aware of a variety of sexual positions—okay, three—she’d never seen herself as the sort to control what happened in the bedroom. But here she was, grinding herself against Spike as she fought to find a rhythm that seemed natural. Her jerky breaths betrayed her nervousness, but when she seemingly faltered, he didn’t frown or roll his eyes or bring any of her worst fears to life. The look on his face remained reverent, his gaze never leaving hers.

She knew why he’d given her control. After all that had occurred, she needed it.

“That’s it,” Spike whispered again, squeezing her ass and helping her lift off his cock. The wet suctioning sound that filled the air between their shared breaths should have made her nose wrinkle in distaste, but it only made the heat in her skin burn hotter and the flood between her legs more pronounced. “Oh, fuck, that’s it. Go as slow as you need.”

But she didn’t want slow. The blaze in her body was too intense. And from the edge in his voice, she could tell *slow* wasn’t exactly something he wanted, either. “What do...”

The words wouldn’t come. There just didn’t seem to be a good way to ask anyone how to have sex, especially since everything seemed really obvious. Insert, withdraw, repeat. But her jittering nerves and racing mind and the compounded sensation of being split with pleasure and wracked with fear all at once had her drawing a blank.

Thankfully, Spike didn’t make her clarify. Instead, his eyes softened and he brushed his lips against hers. “Just move with me,” he whispered, lifting her off his lap, and the wet slide of his cock between her pussy walls had her hips wiggling with a need to lock him inside and

never let him go. “And down,” he sighed, burying himself in her pussy again, the tip of him brushing nerves she’d thought solely reserved for hardcore fantasies. Spike kissed her lips again, then his mouth was at her ear, his voice doing things to her that defied reality. “And up again.”

Buffy squeezed her eyes shut, her body rising and falling. “Ohhh...”

“Feel so good,” he murmured, and tugged at her earlobe with his teeth. “And again. Faster.”

Yes. Faster. Faster was good. Faster was very good. She just hoped she could handle faster. Buffy nodded, her racing mind determined to keep up with every sensation. She was nervous and split apart with pleasure, focused on the slick slide of his erection inside her and, at the same time, the look on his face. Mindful for any grimaces or signs of exasperation at how pathetic she was. But there was nothing. Nothing but bliss stretching every curve of his face. Her name lived on his lips as he swallowed her in the endless blue heat of his eyes. And at that moment, it was all she knew.

“Fucking hell, you’re perfect,” he moaned, encouraging her to bounce faster on his cock. The wet smack of their bodies rocking together echoed in her ears and served only to fuel the growing inferno in her belly. “So tight. God, you’re so...so tight. So bleeding hot.” He nibbled a kiss off her lips, coaxing her to lean forward until she was stretched to the breaking point. There was no way he wasn’t splitting her in half, but she couldn’t bring herself to care. Not when the hurt felt this good. Not when his hips started lifting off the bed to meet her thrusts. “How...how do I...Buffy?”

“I...I’ve never...*good*.” And if that wasn’t the understatement of the year, she didn’t know what was. She only wished she had a way with words. Something that would make what she felt sound sexy and hot rather than adolescent and foolish. She wanted to tell him how she’d never realized how empty she was before—how she could’ve gone through life without being complete. But she knew how that sounded to her own ears—never mind how they would sound to his. It didn’t matter it was the truth. The truth was totally immune to clichés and really bad metaphors—the truth didn’t care how it sounded, it merely *was*. And for that reason, she bottled the truth inside and stuck to safe-ground. A place where her girlish sentiments couldn’t be

mocked, even if the leftovers did her real feelings little justice. "Spike...oh god..."

"Good?" he repeated, grinning and swirling his hips under her before stabbing his cock inside her again. "Just good?"

Colors burst behind her eyes. "Oh!"

"Waited so long for you. So fucking long."

Perhaps it *had* been long. She really didn't remember at the moment. She could barely remember her own name. All she knew was her body was galloping closer to an explosion unlike anything she'd ever felt, and she could barely keep up with him. With the steady thrust of his hips beneath hers as she fought hard for the supremacy she'd forgotten she already had. She felt the eager slap of his skin against hers every time he arched off the bed, heard the squeaking of the mattress beneath their thrusting bodies and shivered at the colorful words she wasn't even certain Spike was fully aware he released into the hot air between them.

"You feel so good. My Slayer. My Buffy. Mine mine mine *mine*."

There was no arguing with that.

"You love this, don't you?" he demanded, threading his fingers through her hair and jerking her head back just far enough so she felt the degrees of separation between them. "You love knowin' I'm yours, almost as much as you love drenching my cock with your hot slayer juice. Don't you?"

She nodded before she knew what she was doing, her body shoved into overdrive. She clawed for balance, bouncing mercilessly in his lap, worries banished. Spike had made her an addict at first taste. Her pussy throbbed and her body rocketed closer to explosion. And she was thoroughly lost.

"Oh god," Spike whimpered, nipping at her breast. "Buffy..."

She tried to say his name, but words were, as always, lost. "Unh—"

He clenched his teeth and arched his back, and the deeper he burrowed himself, the more she wanted to keep him there. She started clenching because it felt like the thing to do. And at the first contraction, his eyes went so wide she thought she'd hurt him—that was, until, her name tore off his lips as his hips started bucking madly.

"Oh my god. *Oh god.* Buffy *Buffy Buffy!* Squeeze me. Oh god, yes. *Fuck* yes."

She gasped, digging her nails into his shoulders and doing what he asked.

"So fucking good. Gonna pop me, you are. *Oh, Christ.*" One hand released her ass and slipped around to her abdomen. Panting, Spike looked between them so she did too, and soaked in the sight of his cock sinking again and again into her warm depths. "Where the *hell...*" he gasped, his thumb sliding over her slippery clit, "did you learn that?"

Buffy shook her head because she hadn't known she was doing anything, doing her best to rub herself against the pad of his thumb. The duality of sensation was going to unmake her. His length was inside her, his eyes were on her hot face, and he was stroking her swollen clit. There was no way. No way...

"Buffy—"

"Spike, *please!*"

A growl tore through the air and he jerked her to his chest, crushing his free arm around her middle and burying his face in the crook of her throat. "Tell me," he whispered, pressing down on her clit every time she swallowed his cock. "Tell me you love me."

Tears choked her throat and she didn't know why. "I love you," she cried, her pussy clenching as tremors seized her body, blinding ecstasy ripping through her every fiber. She couldn't see—she could barely breathe if she wasn't screaming his name. Her muscles clamped down around him, strangling his cock as she spasmed and came apart. And he gave back as good as he got. His fangs were suddenly nipping at her throat, the growls rumbling through him turning into soft whimpers, then he trembled hard and spilled himself inside her.

"Buffy," Spike murmured, his incisors grazing her sweat-laced skin. "My Buffy..."

He didn't bite her. She thought he might, but he didn't. And to her astonishment, she wasn't sure if the sinking sensation in her gut was relief or disappointment.

What did that mean?

"My Buffy," he said again, still thrusting upward, seemingly desperate for as much of her as she could give.

The silly vampire didn't realize she'd already given him everything. And perhaps, for the time being, that was a good thing. Perhaps.

But as her trembling body fell back to earth, she knew it wouldn't last. He owned every last bit of her. He'd asserted the claim, of course, but she'd given herself to him freely. And if he ever stopped reminding her that she belonged to him, perhaps *then* there would be actual cause for worry.

For now, though, as he wrapped his arms around her and cuddled her to his chest, she refused to think about what came tomorrow. What happened in the fallout of what they'd shared. What he'd given her in place of all he'd taken. The words he'd demanded—the same words she'd willingly given. The words he had not returned.

The tender kiss at her brow told her he loved it that she loved him. And for now, it was enough.

IT WAS no surprise when she awoke in bed alone the next morning, but Buffy couldn't help the sinking in her stomach when the arm that had been around her middle vanished with the morning light. Spike had been cuddled at her back just seconds ago, purring gently into her ear and doing increasingly naughty things to her with his wandering hands. Every few minutes his mouth would dip to explore her neck or her breasts or whatever he was hungry for, whispering adorations into her skin. Her heart was systematically being sewn back together, piece by piece, and for the first time in weeks, she felt the future was again in her hands.

"Tell me again," he'd whispered just before the tug of dawn had drawn her away. "Please..."

There was no denying him anything. Buffy had turned in his arms and kissed his lips. "I love you."

If nothing else, the look on his face would remain with her forever.

The night had given her so much, the largest part being that the cloud of misery that had been choking her had lifted.

So odd how so much could change in her sleep.

Spike's words followed her through her morning routine. He was with her when she showered. He stood in the corner as she styled her

hair. He leered at her as she rifled through her panty drawer and pouted when she ultimately dressed. He brushed his lips across hers before she left her room, promising he would be there when she returned.

Buffy faced the world no longer a virgin. Her legs wobbled when she met her mother's eyes over the kitchen island when Joyce told her she looked different. Buffy didn't know how it was different, but in some way, it made sense. She *felt* different. Every step she took rocked her mind back to the magical night she'd shared with the man she loved. Everything in her eyes had changed.

But it had all taken place on a realm beyond the physical world. Her body was technically still untouched. Spike's hands had never wandered between her legs in reality. Spike's lips had never touched her clit, just as his cock had never been in her mouth. Every kiss they'd shared would be deemed a fantasy by the casual observer. And aside from the heated moment they'd shared the night Billy Ford had tried to sell her out, nothing tangible had ever happened between them.

It amazed her that so much could have taken place without *actually* taking place. But then again, these dreams weren't just dreams. There was something greater at hand. Something allowing their minds to meet each other.

She just didn't know what.

And in many ways, Buffy was beyond caring about how or why. She only knew what she knew, and trusted Giles to fill in the gaps should they need to be filled. Perhaps there were some things which didn't have an explanation. Stranger things had occurred on the Hellmouth. All she knew was everything had changed. *Everything*.

Spike now owned every part of her. He'd held her against his chest with his cock deep inside her body, whispering adorations into her hair as he stroked her back. He'd brushed small kisses across her face, his chest rumbling with contented purrs against hers. He'd given her everything in one night.

Everything except the thing she wanted most.

And while she faced the day with newfound joy, Buffy wasn't fool enough to believe everything would be all right now that the worst was seemingly behind them. Not twenty-four hours had passed since she

felt the walls of the world caving in. Since she'd believed herself a pariah of the human world, relegated only to slaying the evils that stalked the night and averting the occasional apocalypse.

Since she'd used one of her friends in a desperate move to prove her own value.

Which reminded her—she had to talk to Angel. She needed to tell him the truth and apologize for last night. Or that there would be no more of last night. It was the least she owed him. She just had to hope he'd understand. Not that she'd blame him if he didn't; she couldn't, especially when she wasn't sure she'd ever forgive herself. She'd treated Angel the exact way she'd felt she'd been treated by the man she loved—as an object to forget someone else.

She'd just have to hope an apology would be enough.



SHE'D BARELY HAD TIME TO FALL ASLEEP BEFORE SPIKE HAD HER cheeks cupped between his hands, his lips blanketing her face with worried, desperate kisses.

"Are you all right?" he demanded. "He hasn't touched you, has he?"

Buffy shivered, the tears she'd kept at bay all day surging forward with renewed vigor. Her eyes were already cracked from weeping nonstop these past few weeks, and while her heart was relieved the source of its pain wasn't the man against her, she couldn't keep it from bleeding.

"Buffy!" Spike growled, seizing her shoulders and shaking her hard. "Tell me you're all right!"

"I'm all right." It was barely a whisper, but evidently, it was enough. The panic in her vampire's eyes died slowly, melting into concern. "I'm all right," she said again. "He...he hasn't... I mean, we fought and he said some things..."

Spike's eyes darkened. "I can bloody well imagine."

"How did...how did you...?"

Words were failing her fast. Her mind couldn't wrap itself around the idea that Angel as she knew him was gone. Logically she knew it was the truth; she'd seen him. She'd heard him. And while she'd been

able to dismiss the bulk of his personal jabs as nothing more than an attempt to strip her of her self-worth, the words had landed their mark. And well.

"Now, I don't know when Spike found the time to teach you that, but I gotta send the boy a fruit-basket." He grinned and spread his arms. "It certainly changed my life."

She was the reason. Somehow, some way, she was the reason this was happening.

"He came to us, pet," Spike murmured, jarring her back to the present. She'd forgotten she'd even asked a question. "He popped over first thing this mornin'. Fuck, he was there before I even had a chance to..." He shut his eyes, running his hands down her arms. "You sure you're all right?"

"He's there?"

Though she wasn't surprised. Honestly, Buffy had expected the first thing a newly soulless Angel would do was turn to his family.

Spike offered a half smile and shrugged. "Probably shaggin' Dru into a hole in the ground as we speak."

"Dru?"

"It's not important, kitten. Just—"

"Dru's with Angel and it's not important?"

"Not to me." Spike kissed her lips softly. "Tell me you're all right."

The perpetual question on Spike's lips, despite her reassurances, had the numbness surrounding her heart melting into warmth. The day had been a nonstop hell-ride. It had begun with what should have been a painfully awkward visit to Angel's apartment and hopefully ending with another magical night in her lover's arms. It had begun so well; how had things spiraled beyond her control?

Then again, there was no *how* in the equation. She knew how Angel had turned evil.

His words had left little to the imagination.

"I'm fine," Buffy whispered again, forcing a smile. "I'm fine."

"I can't be there to make sure you're not lyin' to me."

"I'm not lying."

Then she burst into tears. Of course she was lying. How in the world could she be all right? How could she? She was still sore from

where Angel had punched her, but not nearly as sore as she was from the verbal barbs he'd fired. How could anyone expect her to be all right? She was the reason. She didn't know how, but she was the reason. She'd done something to remove the part of Angel that kept him grounded in humanity. She'd done something seemingly small and insignificant, and somehow it'd ended up costing her the world.

Well, not the world. And perhaps that was the worst part. She'd fallen asleep with hope in her heart because she knew Spike would be waiting for her, and Spike would make everything better. Spike wouldn't mind if she needed to be weak. If she needed to cry. He'd already seen her at her weakest. He'd hold her if she asked him to.

God, she hoped so. Her emotions were too frazzled, and she couldn't make sense of herself.

When she snapped back to the present, she found she was seated at the edge of the bed with Spike on his knees before her. He was drawing her camisole over her head, exploring her exposed skin. "What did he do?" he demanded. "I'll sodding kill him. I swear it."

Buffy hiccupped miserably and forced a grin. "Spike—"

"If he touched you—"

"Even if he did, you couldn't see it here. Remember?" She raised her hand to his face. She probably looked terrible, but the look in Spike's eyes made her feel beautiful nonetheless. "Dream-world."

His eyes brightened and his nostrils flared. "The second my legs work—"

"He didn't do anything."

"You're crying."

"I've cried a lot recently." Buffy sniffed hard and wiped her eyes. "Sorry."

Spike's head shot up from where he'd been inspecting her belly, his hands poised and ready to draw her flannel bottoms down her legs. "Don't you dare apologize," he said shortly. "For what I put you through—"

"Spike—"

"But I know what... I know what *I* did, kitten. I know it. I don't need any bloody clarification." He fisted the waistline of her pajama bottoms. "But I can't be there to make sure you're not bleeding or

worse. I don't know what the wanker did, and he sure as hell isn't talkin'. So you better be straight with me, or so help me, I'll haul my broken arse to your house and find out for myself. Bugger the consequences."

And just like that, she was engulfed in heat, and a wave of calm washed over her. "You'd do that?" she asked softly.

If anything, Spike looked offended that she'd felt the need to ask. "Of course I would, you daft twig," he retorted, quickly stripping her pajama bottoms down her legs, leaving her body bare to his inquisitive eyes. She hadn't worn panties to bed tonight, and as always, her night-time attire had carried through to the dream-world. Only for the first time, her nudity wasn't soaked in with leers of appreciation and lurid comments; Spike was determined to inspect every inch of her for injury, even if this was a dream world. "But seein' as I really don't fancy the wanker addin' a few months onto my recuperation, I'd really prefer it if you would just tell me."

"That I'm okay?"

"I know you're not bloody *okay*. I just need to know that he didn't hurt you. *Really* hurt you. That you're not bleeding somewhere, tryin' to hold your insides together. Tell me that."

The panic in his eyes was only heightened by the urgency in his voice. And without warning, she found herself gaining balance in a world of chaos. She was in love with Spike, and this was why. This gentle compassion he'd shown her over and over again before the restoration ritual—before everything had blown up in her face. Only it was more pronounced now. There was something in his voice—in the desperation of his touch—that she'd never experienced before.

It hit home then. Something she hadn't truly allowed herself to realize.

Spike was worried. About her.

Spike was *worried* about *her*. Beyond liking her body and the slayer coating it came in. She was crying and he was worried. He couldn't stop touching her, and not in a way designed to make her sizzle. He was worried about her. He was worried about the girl inside the Slayer. He was worried about *Buffy*.

She wanted to cry all over again, but that would only worry him

more. And though her eyes rejoiced at the idea of finally shedding some happy tears, the whole of her was too worn to cry anymore. She'd done her share of crying.

"Believe me," Buffy whispered in lieu of another emotional onslaught. "I'm fine. Really. He said some things, hit me a few times, but I'm not bleeding and all the inside parts are where they're supposed to be."

"This isn't a joke, love. You don't know Angelus like I do. He doesn't just kill—he tortures. And I mean *real* torture. Part of what gives him jollies is findin' creative ways to keep his victims alive." Spike shuddered and pressed his brow to hers. "Fuck, I don't think I've been so scared my entire bloody life when I saw him... When I realized..." He paused. "How'd it happen? How'd that soul get knocked loose?"

Again, and without warning, Buffy felt herself begin to crumble. She didn't want to think about it—didn't want to see the horrified, disappointed looks on her friends' faces or the solemn, parental understanding on Giles's. But Angel would figure it out, if he hadn't already, and the only thing worse than telling Spike would be Spike hearing it spat at him.

"I told you I... To get back at you, I blew him."

Spike went rigid and didn't say anything.

"Ms. Calendar is apparently part of the tribe that cursed Angel way back when. And they gave him an escape clause. If he gets happy, *really* happy, the soul leaves the premises." She barked a laugh even though nothing had been less funny in her whole damn life. "Guess I was really good."

There was nothing for a long, tense minute.

"Spike, I'm so sorry about that."

He broke then, shaking his head and pressing his lips to her brow. "My fault," he murmured. "It was my fault, love. You wouldn't have gone to him if I hadn't been such a prat." He pulled back, and when she saw his eyes, she saw he meant what he'd said. She also saw the things he wasn't saying—the anger and resentment, and the jealousy. She'd just have to take him at his word that the anger and resentment were aimed at himself and not her.

"I'm with you *now*," she said softly. "I'm with you. It's the only place I've wanted to be."

Another pause as Spike studied her before he nodded. "I know, Slayer. Luckiest bloke in the world, I am."

Then he kissed her, the sort of kiss that erased bad thoughts. Belatedly, she realized she was seated on the very bed upon which she'd lost her virginity the night before, and she was naked. Spike hadn't made a move to touch her breasts beyond checking for bruises, and for some reason, that golden piece of knowledge moved her beyond reproach.

Then her eyes fell to his chest, which was covered by the customary black tee. Spike was always dressed when they met. Always. Whereas she fell asleep and wandered into their meeting room in her jammies, his clothing never changed. Did he have a way of projecting his standard outfit on himself before entering their secret rendezvous, or did he perpetually sleep in jeans? She didn't see Spike as the sort to wear boxers to bed or own a pair of silk pajamas. In fact, she would have guessed him to be the kind of guy to sleep in the nude.

It'd be a little jarring, she supposed, if she was met every night by a naked Spike. A little jarring but not at all unpleasant.

"What are you thinkin', pet?" he murmured, jerking her out of her thoughts.

Buffy's cheeks went hot. "You...nothing." She paused then, frowning as an unsettling thought occurred. "He hasn't hurt you, has he?"

It hit her from nowhere, but she didn't know why it'd taken so long to realize Spike might well have found himself on the blunt end of Angel's wrath, if Angel's pointed remarks were anything to go by. There was no longer any doubt whether or not her once almost-boyfriend had known something was going on between her and Spike. His words had left nothing to the imagination, and if he was at the factory, she had much more reason to worry about Spike than he had to worry about her.

If he knew what she was hinting at, Spike betrayed nothing. "Hurt me?" he repeated. "I'm not followin'."

"Like...I'm not speaking in euphemisms here. Has he hurt you? If he's hurt you, he's gonna get his ass kicked."

A smile quirked Spike's lips. "Is that right?"

"Let's just say," she continued, choosing her words carefully, "I don't play nice with anyone who messes with my...whatever you are."

She literally had to bite back the word *boyfriend*. Spike wasn't her boyfriend. And it would be a cold day in Hell before she allowed herself to verbally define their relationship before he did.

If he noticed her fumbling, Spike was gentleman enough not to mention it. Instead, he just grinned. "I'm fine, pet."

"He knows. He knows about us."

"He does?"

The shriek of alarm bells had her deafened. If Angel hadn't confronted Spike about their relationship, something was very wrong. "He told me he knew," she protested. "He—he said...what I—"

Spike held up a hand. "Buffy—"

"He said—"

"He doesn't know, kitten."

Panic speared her veins. How could he be so blasé? So calm? How could he take anything at face value? "No," she said firmly, "I was there. I heard him. He said—"

"He was tryin' to rattle your chains is all." Spike frowned, his brow furrowing. "What's it they say...he lies with the truth. He doesn't know rot. Point of fact, Slayer, he thinks I've been playin' you."

Buffy blinked. Hard. "What?"

"He thinks it's a ploy. Whatever's been goin' on between us..." He paused again, and she could see the clockwork behind his eyes turning as he struggled to find the right words. "He thinks I'm... He thinks I've been jerkin' you around as means to add another notch to my belt. Angelus's head is bloody large enough to be seen from the sodding moon, love, and he's not used to anyone challenging his word. He's not used to being *wrong*. It's bad enough the great sod's regarded as a king among other demons...the blokes who view vamps as an insult to demons everywhere. Angelus manages to make friends and enemies wherever he goes, and his word's as good as infallible to mindless gits who don' know better. I have minions who are trippin' over themselves just to touch the wanker." He shook his head angrily, as though trying to

banish a disturbing image. "Point is, love, whatever he told you was to shake you up. He doesn't know rot about us, except for this bloody hilarious idea he has that I've been toyin' with you to soften you up for the kill. Make you love me just a little so the fight's all the more delicious. He thinks I've played you so good you'll just fold in." Spike's eyes darkened. "He's bloody well forgotten I'm not like him, the arrogant prat."

There was a long beat of silence. "What?"

She flinched. The question was perpetually on her lips, but she couldn't help herself. And if Spike noticed or cared, he didn't comment. He just took what she said for what it was, and did his best to fill in the gaps.

"I've killed two slayers, pet."

Yes, he had. And it should have bothered her the way he spoke of it so candidly. The way he was able to say the words without blinking, without dragging his eyes from hers. It should have bothered her, but it didn't.

And *that* was what truly bothered her.

"He also wagers I have a real need for a roll between the sheets since Dru's been bedridden so bloody long," Spike continued, a long sigh rolling off his shoulders. "He knows I don't fuck around. That Dru's... I've been as faithful to her as a sodding pup. But mix in my fascination with slayers..."

"Fascination?"

"I don't play with my food, love, and I'd never..." He caressed the length of her arm with curled fingers, trembling. "Buffy, you know I'd never hurt you, right?"

The rapidity at which her response came should have terrified her, but it didn't. There was a fine line between deception and the truth, but she knew simply from loving him—from the worn path they'd traveled together—whatever he showed her was his true face. If he hated her, he'd tell her. If he wanted her, he'd tell her. If he hated the fact that he wanted her, he'd tell her. She knew because she'd seen it, and the deception Spike was referring to simply wasn't in his wiring. He *wasn't* one to screw around. If ever he decided he didn't want her anymore, she'd be the first to know.

"I know it," she whispered, smiling gently. "You don't have to worry."

A smile warmed his face, relief brightening his eyes. "Oh thank god," he replied and kissed her brow. "The point is he doesn't know about us, baby. He thinks I'm the best bloody weapon he has against you. He's so certain."

"He really thinks you've been leading me on?"

Spike nodded stoically. "He doesn't know anything, sweetheart. He thinks I have you blinded. That chuffs him a bit too, that I got close and he didn't, but he wants to use it. But he doesn't know *how* I've gotten to you, 'cause he hasn't been able to pick up a whiff of me anywhere on your delicious body, but he's convinced I managed to earn myself a taste. And that's..."

He trailed off, which was just as well because her ears were again ringing with the echoes of Angel's taunts. He certainly hadn't seemed confused. And if he had Spike convinced he thought it was all an act, for all his swagger, Spike might find himself blindsided. And she'd have no way to help him. "Are you sure?" Buffy asked shakily. "Maybe he just wants you to think—"

"No."

"How can you be certain?"

"I just am."

"Spike—"

"He saw me and Dru, okay?"

Every muscle in Buffy's body locked up. It wasn't possible. It *wasn't*. Not after last night. It couldn't be possible after last night. Oh god, could it? Was he saying what it sounded like he was saying? God, was he really capable of something like that? Of waking up after the night they'd shared and taking her passion with him so he could screw his insane girlfriend.

How could anyone be so callous?

Her thoughts must have been in surround sound, for the next thing she knew Spike had her face in his hands and was brushing needy kisses across her skin. "No," he said hurriedly. "No. Not last night. Not for a bloody long time. Not even when...he didn't see what you're

thinkin' he saw. I'd never do that to you, baby. *Never*. Not after last night."

"You didn't—"

"No. Buffy—"

She sniffed hard, feeling foolish and idle but she couldn't keep her stupid self from crying. "I'm sorry," she said softly. "I don't mean to... keep doing...this..."

Spike kissed her lips softly, cupping her naked shoulders. "Buffy...with everythin' I put you through, you don't need to explain yourself to me. You've already given me so much. Last night was..." He trembled hard, dropping his eyes to her breasts almost reluctantly, but shooting up again like a child who didn't want to get caught doing something naughty. "Last night was...more than anythin' in my life, sweetheart. And since this... this is only in here, I can't bloody wait to get a taste outside. When it's not a dream anymore." He paused. "When I say he doesn't know, it's because of what he saw when I had him goosed up and ready for Dru's restoration ritual. He can't know how I feel about you, baby. He's seen nothin'. Dru's tried to tell him, but he can't understand her riddles worth rot. And what he saw...I was tryin' so hard to convince myself I didn't feel for you what I did..." He broke off again, a shaky breath shuddering off his lips. "My behavior wasn't of a man infatuated with a girl beyond wantin' her quim and a mouthful of her blood. I wanted to be what he thought I was. Someone who...was only after you to see you dead."

It was impossible to deny the cold that settled over her, but Buffy refused to blink. These were things she already knew. Things that were in their past. What mattered was what they had now. What he'd told her in the aftermath. And while the words she desperately wanted to hear hadn't yet touched the air, he'd already fueled her heart with hope simply for everything he *had* said. Everything he'd already told her.

"I didn't touch Dru," Spike continued. "I haven't in a long bloody time. But he saw enough. He saw me tryin' to convince myself. Guess I did a good enough job to convince at least one person. Dru didn't buy it. Angelus did."

He didn't let the thought muster. Before what he'd said could even settle in her mind, Spike seized her cheeks again and devoured her

mouth in a fiery, desperate kiss. As though his words could be forgotten under the persuasion of his lips and tongue. And if her wounds had been completely healed, he would have succeeded. He would have eradicated all doubt from a mind that wanted to believe him completely, and a heart that was thoroughly his.

Last night had given her so much, but she'd lost things, too. "But now," she gasped between kisses, tugging his shirt over his head before she could stop herself. Her hands didn't care about her wounds—they wanted to explore his chiseled chest, and it wasn't like she could blame them. "Now...you don't want it now, right?"

Spike moaned in protest. "Don't want what?"

"To...to not...to not be here."

"Fuck no," he panted, palming her breasts at last, flicking his thumbs over her taut nipples. "I didn't want it then. To not be here. I *always* wanna be here. With you. That was the sodding problem."

"Not anymore, right?" she asked before nipping at his mouth. Her hands remained satisfied with the slab of marble he called a chest only for a few seconds before diving for his jeans, much more interested in the brick he kept concealed in his pants. Spike sensed her motives immediately and jumped to his feet to grant her access. His enthusiasm only made her heart swell.

"No. No."

"You want this," Buffy said, jerking down his jeans. His cock bobbed eagerly, striking her jaw. "You want to be here. You want *me*. You want me doing this to you."

"Oh god, yes," Spike agreed, his eyes rolling back as her hand encircled the base of his erection, his hips jerking forward. "Always. *Always*."

A small, confident smile stretched her lips as she lapped at the silky head of his cock. "But that's not it, right?" she asked softly, pumping the hard length of him, mesmerized by the movements of her hand. How something as seemingly small as running her hand up and down his shaft could inspire the sounds he made, she would never know. But she loved the way he whimpered. The way he gasped her name as though she were a saint.

"What...oh god." He wove his hands through her hair, tenderly massaging her scalp. "Buffy...my gorgeous little slayer. My...*Christ*..."

She grinned, sucking him hard between her lips. She loved the taste of his skin against her tongue. The way his flavor consumed her mouth. There was nothing like this—the fumbled attempt to forget Spike had only made her crave this more. She'd never be fool enough to think she could drown out his memory with anyone else ever again.

"Such a hot tongue," Spike groaned, thrusting his cock deeper into her mouth. "God...lick me. Just like that."

Her skin buzzed and her blood burned, but she wasn't about to deny him. She was too addicted to his taste. She murmured around him, scaling a hand between his legs to cup his balls. Her mouth trailed up his length until only the very tip of him remained trapped between her lips, exploring the sensitive dip in his head with her tongue, moaning when he moaned.

"Buffy... *God*, you feel so good. So bloody good."

Buffy smiled shyly and quickly turned her eyes from his when he peered down at her, then released his cock with a wet plop. "Really?"

He whimpered an unintelligible response and thrust his hips forward, cock begging for reentrance. It wasn't good enough, though; she wanted to hear the words. She *needed* to hear the words. She needed to hear how much he adored what she did to him. How she could give him something no one else could. How he loved her.

But she knew those words wouldn't come, and she couldn't think ill of him. Not when he'd been nothing but honest with her. "Never mind," she added quickly, then licked a long path along the underside of his erection. If there was any luck to be had, he'd forget she'd spoken at all.

Spike blinked several times, evidently sensing something important had happened and he'd missed out. "Buffy?"

She sucked his sensitive head between her lips again, determined to distract him.

"I...ooh *fuck*."

Buffy grinned, her mouth inching down his length, teeth just barely grazing his skin. She drew him in as deeply as she could—until his head brushed the back of her throat. She knew he loved it when she swal-

lowed around him, and wasted no time contracting her throat muscles around his cock, sparks blazing across her skin at the moans that ripped through the air.

"So good," he babbled, thrusting deeper into her throat. "So bloody good."

"Mmmm..."

Too quickly, he closed his hands around her shoulders and jerked her roughly to her feet. "Don't wanna come like that," he said hurriedly. "Wanna come inside you."

He kissed her before she could reply.

"You'll let me inside, right?" Spike asked, a hand slipping between her legs and cupping her wet flesh. And god, just the feel of his nimble fingers teasing her swollen clit had all fears banished in the light of pleasure. "You'll let me in your sweet pussy again."

Buffy nodded hard. "Yes."

He smirked. "But don't think you can hide from me." The last words rode out on a growl as he tossed her onto the bed and kicked his jeans off his legs. He soaked in every move her body made, from the helpless parting of her lips to the bounce of her breasts when she landed on her back.

"What—"

"When I say *good*, what I mean is *best*. Sodding best I've ever had."

There was no way he could mean it.

"I *mean* it," he countered. "Every word. No one...*no one* has ever tried to know me the way you do. Has ever wanted to know what I like...how I like to be touched. I never stop wanting you. Your mouth around me...your pussy...*you*. All of you. And the only reason I wanted you to stop was the reason I gave you. I dunno how I'm ever gonna convince you, but if it takes the rest of my days, I'll make sure it gets through your thick skull."

He didn't allow the thought to muster, which was perhaps for the best because if the weight of his words had time to settle, she might have embarrassed herself with another emotional outburst. Instead, he cupped one of her breasts, successfully distracting her with a tender pinch of her nipple. He licked his lips and soaked her up with his eyes, looking, for all the world, like a man on the brink of losing control. "I

wanted to be back here the second I woke up,” he murmured. “You were gone and then I woke up.”

His words made Buffy’s blood sing. “I wanted to be back here, too,” she replied, parting her legs in welcome. She flushed with need the second his eyes raked down her body when he licked those sinful lips the second his gaze landed on her pussy. “I wanted...”

“You miss me, pet?” Spike asked, his voice rough. The mattress dipped with his weight and then he was prowling up her body, settling himself between her legs and making sure she felt every inch of his skin against hers until they were face to face. His cock nestled in the wet valley between her legs, her breasts pressed fully against his chest. There was no hiding from his eyes, and she wouldn’t if she could.

“I wish you’d been with me when I woke up,” she admitted softly. “I didn’t like waking up alone.”

A small, sad smile stretched Spike’s face and he nodded, brushing a tender kiss across her brow. “I’m sorry, baby,” he whispered, his lips traveling to her cheek, then her chin, the corner of her mouth, her lips in full, his heart weighing in his eyes. And the emotion she saw there—the emotion pouring through his gaze—made her bones rattle. “I wanted tonight to be...I don’t know. I wanted...”

“About us?” she volunteered.

“For starters.” He kissed her again. “You distracted me with your hot little body last night. I never even got to ask you how it was you avoided me for so bloody long, so I can make sure it never happens again.”

“Pendant.”

“Pendant?”

“Some anti-dreams pendant. I asked Giles...” She shifted and averted her eyes, suddenly feeling self-conscious. “I asked Giles to...keep...”

Spike arched an eyebrow, not bothering to mask his surprise. “Your watcher knows about us?”

“About the dreams. He knew the night of the ritual. At least that’s when I think he found out.”

“How? We barely knew anything then.”

Buffy licked her lips, unable to keep her eyes from misting. It

surprised her how often she saw what happened. Even after Spike had torn her heart in two, her nights had been haunted by the fall of the pipe organ. Her throat still hurt from the scream that had split the air, her insides still burned with the crushing weight of grief. And then that night—when she'd wrestled with sleep until it came to her only to find the room empty...no matter what had happened since—no matter that she knew Spike was as undead as he'd ever been—the night she'd thought she'd lost him would remain with her forever.

"When...when it happened," she began carefully, unsure how much to betray. "I...he knew. He knew when the organ fell that something was going on... Because of how I... He asked me later and I told him."

Understanding stormed Spike's eyes. "Buffy..."

"He asked me and he was okay with it. Which, yeah, kinda weird, but maybe he sensed that scolding me wouldn't change anything. S-so when I asked him for a way to...you know, stop coming here, he had one." She broke her gaze from his, trembling hard. "He... I don't..."

"Buffy...my god."

He regarded her for a long, quiet minute, gently caressing her temples, long shudders racing through his body. He touched her with quiet reserve—as though she was fragile and precious, rather than rough and expendable.

Was he really so moved at the notion she'd wept for him in front of her Watcher? Had he really not heard the deafening scream that had ripped through her throat? Her body still ached when she thought of that night. It didn't take much to propel her back—a turn of the head, the pull of a sore muscle, and she found herself standing at the altar of a burning church, watching helplessly as the man she loved disappeared under the crashing ceiling.

"You are gorgeous," he murmured, shaken and apparently at a loss for words. "So gorgeous." He sighed and brushed his lips across her cheek, then swallowed her with a gentle kiss. And damn, she melted into him like wax. He gave her everything in a kiss. In the way he whimpered into her mouth as his body moved against hers. The way his tongue begged her lips for entrance. "So bloody gorgeous," he said again, cupping her breasts again.

He left her mouth, wandering southward until he was pressing

kisses against her breasts. There wasn't much there for him to kiss, but if Spike was disappointed with her lack of cleavage, he didn't let it show. For the way his tongue teased her aching nipples and the ardent kisses he peppered across her milky flesh, she could almost believe he meant his own words. She could almost believe he thought she was beautiful.

"I'm bloody amazed," Spike murmured, slipping a hand between them. He teased her clit before ultimately fisting his cock.

"By what?"

"You... God, you." He glanced up, running his blunt teeth over the tip of her nipple, the hand between them directing the velvety head of his cock to tease her swollen clit in time with the near indiscernible movements of his body. "I gave you every sodding reason to kick me away. I sent you to...but you're still here." Spike shook his head and resumed his torturous tease of her body, rubbing his cock up and down her drenched slit and grinning when she gasped and arched beneath him. "You really do love me, don't you?"

Every corner of her being was ablaze. "Spike..."

"You really love me."

She felt like weeping. "I do. I really do."

His fingertips grazed her clit as his lips found the pulse-point of her throat. "Buffy, fuck."

"I love you."

Every time those words left her lips, she lived with the hope that she would hear them back. Right now, she craved his love more than anything. *Anything*. If he told her he loved her—if he meant it—it would be worth losing Angel's soul. It would be worth anything she had to sacrifice. But Spike was too good to deceive her, and she'd rather him not say anything than lie.

They hadn't been back together for long, if they were together at all. If they ever had been or would be. Spike wasn't about to fool her with false confessions.

She was just the rebound girl. And men didn't fall in love with the rebound girl.

But for the moment—for this blessed moment—she would make it be enough. Spike murmured against her lips as he sank balls-deep

inside her pussy, whimpering small adorations that had her head floating and her heart ready for another suicidal dive.

She'd sold Angel to get here. And tomorrow she would deal with the consequences. Tomorrow she would start to pick up the pieces and try to figure out when things had spiraled so out of control.

Tomorrow.

The night belonged to her.

And while she could, she would spend what little time she had with the man she loved.

EVEN WITH A SOULLESS monster terrorizing the Hellmouth, Buffy's life managed to fall into a series of habits. On weekdays, she dragged herself from bed—usually tripping over the echoes of an earth-shattering orgasm—showered, avoided her mother's intense gaze at the breakfast table, and went to school. She and Willow would commiserate over the resident baddie-slaying and how it was they'd both fallen madly in love with creatures of the night.

Well, Willow did most of the talking. While Buffy had eventually confessed everything that was going on with Spike, she was perceptive enough to know the redhead was weirded out at the idea of a slayer and a vampire bumping uglies.

Even if no uglies had actually been bumped in reality.

Willow didn't pretend to understand Buffy's relationship with Spike, which was fine because Buffy hardly understood it herself. All she knew was he was there for her. Every night, he was there for her. She didn't know why. She didn't really care that she didn't know why; in the end, the *why* and *how* didn't matter to her. Perhaps they really had been slated by the Powers to kill each other in their dreams, but if such was the case, the Powers clearly had no handle on who they were dealing with. Neither Buffy nor Spike were easy to control, and they

had an equally messy way of handling anyone who attempted to throw a leash around their necks.

He was there every night. Always first. Always waiting for her. He'd grin at her and rise to his feet the second she popped into the room. Then he'd storm forward and take her face in his hands, kiss her lips numb and walk her backward until they fell into a tangle on the bed. His hands knew her body so well now. Every night, he perched himself between her open legs and inspected her for new bruises, convinced they would carry over into their sub-reality if Angel had managed to get his hands on her.

Similarly, every night his inspections resulted in toe-curling pleasure. Spike never tired of teasing her with his hands and mouth. It seemed he could spend hours with his head between her thighs, happily tonguing her to the stars and back. If he was trying to make the hurt go away by paying her pussy extra attention, he was on the way to full exoneration.

There was peace in her dreams even if reality was chaotic. Spike was with her. He kissed her and every concern niggling her brain melted into nothing. He caressed her and held her and let her be weak in a world where she was supposed to be nothing but strong. He was there.

Giles had given up trying to find an explanation for her nocturnal activities. Once she told him the pendant was no longer needed, his concern for her well-being—atop the looming threat of Angel and the deaths mounting around them—had him delving full-force into research mode. He'd been researching the dreams since the night the organ fell, but now that she had resumed her schedule of meeting Spike every night rather than avoiding him, the need to find the cause of her dreams had skyrocketed.

Only to no avail. There was nothing.

"I really have no answer," Giles told her one day. "Any number of things could have happened to give you these dreams. Perhaps you unknowingly made a wish around a vengeance demon. Perhaps a witch cast a spell with rather peculiar results. Perhaps you've garnered the attention of a Greek deity who wished to have a little fun at your expense. There is no telling, Buffy. The psychology of

dreams and the mysticism behind them...the possibilities are endless."

Buffy mulled his revelation over for a long minute, wording her reply carefully. "I'm fine."

"You're fine?"

"I'm fine, Giles. I'm fine and more than fine." A small smile tugged at her lips. "He...he makes me happy."

Giles's frown deepened. "He wasn't making you happy before. You...Buffy, he made you miserable."

"That *was* before. Drop it."

"Buffy—"

"Giles. Drop it."

And he did. She didn't know why, but he did. Perhaps because he trusted she could handle herself. Perhaps because he knew she needed someone. Perhaps because he thought they could rely on Spike as a last resort. Perhaps because he knew Spike would let her know if Angel was planning something—or hoped, at least, that he would.

Buffy didn't know, and she didn't question it.

Spike was the one constant in her life. And she loved him.

No matter if he didn't love her, she loved him.

Knowing she would see him at night got her through the day. And she wasn't about to give that up.



BUFFY BLINKED. HARD. SHE KNEW SHE'D HAD A WEIRD DAY—ONE OF the strangest in recent memory—but there was no way she thought it could get stranger after she went to sleep. If anything, she'd expected Spike to keep her grounded after everything else that had occurred since she awoke. And while, yes, Valentine's Day was a day for one's respective honey to do something sweet and romantic, she hadn't expected anything beyond the ordinary. Valentine's Day just didn't strike her as a holiday celebrated by demons.

And yet, here was Spike. Standing in the middle of their special room.

Oh yeah, and he was wearing a tux.

Spike. In a tux. Looking awkward but hopeful, his eyes shifting with shy uncertainty that had her stomach knotting and loosening all at once. His hair was slightly ruffled rather than slicked back, and she had the warming sensation it was due to a remark she'd made a few nights ago about how adorable he looked with bedhead.

Can anyone say yum?

"Happy Valentine's Day, love," he said at last, shrugging awkwardly as though to present himself.

Buffy blinked again. "Oh my god."

Spike shuffled, his eyes growing nervous. "I...I didn't know what...I..."

"You dressed up for me?" she asked softly. "You look good enough to eat."

Her words banished all tension, and he rolled his shoulders back, a familiar cocky grin spreading across his face. "Might just take you up on that, kitten," he purred, running a hand down his front and giving her eyes no option but to follow. The lack of denim provided little doubt as to how she was affecting him—his cock was hard and straining for attention, tenting his slacks in a way that had her cheeks reddening and her head telling her it was rude to stare. But her eyes couldn't be swayed. Spike wanted her. She'd just arrived, and he was already hard.

"I...umm...you're...ummm...showing."

Spike's grin broadened and he licked his lips. "Like what you see?"

Buffy's throat ran dry. "Uh huh."

"Got a surprise for you," he said, taking a step forward.

"How did you manage to get into a tux?" she blurted before she could help herself.

"Huh's that?"

"A tux. I...did you go to sleep in a tux? Wouldn't Angel and Dru find that majorly weird?" For some reason she couldn't stop herself from asking, even knowing she was ruining what Spike had tried to make special. "A-and you always...do you really sleep in your clothes, or do you just show up like that? 'Cause I always show up in the jammies I sleep in, and—"

Spike held up a hand, arching a brow. "Buffy?"

She pouted and kicked at the ground. "Sorry," she said. "I just...I've been wondering."

"And only now thought to ask?"

"Well, you're in a tux!"

"Am I? Am I really?"

Buffy scowled, though she couldn't help the smile tugging her lips. She loved it when he teased her. When his eyes brightened with mischief and sparkled as though the world around them wasn't crumbling away. "Yes, and you look beyond yummy. But...I'm with the... massively confused."

Spike grinned. "I don't think I wanna share."

"Huh?"

"I like seein' you in your little slayer jams." The look in his eyes was positively sinful, and it made her want to devour him from head to toe. "I like seein' you the way no one else does. Makes this all the more mine."

Her pout deepened. "Still...with the unfair."

"It's a dream, love."

"Yeah, but I could've dressed in some kinky lingerie or something." A giggle battled her throat at the dreamy look that stormed his eyes. How was it that she'd thought of it before him? "You know...black lace...maybe a few appropriately placed little red bows. So you could open your Buffy present—"

"It's a dream," Spike said urgently.

She blinked. "Huh?"

"I got here first that first night, yeah?"

"You *always* get here first."

Spike waved a hand dismissively. "Yeah, yeah. Well, I got here that first night...starkers, as you might imagine."

She blinked again.

"...I sleep without a stitch, pet."

Thoughts she'd had weeks ago surfaced without warning, and her cheeks reddened under the influence of some deliciously naughty images. Naughty images with her involved, of course. She didn't like to think of Spike as being naked around Drusilla, especially since they'd

been sharing a bed up until the organ collapsed. And knowing their nocturnal activities, it wasn't hard to imagine Spike in real time getting aroused...and touched by another woman as he slept.

"Oh."

He smiled softly as though reading her thoughts, but didn't comment. Instead, he took her face in his hands and brushed a gentle kiss across her lips. "I figured it to be a dream," he continued, his low voice making her nerves buzz with anticipation. "So I wished me some clothes."

"Wished?"

"You can control dreams, love. The strong-willed can, anyway." He pulled back with a devastatingly sexy wink before allowing his eyes to roam the length of her. "And you're as bloody strong-willed as any chit I've ever met. So why don't you wish yourself into some of that sexy lingerie you mentioned?"

Her will abandoned her. Sexy lingerie? Her? She'd just embarrass herself.

Luckily, Spike continued talking before she could protest.

"Or I could just..." He kissed her again, and the ground shook beneath her feet. "...give you your surprise."

It was the last thing he said before vanishing.



TAPPING. WHAT WAS THAT TAPPING?

A thousand things could plague a girl before the truth reached the surface. All she knew was Spike was gone. He'd been there one second, his fingertips caressing her face, and he was gone the next. And in a world where nothing was certain, she couldn't keep her head from screaming in panic.

What if he was dust? What if she'd been right all along and Angel really did know what was going on between them? What if, what if, *what if*.

Tap tap tap.

She paced the floor of the dream-world motel so hard it was a

miracle she didn't wear herself into a trench. She wanted to awaken so badly. She tried screaming her head off, tried pounding on the walls, tried singing "The Song That Never Ends", tried pinching herself, tried everything under the proverbial sun and nothing worked. Nothing. It'd seemed so easy—the few times she'd forced herself awake in the past hadn't required any thought. It was a silent acknowledgment. A voice within that whispered, *I can't be here anymore* and she'd find herself awake.

Now when Spike might be in trouble, she couldn't budge.

If she lost him, she'd never forgive herself.

Tap tap tap.

Buffy jerked awake with a chest-crushing gasp, twisting in her bed sheets and blinking hard until her eyes adjusted to the darkness around her. She was in her room, alone, and she was awake. Spike had been with her just minutes before, but he'd vanished. He'd vanished without a word. And now she had to—

Tap tap tap.

Tears in her throat, her head jerked up violently as her eyes settled on the window.

"Oh my god."

In a blink, her fears morphed into astonishment, and for the first time in months, their eyes actually made contact. There was no fog between them. No distance. The vampire she'd fought with forced passion at the church—the vampire who had introduced himself by announcing he'd kill her—sat outside her room. And despite everything, despite what she knew of him now and everything they had shared, a shiver of fear raced down her spine. Real meant no hiding. No jerking herself awake. Real meant true consequences.

Real changed everything.

Spike smiled softly and offered a little wave, which was enough to break her from her daze. Wobbly legs met the carpet of her bedroom floor, her heart thundering relentlessly in a body that suddenly felt small. She trembled as she unlatched the window and pushed it open. But confronted with closeness after so long knowing he was miles away, her voice failed her completely. She simply stared at him, numb, afraid he would vanish if she blinked.

Afraid he'd be different in the real world, the way he always was, or if things really had changed.

The air between them was suspended. She heard him breathing. He was so quiet she began to doubt he was really with her, then his lips parted and his voice washed over her like warm satin.

"I take it you weren't expectin' a visit?"

Buffy shook her head, running her gaze down his body as something else occurred to her. "You're not in...you can walk?"

"Back's all mended."

"You didn't tell me."

Spike cocked his head. "Wanted to show you," he replied. "Wanted... Are you all right?"

She licked her lips and nodded again, meeting his eyes and smiling sheepishly. "I'm just... You're here."

"I'm here."

"Why?"

He arched an eyebrow. "'Cause here's where you're at. Should I... Buffy?"

She should speak. She knew she should speak, but words wouldn't come. Not even when disappointment washed over his face, and he shifted uncomfortably as though only then realizing that he might not be welcome. It was the furthest thing from the truth, of course, but her stunned nerves were too startled to immediately jump and reassure him. They never had they been face-to-face with the understanding they had now. And she didn't know what to do. She'd imagined their next *real* meeting a thousand different times. A thousand different ways. Never in her fantasies had she been stunned silent.

"You're here," she said again, her mind breaking through the haze. He wasn't disappearing. She kept blinking and gaping and he was still there. Spike was with *her* in real-time. "Are you...we..."

"I was hoping you'd invite me in, love."

Buffy blinked. "Oh...oh yes." She nodded and stepped aside. "Come in, Spike."

It should have alarmed her how easily the decision came, but it didn't. Spike's gaze turned molten. "Just like that?" he asked hoarsely, slip-

ping under her window, his eyes fluttering shut as he slipped inside. “You invite me in to the place where you”—he glanced to the rumpled state of her bed and sighed—“sleep.”

Buffy swallowed hard and nodded. Every cell in her body was attuned to him. He shifted and the movement rippled across her skin. And then she couldn’t stand the distance between them. He was in her room—he was in her space—and she’d never gotten to touch him as a lover. She’d never truly felt his flesh beneath her fingertips or known the taste of his lips. And now that he was here, she needed to know it was real. She needed to know so badly.

“Spike?”

Apparently, hearing his name was all he needed. Spike moaned in surrender, stormed forward and took her face in his hands. “I wanna kiss you,” he murmured. “Really kiss you. Can I?”

She nodded so hard she gave herself whiplash. “Yes. Yes.”

The second his lips brushed hers, the walls around her collapsed and she felt. She *felt*. Spike moaned into her mouth and she felt it. His hands slid down her shoulders and she felt it. He murmured her name against her lips, his tongue seeking hers, his hips thrusting up against hers. Warmth blazed every inch of her skin. She couldn’t get enough of him—enough of this. Enough of the long strokes of his tongue, of the sensuous dance of his lips against hers, of the guttural moans scratching at his throat. Every move he made betrayed his need—need she recognized. Need she could identify.

Need for *her*.

Tears stung her eyes and she had to bite back a laugh. Seemed there was nothing she *didn’t* cry about nowadays. Spike didn’t want her, and she wept. Spike wanted her, and she wept. Spike kissed her, and she wept. Sooner or later she’d be a sniveling baby every time he changed his socks. She really needed to get a handle on her emotions. Buffy wasn’t used to being the teary-eyed female in any role, which was how her mother knew when she was really upset versus when she was overreacting for attention’s sake. Tears on Buffy equaled the rawest form of emotion.

Now she was crying because she was finally kissing Spike. It was no

longer a dream. It wasn't. He was really with her, and his taste was the warmest homecoming she'd ever known.

"What's this?" Spike asked softly, raising a hand to her cheek again to wipe her tears away. "Didn't mean to make you cry, love."

Buffy just laughed and cried harder. "You're here," she blubbered, unsurprised when his brow furrowed in confusion. "You're really here."

"Yeah...thought it'd be the sort've thing that'd make you happy."

How could she even begin to describe how she felt? Buffy broke off, trembling. Every fantasy she'd ever entertained had become solid.

"You *are* happy, right?" Spike ventured cautiously, his eyes searching hers. "These are happy tears?"

"Yes, doof!"

"Oi!"

She widened her eyes and pressed her hand to his mouth, shivering at the soft feel of his lips against her skin. "Shhh. My mom."

Recognition swept across his face and he nodded sheepishly, though her warning didn't prevent him from taking a quick lick of her palm. The contact made every inch of her burn. "Sorry," he murmured. "Just watch the name-calling, yeah?"

"Well watch the stupid questions."

"Doesn't do much for a bloke's ego when the girl starts weepin' the second he kisses her," he replied even as tension rolled off his shoulders. He glanced down to collect himself, and when he met her eyes again, the shine of emotion was so heady she nearly forgot to breathe. "I've wanted to be here so bloody badly."

"You have?"

He blinked. "You doubt it?"

"N-no. I just..." Buffy shuddered hard and sighed, her eyes dropping to his chest, her hands soon following suit. He was no longer in the tux, obviously, as that had been a projection of the dreams, but his normal clothing was almost sexier. Perhaps because she knew it was real. "It's just...I've...with the...being real, and all."

"It's what I mean, kitten," Spike replied, smiling gently, brushing his lips across her brow. "I've wanted to be here." He ran his hands up and down her arms before hesitating and cupping her breasts. When she didn't protest, he began toying with her aching nipples. "Wanted to

feel you under my hands.” He dropped his mouth dropped to her throat. “See if you taste as sweet as you do in the dreams.”

“I-I...”

“Mmm...” He teased her breasts a minute longer before dropping his hands to the hem of her bedtime tank. Then he paused, his eyes seeking hers. “Buffy?”

His hesitation, uncertainty, surprised her. For the past few weeks, they’d been going at it like bunnies, meeting in the middle of the room and ripping each other’s clothes off.

But this *was* real. They were no longer guarded by the protective veil of a dream. Anything they did now would have real-world consequences.

And amazing as it was, but Buffy wasn’t afraid. She’d come to terms with her feelings and the unavoidable places they would take her long ago. Standing with Spike in her bedroom, while an unexpected turn, felt too right to fight, and she wouldn’t if she could.

Buffy drew in a deep breath and nodded, grinning and raising her arms in the air, enjoying how his eyes widened and the unneeded breaths he took caught in his throat. He paused as though giving her time to change her mind, then fisted the cotton of her tank and dragged it over her head with trembling hands. He held her eyes for a long second before dropping his gaze to the fabric in his hands, ultimately pitching it to the corner of her room.

“Buffy...” He flexed his hands, his jaw tightening. He looked anywhere but at her. “We...if we...”

“My mother’s asleep.”

Spike swallowed hard. “Yeah?” he replied, voice hoarse, his eyes unable to keep from zeroing in on her breasts a second longer. He stared at her hungrily for endless seconds, licking his lips before raising his head to meet her gaze. “She’s sleepin’?”

Buffy nodded and fought the urge to cover herself. Spike might have seen her naked a thousand times, but this was different. “S-she’s a...umm...a heavy sleeper.”

A ghost of a smile flickered across his lips. “I’d think so.”

“Oh?”

“All the sneakin’ out you do.” Spike inhaled sharply and closed the

space between them, raising a tentative hand to one of her breasts. "Buffy...do you...do you want...?"

"Yes."

Spike paused. "I didn't ask—"

"You don't have to." She raised her hands to his chest, pushing at the lapels of his duster until he unwound and allowed the leather coat to slide off his shoulders and to the floor. And while she hadn't known what to expect, a part of her shivered when her eyes took in his muscular body. He was dressed, of course, but she knew that chest so well. She knew Spike, and her dreams had not lied to her. "I...I want..."

But words failed her. Verbalizing her desires had never been her strong suit—especially when she was caught unawares. Now, with her heart pounding so hard she could barely keep her breath, she trusted her body with words she couldn't voice. Not allowing herself another moment's pause, she consumed his mouth with hunger she barely recognized.

Spike melted into her with a growl, sucking her tongue greedily into his mouth. "You drive me wild," he told her, breaking their kiss just long enough to rip his shirt over his head. "So much I can't bloody think straight."

She grinned with confidence she didn't feel. "We're even, then," she replied, her eyes dropping to his exposed flesh, placing a tentative hand on his chest. "This is...it's real. No more...here, in this...in real-time, I've never gotten to touch you."

For a second she thought he was going to object, but nothing but heat passed between them.

"I've never felt this chest," she continued bravely, her fingers caressing his skin. "Never...gotten to taste your skin." Fully aware she was echoing his earlier actions, she lowered her head to the chest in question. She'd never played with him the way he did her—tasted his skin, licked his nipples, or worshipped his body, aside from his cock, as he worshipped hers. She wanted to make up for it now. "Never..."

"Buffy..."

She smiled shyly and walked him backward until his legs hit the bed, tugging on the waistband of his jeans. "I've never gotten to...to taste your..."

Spike's eyes bore into hers with heat that had her melting. "God, Buffy..."

Her bravado vanished before she could say the actual word. Where Spike had no trouble uttering little dirties, she was trying to perfect the art. Saying things like *cock* and *balls*, though knowing he'd probably get turned on just by hearing her try, was too far beyond the comfort zone she'd established for herself as a young teen. Eventually, she would try to incorporate *dirty language* into her vocabulary for Spike's benefit. Right now, it was a matter of mastering a verbal description of everything she wanted to do to him.

Her cheeks reddened even further, trembling fingers unzipping his fly. "I want—"

"You have me."

"You didn't let me finish."

"You can have *whatever* you want," Spike replied urgently, jerking his hips forward. "Just—"

His words rode out on the sexiest moan she'd ever heard as she closed her hand around his cock. She'd done this a thousand times. She'd held him, laved his length with her tongue, taken him into her mouth and swallowed around him until she was drinking him down in earnest. She'd done it all without doing it; now her hand was truly around him. She was studying his naked erection for the first time, and all too soon it wasn't enough. She wanted so much more than just to hold him; she wanted him inside her. She wanted his cock thrusting into her mouth, into her body. She wanted *everything*.

"Wanna taste," she said, barely aware of her words. She pushed his jeans down his legs as he tried to kick off his shoes—a collaborative effort which had him crashing to her mattress with an enthusiastic bounce.

"Buffy..." The need raging in his voice had her trembling to her core. It was very clear he was attempting to hold onto control. "Please..."

"Please?"

"I need..." He sighed heavily, his eyes soaking her in. "I...I know it's... It's different, yeah?"

His ability to read her without effort had her feeling even more

self-conscious. Buffy shifted and shook her head, licking her lips. "It's not... Well, yes."

Spike swallowed hard and nodded. "Buffy—"

"But I want you. I do." Buffy leaned forward, dropping her lips to his throat. She loved the taste of his skin. She didn't know how much her emotions poured through actions; she didn't know if Spike even cared that she tried to show him her love through touch. All she knew was she loved him, and her body couldn't turn off love. When she was with him, it was all she could do to keep from saying it on repeat. "I didn't..."

"Oh god," Spike hissed as her teeth gently scraped one of his nipples. Then he blinked and closed his hands around her forearms. "What? Buffy?"

"I didn't know."

"Didn't know what, sweetheart?"

Buffy inhaled deeply and avoided his eyes. She knew he would berate her, but she couldn't help herself. "I didn't know...you'd want this...here."

"Huss'at?"

"...with me. No dreams." She motioned between them, feeling smaller by the second. "I-it's real... I didn't—"

"Oh for Christ's sake—"

"Well, with everything—"

"Buffy, I thought we were..." He cupped her chin and jerked her face upward, forcing her gaze to clash with his. "I know I was a right bastard not too long ago, and I know I deserve every sodding ounce of doubt, but you *know* I...it's *never* been about not wantin' you. Never."

He was right. It was more about not wanting to want her. Not that the distinction made her feel any better, but she supposed it was only fair to get all the facts straight.

"I know," Buffy replied a long minute later, her voice braver than she felt. "I...I just..."

"I wanna make love to you." The way his voice rumbled alone could get her to orgasm. "I wanna feel you around me. You're...I'm lost for you, love. I'm completely buggered and I could give a damn 'cause you're here. I came here because I know the dreams...wonderful as

they are...I know they're not enough for you." He caressed the length of her stomach, his hand coming to rest above the waistline of her pajama bottoms. "They're not enough for me, either."

Her blood raced and her heart thundered with hope she barely allowed herself to feel.

"They're not?" she whispered, her eyes fluttering shut as he palmed a breast.

Spike swallowed hard and shook his head. "No," he replied hoarsely, leaning in and favoring her nipple with a long, sultry lick. "To know I'm not really holding you? That you're not really shivering against me? And waking up without you...without you beside me and knowing I won't see you again till..."

Tears again. It seemed her poor eyes never caught a break. "Spike..."

"It's not enough. Playin' them at this angle isn't enough for me anymore." He trailed a series of wet kisses to her other breast, sliding her pajama bottoms over her ass and down her legs until they pooled around her ankles. "I can't pretend to want you dead when the idea makes me..." He completed the thought in a rumbling growl around her flesh, coaxing her legs apart with his left hand, his fingers sliding sensually between her slick labia. "God, you feel—"

"Unh..."

"Can't wait to taste you." He licked his lips and winked. "See if your honey's as sweet here as it is in our dreams."

"No."

Spike arched a brow. "No? You're not as sweet?"

"I wanted...I-I had a plan." She slipped her hand dipped between them, wrapping her eager fingers around his cock and enjoying the way his eyes clouded. "You always make it...about me."

"Oh, Buffy. Not true." He drew a circle around her mouth. "Seem to recall making it about me quite a lot."

"At first, maybe. But not since then. I wanted—"

"Next time," he promised and kissed her hard. "I wanna be inside you."

"I want that, too. I just—"

"Slayer, if we...this is your... I know it's bloody ridiculous, not to

mention as deliciously twisted as anythin' I've ever experienced, but you...you're..." He paused, his eyes falling to her pussy as he rubbed his fingers along her slit until his skin glistened. "We've never done this. Not here. You're a virgin here."

She suddenly had the urge to laugh, even though she knew it was true. It seemed so absurd for as often as they'd made love. She truly was a virgin in this world—in the real world. Her body had never known the touch of a man. And while this was nothing she hadn't recited to herself a thousand times, he was right—it *was* ridiculous. They'd been lovers for weeks. They knew each other's bodies as well as their own. And yet, in the real world, none of it had ever taken place.

"If we're not careful, I could hurt you." He thumbed her clit. "I don't ever wanna hurt you."

Buffy grasped his shoulders, holding onto him as though the world would fall away if she let go. "Ever?" she repeated, shuddering and bucking against his hand before she could stop herself.

"Sweetheart—"

"When...unh...when this is over—"

Spike lowered his head again to tease her nipples, switching off to treat each breast with equal care. "When this is over," he replied softly, his hands sliding to her hips, gently coaxing her forward until she risked either straddling his legs or falling onto him. She chose the former. "You and I...are gonna have a confrontation. Preferably somewhere far away from here with nothin' but food, water, blood, and a big fluffy bed."

He regarded her with dancing eyes as he slipped his fingers between her thighs again and tapping her clit. She loved the way he rubbed her. The way his fingers thrust inside her pussy to test her readiness. She'd never thought her body anywhere near the enigma Spike seemed to think it was—he was constantly exploring her, attempting to unlock her secrets, as though she had anything to hide.

"But to answer your question, kitten," he replied before nipping at her breast and deftly sliding his fingers away from her sopping hole. He regarded her with a heated look at her whimper as he wrapped his hand around his cock and lathered himself with her juices. "Not gonna hurt you."

“I—”

“You love me. Don’t wanna bollocks that up.” He dragged his lips along her collarbone and up her neck until he was kissing her again in earnest, coaxing her body downward. He rubbed himself along her clit as he’d done countless times. “Want you to keep loving me.”

“Always.”

Spike pulled back just a hair. Just so she saw the blue of his ocean gaze as he pierced her with a look. “Tell me,” he whispered, the head of his cock parting her wet, pink flesh. “Tell me, pet. Please.”

She didn’t hesitate. “I love you.”

A smile stretched his lips, and he tended to hers with a gentle kiss. “And you’re sure?” he whispered, even as his hands urged her downward, his cock pressing into her. “God, Buffy...”

“I’m sure.”

“It’s gonna hurt, love. Not like—”

She didn’t care. She’d waited too long for this moment. She’d waited too long to have Spike’s hard body against hers in reality. If she hesitated, if she blinked, it might all vanish. The world could have ended and she wouldn’t have cared. Buffy attacked his lips with hers and sank down on him, seating his erection deep within her. She waited for the explosion of pain he’d forewarned, but there was nothing. Nothing but the familiar tightening in her lower stomach as her flesh stretched to welcome him. It was uncomfortable only for a second before pleasure rippled through her body. Spike poured a helpless moan into her mouth and clutched desperately at her hips. Ecstasy spiked her blood, elation sparking her every cell. There wasn’t an inch of her that didn’t tremble. Every corner of her body echoed with ecstasy. She felt him everywhere. Her scalp tingled, her eyes blazed, her skin shivered, and he was there. For a blessed second, there was nothing between them. His wide eyes studied her face, his heavy breaths crashing against her mouth. She felt split down the middle and sewn together all at the same time.

It was different but it was the same. It was wonderful. She nearly laughed when the familiar sting of tears attacked her eyes. Instead, she wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him to her, burying her face in his shoulder.

"Oh god," Spike murmured into her hair. "Oh god."

She didn't know what to say, so she fell back on the only truth she knew. "I love you."

"Oh, Buffy." He kissed her brow, his hands squeezing her ass as she lifted off his cock and sank down again. This was a dance they knew well—a dance they had perfected with each other. And while everything was different, there was so much that remained the same. "Are you...any pain, love?"

She shook her head, her eyes shining. "No."

Spike kissed the corner of her mouth. "None?"

"Is that...ohh...is that bad?"

He grinned and shook his head. "No. I just..." He blinked and the matter became moot the second her pussy clenched around him. A long whimper tore through the air and his expression melted again, hands following the bounce of her ass as she moved in long strokes against him. "Oh god."

Buffy tossed her hair back. The air around her burned with novelty. It was so new—so new, yet familiar all at once. Her body protested her mind's knowledge, clenching when she wanted nothing more than to gallop him into a vampire-shaped hole in her mattress. "You've told me so many times," she whispered, and scratching at his lips with her teeth as she thrust her hips against him, "but...I never thought we'd really...here." The rhythmic slide of his erection in and out of her pussy had her insides melting. She was surrounded by familiarity rather than the cold impersonal walls of an imagined room. The breaths against her lips were real, as were the muted mewls that whispered around them.

"Never say never."

Spike slid his arms around her middle and the next thing she knew, he'd flipped her back onto the mattress and was gazing down at her, perched on his elbows and nestled between her legs. He hadn't broken contact, his cock was still moving inside her, hitting all the places he knew drove her crazy. He knew every inch of her so well. So damnably well.

"Buffy..." He explored her face with his lips, rolling his hips, striking nerves inside her she still hadn't been convinced truly existed

outside the fantasy world. But the dreams hadn't lied to her. About anything.

"I didn't think it'd feel like this," he whispered hotly, sliding his hands under her shoulders. "Didn't think anything could really feel so good."

Buffy smiled, nipping at his lips when his mouth dipped for hers. "Do I?" she whispered.

"You're so hot. So bloody hot."

"D-different?"

"No." He smiled and her heart soared. "And yes. I can't...explain." His mouth dropped to her throat, lips dancing across her skin with heated expertise. "It's different, but god you're still... You feel so good. So bloody good. Liquid heat, you are. My hot little slayer."

She clawed at his shoulders, battling his hips in a desperate need to recapture his cock inside her body every time he drew away from her. The wet slide of his flesh against hers had the room spinning. There was nothing beyond this. Beyond Spike pounding her into the mattress. Beyond the feel of his balls slapping her ass with every thrust. Beyond the squeak of a bed she didn't know could squeak so loud. The walls of a room that had previously defined her adolescence melting away as she embraced the fullness of her womanhood.

"Slayer," Spike gasped against her mouth, his pace quickening. "God..."

"Spike..."

"Tell me," he growled, his mouth dancing southward until he was sucking at her breast. A hand danced across her abdomen, slow and calm even as his thrusts grew more demanding. She felt his breaths rocking against her skin, felt his moans rumble through his chest in the guise of a thundering heart. He chewed on her breast and massaged her clit in gentle counterpoint to the wild stabs of his cock. "Tell me how this feels."

"Spike..."

"No one else, love," he snarled, panting hard into her skin. "No one else gets to taste this."

"No one," she agreed breathlessly. Her body belonged to Spike. Her *everything* belonged to Spike. She was his; his to fuck, his to love,

his to break. She just didn't know which option he would choose in the end. How he would regard the gift that was her.

Right now, she felt like he wanted to love her. It was a pipe dream, of course—the romanticism of the day swirling with the magic of the moment. Spike was in her room, in her bed, in her body, loving her with all the words he refused to speak. The love he kept from her.

None of it mattered. She belonged to him either way.

"You're mine." He'd vamped in a blink, his yellow eyes consuming hers, his slippery fingers caressing her clit speedily until the strokes, combined with the thrusts of his cock into her warm depths, had ecstasy piercing her every nerve. "Squeeze me, kitten," he murmured around her breast. "Wanna feel that juicy little cunt of yours squeezin'...God, please."

She obeyed, squeezing her slayer muscles around him. Spike's eyes fell shut and he surrendered with a low moan and in the guise of his demon, she'd never seen anything more beautiful. He favored her breast with another long, lavish lick before seizing her lips with his, teasing her with the hint of his fangs against her hot skin even if he never came close to nicking her.

"Oh yeah," he purred rakishly, his words riding out on a whimper. "Buffy...*Buffy*..."

"Need...need..."

"I know what you need, kitten." He buried his face in the crook of her throat, shuddering hard. Every stroke of his fingers had bolts of lightning shooting through her body. The heat storm mounting in her belly was on the verge of an explosion the likes of which she'd never experienced. His mouth was on her, his fangs were glimmering in the shards of moonlight peering in through the open window, his cock stuffing her pussy with every stroke—it was too much.

"Wanna feel you strangling me," Spike growled. "Want you to drench me with your sweet..."

"Spike—"

"Do it, Buffy. Come for me. Lemme hear it."

And from nowhere, her blood shot with a desire so forbidden she nearly wept. But how could she deny herself when this might be all she ever had? When the novelty of screwing a slayer wore off—when her

love for him no longer enchanted him, and she became a punchline for the history books. She'd already sold herself this far—there was no sense holding back now.

"I need you," she whispered, her voice barely audible above the illicit smack of their naked bodies as she barreled closer to climax.

"You've got me."

"I need...your fangs."

Spike's eyes went wide. She didn't know what she'd expected; a laugh, a kiss, the immediate halt of their lovemaking so he could make sure he'd heard her properly. None of that happened. If anything, the instant her words hit the air, her mind and body parted completely—body lost to bone-melting pleasure as he unmade her with every stroke, her mind racing to catch up with the magnitude of what she'd just asked.

She thought for a second he might ask her to repeat herself to make sure it was something she truly wanted. He didn't. Instead, a leer stretched his lips before he lowered his head again, his movements slow and intentional even as his hips rocked hard against her. "You're mine," he whispered again, and the words made her insides shiver in the midst of blazing heat.

Then his fangs sliced into her neck, and the world around her exploded into a foray of color. Buffy screamed—she was sure she screamed only no sound escaped her lips. Her scream was muted but deafening, every cell in her body rocketing as her body clenched and spasmed around him. She felt herself pouring out; felt his incisors in a strained pleasure-pull, Spike drinking her down his throat. He growled around mouthfuls of blood as he spilled himself inside her, as his cock rubbed her wet, sensitive flesh. Pleasure numbed her until there was nothing left but a dull tingle. Until she was aware of nothing but his ivory fangs and the welcomed weight of his body. He was inside her in every possible way, and somehow, it was still not enough.

But he was with her. He'd given her more than she'd thought she'd ever have.

He'd given her a part of himself. Turnabout was fair like that—he owned everything she was.

“Buffy,” he whispered, soft lips caressing her bloodied skin.
“My Buffy...”

She trembled and wrapped her arms around him, her eyes fluttering shut.

Perhaps if she held on tight enough, perhaps if she wished hard enough, morning would never come.

Perhaps he'd never disappear.

Perhaps this moment would last forever.

A WAVE of disappointment always accompanied her upon awakening, tagged with an immeasurable pang of loss. She hated the sun. She hated knowing what awaited her when the dreams fizzed into nothing. She hated the sinking in her stomach. She hated knowing the hard body behind her would blink away until night fell again. She hated knowing she was going to be alone once sleep released her completely.

The arm around her middle tightened, coaxing a long sigh through her lips. God, she wanted this to last.

“Buffy,” he murmured, soft lips grazing her shoulder. “I know you’re awake.”

She inhaled sharply. *Don’t disappear. Don’t disappear.*

And then it hit—a tidal wave of night’s memories. Spike dressed in a tuxedo. Spike disappearing in the room. Spike tapping on her window. Spike murmuring into her mouth as he kissed her for the first time—the first true time. Spike cupping her breasts. Spike’s cock sliding against her soaking cleft. Spike inside her.

For the first time, she woke with a splendid sense of soreness she hadn’t known to miss upon every other awakening. Her thighs were tender, her insides still warm, her body cradled against his. Spike’s chest was pressed against her back, his arm hooked over her waist, his

thumb idly stroking her stomach. He wasn't disappearing because last night hadn't been a dream.

So accustomed was Buffy to the formation of tears behind her eyes that she didn't notice she was crying until Spike inhaled sharply and gently dabbed her wet cheek with his fingers. "What's this?" he asked. "Sweetheart—"

"I didn't think you'd still be here."

"Of course I'm still here. Where else would I be?"

Buffy fought the urge to twist in his arms. As much as she wanted to see his eyes and kiss his lips, a small, dark part of her psyche remained unconvinced this was real. She didn't want to brave facing him only to have him disappear. "I didn't think..."

Spike tightened his arm around her. "Not goin' anywhere."

"Not even when my mother comes in here, demanding to know why I have a naked hottie in my bed?"

He tugged on her earlobe with his teeth, sending electric shocks through her body. "A hottie, huh?"

"Oh shaddup. You know you're gorgeous." She grinned and stretched against him, parting her legs without quarrel at the tender coaxing of his hand. Everything went molten when he dipped his fingers between her thighs. "Unnh...Spike..."

"You feel all right, love?" he murmured, his strokes becoming bolder. In easy seconds, his fingers slipped between her pussy lips, gently exploring her pooling wetness. "No...pain?"

"No..."

"I wasn't too hard last night, was I?"

Just thinking about what they'd done last night had her close to spasming in his hand, and he'd barely started touching her. Buffy bit her lip and shook her head hard, her hips moving against him of their own volition. "N-no. Y-you...it was p-perfect."

His lips were on her skin again without warning. "Perfect?" he replied, a purely male purr of pride tickling his voice. "Even this?"

He sank his blunt teeth into the mark his fangs had given her without warning, and before she could stop herself, a long, loud whimper tore through her lips. She exploded with ecstasy, need bubbling over. Her clenching thighs locking his fingers inside her pussy

as she gyrated desperately against him. "Ohhh my *god*," she gasped. "Oohhh..."

"Baby likes daddy's fangs, methinks." He licked her sensitive skin with a sinful growl. Then, in a small voice, he softly implored, "You still love me?"

The idea that she could do anything *but* love him at this point was nearly laughable. "Oh yes."

"Say it for me, baby."

"I love you."

"That's my girl."

His words only made her hotter. "Spike," she whimpered. Logic was lost then. She needed to feel him. Damn the fact that her mother was down the hall and would be stirring soon to go about her normal routine. Spike was in her bed. He was driving his fingers deeper inside her pussy and rubbing his cock against her, and she needed him. "Touch me."

"I am touching you, kitten."

"Need...more."

Spike nipped at his bite mark, wet fingers slipping out of her aching body. "Need me inside you?" he asked softly, his thumb finding her clit and favoring it with a slow, tortuous caress. Every move he made against her sent an electric shock through her veins. She was burning up and he was fueling the fire.

"Spike, *please*!"

"What about your mum? Won't she be waking up soon?"

"Don't care. Need you." She hooked her leg over his calf and jerked him forward so that the silky head of his cock was rubbing the crack of her ass. "Please."

Spike swallowed hard and released a ragged breath. "You might not care, pet," he said slowly, his fingers abandoning her clit as his hand slid up her flat stomach until he was cupping a breast. "But I do."

Buffy blinked hard, her mind spinning. He was worse than any woman she'd ever known when it came to mixed signals. He'd just asked if she wanted him inside her and was now suggesting he worried about her mother discovering them. He was certainly the strangest vampire to have ever walked the earth. And he was tormenting her.

"You...unh—"

"Don't want her interrupting what could be a very happy time for both of us." Spike licked the bite mark again and pinched her nipple. "What time does she usually pop off to work?"

"Eight-ish."

Spike lifted his head from the pillow to peer at the digital clock on Buffy's nightstand. "Bout an hour."

"It might be later today."

"Oh?"

Buffy grinned, stifling a quick chuckle. She wrapped her fingers around Spike's wrist and, not so subtly, guided his hand back to her center. Fortunately, her vampire wasn't the sort of guy who required much persuasion. Without putting up anything resembling a fight, he slipped two fingers inside her aching wetness, his thumb finding her clit again. It took a few seconds of exquisite torment before she remembered he'd asked a question.

"S-she d-d-drunk," she stuttered, thrusting herself against his hand desperately. "A l-lot."

"Mmm," Spike mused, his cock slipping between her legs again, rubbing her wet slit with a carelessness that made her think he was only half aware of what he was doing. "Why?"

"X-Xander."

She could practically hear him arching an eyebrow. "Well," he replied, "it's not like I can't understand why your nitwit of a chum would drive a woman to drink, but—"

"There was a...a spell."

"Mmm?"

"Yesterday. Xander...to...for Cordy. It...made girls love him."

His velvety head slipped inside her as though it had a mind of its own. "Girls?" he replied, his tone intentionally neutral. "Did you—"

"Yeah-huh." Buffy tossed her head back against him and sighed when he was finally seated completely within her, clamping her muscles hard around him, determined to draw him as far inside her body as possible. "Love spell. Gone. Wrong."

"The wanker did a love spell?"

"Just...a...little one."

The dangerous edge in Spike's voice told her plainly she needed to clarify before she risked putting Xander's life on the line. His body had tightened, and without warning the plunges of his cock into her pussy grew raw and desperate. He was marking her again as his—rubbing her clit and nibbling a wet path down her neck. God, he was breaking her apart and piecing her back together and she loved every second of it.

"Wasn't for *me*!" she clarified, though her body was melting into a pool of endless pleasure. Jealous Spike could rear his head any day. She loved knowing she could make him like this. Spike wanted her—he wanted her to be all his. That was more than fine by her. "I... fell...crossfire."

"Git better keep his bloody *crossfire* off my woman."

At this rate, she didn't care if her mother barreled in with Giles, her father, and the local priest in tow. Spike was staking his claim, and she was more than willing to be staked.

Which, yes, ironic. She'd mull that particular thought over once the fog had lifted. Once pure bliss wasn't turning her insides into mush.

"Completely off."

"You're *mine*, Buffy."

She nodded furiously, thrusting back against him. There was no point in fighting it, if there ever had been. All of her was lost to him. Completely lost. He was pounding into her, his face buried in the crook of her throat as he played her clit like a harp. It was hard and fast—the slaps of their bodies building toward a crescendo the likes of which would make the walls rattle. She felt everything. Felt his ragged, unneeded breaths against her skin. Felt the smack of his balls against her drenched flesh every time he drove himself inside her. The springs of her bed were wheezing and her headboard was making noises against the wall it had never made before. She should be appalled or at the very least terrified, but all she could summon was a gasp of his name.

Because she was his. Completely his.

An indeterminate amount of time later, they were laying side-by-side on the well-loved mattress, gasping for air and staring at the ceiling. This was where good intentions went to die.

Spike grinned, propped an arm behind his head and drawled proudly, "There's no bloody way she didn't hear *that*."

Buffy grimaced and wiped sweat off her brow. "I...unhnnah."

Okay, so there really wasn't a point in trying to talk. It was just embarrassing.

"You scream like a bloody banshee, love."

Heat burned her cheeks, but there was nowhere to hide—that was unless she wanted to bury her face in his chest. And while something told her he wouldn't mind so much, it would defeat the purpose. Instead, she waited for her heart to find a calm, steady beat and for her breaths to return to normal rather than crushing her lungs.

"I love waking up with you," Spike murmured after a few quiet seconds, his fingers weaving through hers. "I don't wanna leave."

Warmth flooded her from head to toe, but she didn't reply. How *could* she reply? Even lying beside him in her own bed, surrounded by her things and encased in the seeming safety of her walls, she felt completely on his turf. The knowledge left her cautiously hopeful. She'd only told him she loved him a thousand times. Spike knew her heart belonged to him. And here he was, snuggled at her side in the delicious aftermath of their lovemaking.

Amazingly enough, she didn't recall falling asleep. The sensation of his arms around her, hands caressing her body, exploring her breasts and dipping between her thighs, remained with her all through the night. She'd thought she'd been dreaming. She thought everything had been a dream.

"We went right back, you know," Spike said softly, squeezing her hand. There were times she was certain he could read her mind. "Second we fell asleep we were in the room again."

Buffy blinked. Hard. "We were? I don't remember."

"Just popped from this bed to that one. Knew it the second I couldn't smell your room."

She wrinkled her nose and twisted her head to look at him. "My room smells?"

Spike grinned and kissed the tip of her nose. "You. Your scent's all over this room. A man could die happy here. I knew the second I was asleep 'cause the room no longer smelled like you." He paused. "But

you were still with me. We were still...together. I guess there was no point in enterin' the room since we were together out here, too."

Buffy frowned and mulled over what he was saying. There was nothing about this arrangement that made a lick of sense to her. "What do you think it is?" she asked softly. "We're... Whatever it was that makes us dream together?"

"Brilliant."

An exasperated sigh rolled through her body. "Spike—"

"No, kitten. I mean it." He inhaled and turned until he was perched on his side, his cheek resting against a closed fist and his eyes boring into her. He considered her for a long, silent beat, then tentatively ran his curled fingers down the length of her stomach. "I know I was an insensitive arse when this began. And Christ, Buffy, I'll never forgive myself for that. Never. I treated you like a... I was so bloody horrible to you. But you're here."

She shivered, her mind unwittingly flashing back to the night of the first true explosion. Back in October, after the most bizarre Halloween she'd ever known, when Spike had shoved her to the ground and fucked her mouth. He'd been so angry with her. So furious. And now he was in her bed, stroking her skin like she was something precious.

So much had changed.

"We didn't know what it was," Buffy whispered. "The dreams. The reason we were...together. We still don't."

"I should've," Spike insisted softly, shuddering as he leaned back against the mattress. "I should've known immediately."

She frowned. She had the feeling they were no longer talking about the same thing. "I don't understand. How?"

"I wished for it."

The words were so simple. He whispered them as though they didn't mean anything. As though such a revelation wouldn't steal the air from her lungs or make her shiver. At first, she thought she must have heard him wrong. There was no way the Spike she'd known in the beginning would have ever wanted anything like this. The Spike she'd known in the beginning had hated her, not to mention this crazy thing they shared. Sense was not being made.

And yet, in looking at him, she could almost believe he meant it.

"You what?" she asked.

Spike stared at the ceiling, his fingers curled around hers once more. The air between them had grown so still it almost seemed fragile.

"I wished for it," he replied softly. "The first night. Christ, you were so magnificent. The way you moved..."

Buffy shifted self-consciously. She remembered the first night she'd seen him. God, her body still tingled to think about what he'd witnessed before observing her vamp-dustage in the alley. She'd replayed that night over and over since the dreams began. She now knew the voice that had prompted her outside had been Spike's. Spike announcing someone was in the alley being bitten. She hadn't told him as much, but she knew it was him. And she knew he'd staged it just to see how she moved.

Buffy knew him well enough to understand his way of thinking now. He'd seen her dancing with her friends. And if she knew herself, she was probably playing the part of the hard-to-get-but-seemingly-easy girl. Buffy liked to pretend she didn't notice how men looked at her when she danced, but she was no fool. She'd already used her body to her advantage to drive Angel out of his mind by the time she first encountered Spike, and she'd done it by dancing with Xander.

If she was dancing, Spike would have noticed. He'd been there. He'd seen her.

"If you're talking about the Bronze—" she began, only to be cut off by a dismissive wave.

"I'm not, though you were bloody unbelievable then, too." He turned to her with a knowing leer. "But that wasn't our first night, pet. That was a teaser. Our first night was at your school. When I first touched you. When I saw your eyes and... I wished for this. You were so warm and bright an' alive. You were unlike anything I'd ever seen or touched. And I wanted you. I wanted a chance to touch you like this." Without warning, he slipped a hand beneath the blanket and cupped her breast. "I wanted to...taste you like this. And I hated myself for it. I was s'posed to have perfection in Dru, but I didn't. I didn't know what perfection was until I knew you. So yeah, love. I wished for this.

I didn't want to want it, but I did. And that first night...when you were there, I didn't know how to react. I didn't for a long time. Until I knew I was hurting you. Until I..." He broke off, the words taking on a new life of their own. She didn't realize she was holding her breath until he started speaking again. "You've ruined me, kitten."

Buffy bit her lip. "I didn't mean to—"

"And I don't care." He shook his head and smiled. "You've ruined me and I don't care. I live for dreaming now."

Her breathing hitched and her eyes again glazed with tears. All at once, the clouds parted and the light she'd been reaching for was suddenly kissing her fingertips. Her body warmed with elation, and she thought she saw something in his eyes. Something beyond lust.

Something she could have almost believed...

"Spike..."

He leaned over and gently brushed his lips across hers. "Buffy, I—"

The room exploded with several sharp knocks to her closed door, causing them both to jump and Buffy's eyes to shoot wide with alarm.

"Oh god—"

"Buffy?" her mother asked, her voice muffled through the door. "Are you up?"

Apparently, no amount of alcohol-imbibing could prevent Joyce from adhering to her normal routine.

She was frozen. Her mind raced and her blood pumped but she couldn't move. Spike couldn't either, apparently, apart from squeezing her hand so tight she was surprised she could still feel her fingers. It surprised her—she hadn't thought he would be one to care one way or another if her mother caught them in bed naked together, but he looked horrified.

"Sweetheart," he urged her softly—so softly she barely heard him. "Answer the lady."

"Buffy?"

Buffy cleared her throat, snapping back to herself. "I'm awake," she said, her eyes shooting wide open when she heard how hoarse her voice was. Dear god, she sounded like she was coming down with the flu. Maybe Joyce wouldn't notice.

No such luck. "Honey, are you feeling all right?"

"Fine. I'm fine. Getting up now."

"I'll start breakfast."

Buffy sat still until she heard her mother move away from the door, and was slightly amused when she heard Spike exhale a much-unneeded breath. When she turned to face him, he was even paler than usual.

"Bleeding hell," he said without prompt. "I tell you, kitten..."

"You're afraid of my mother."

Spike shook his head, offering no apologies. "The last time I saw the woman, she was standin' over me with an ax in tow. Not lookin' forward to what she'd have to say if she caught me sullyin' her daughter."

"I'm of the willingly sullied."

"Doesn't make a lick of difference if you're willing or not. Not to mums." He sat up and frowned at the sunlight hitting the foot of the bed. "You better toddle downstairs. Maybe snag me some nosh while you're at it." He shrugged when she scowled at him. "What? You're gonna be down there anyway."

"Spike—"

"You better go now, love. Even if I could make it to the closet before she plowed in here to see what the hold up was, your room smells to high heaven of sex. She'd know somethin' happened in here in a heartbeat."

She didn't smell anything, but it could've been due to the fact she'd been in the room all night and had already grown immune to whatever scent lingered in the air. "I didn't know sex had a smell," she said honestly. The dream-room had never smelled. Not one she'd noticed, anyway.

Spike grinned and kissed her. "You're adorable. *Go.*"

Buffy rolled her eyes but she couldn't hide her smile. Happiness unlike anything she'd ever felt was ballooning inside, and she couldn't contain herself. "You're really that afraid of my mother?" she asked, throwing her legs over the side of her bed and throwing the blanket off. She was self-conscious but forced herself to ignore it. Spike had seen her naked a thousand times. He'd explored every inch of her body with his hands and mouth. There was nothing left for him to see.

But at the same time, it had never been like this. She'd never been naked with him in the soft light of morning. She'd never awakened with him beside her. She'd never had a morning after. And Spike's knowledge of her body didn't prevent him from leering at her. He even had the audacity to pout when she shimmied into a pair of flannel pajama bottoms.

"I'd prefer to have my manly bits intact and able to service you whenever you wanna be serviced," he replied, and it took her a minute to remember she'd asked him a question. "Plus I was hopin' you'd let me stay today."

Buffy paused, the camisole she was in the process of sliding on suspended awkwardly around her breasts. "Stay?"

He grinned, his tongue sliding over his teeth in that way that ought to be illegal. What he could do to her without touching her—what he could do to her with a simple look—was positively sinful. "Think I can convince you to play hooky?" he purred. "Sun's out, pet. I'm stuck here all day long. You don't want me to get bored, do you?"

Buffy swallowed. Hard. "Well," she said slowly, straightening her camisole, "I *am* feeling a little...sick."

He grinned. "Yeah?"

"Mom even said so."

"It's what holdin' in your screams'll do to you. The ones you managed to hold in, anyway. I still don't see how she didn't—"

"Mom plus booze equals dead to the world," she reasoned with a shrug. "Believe me—I lived through it in the Great Divorce of '96. And for how hard my mom came on to Xander, she drank *a lot*."

Spike arched an eyebrow. "She came on to Xander?"

"I told you. Love spell gone wonky. The whole stupid town came onto Xander." Buffy held up a hand. "Yes, I did. No, as I said, nothing happened. He was actually very gentlemanly. Once he realized I was... all with the love spell possessed, he refused to go near me." She frowned. "But by then he was being chased by everyone. And Willow had an ax."

"The redhead?"

She nodded.

Spike whistled. "Now *there's* a frightening thought."

Buffy smirked and nodded. "You're telling me." She turned to the door, favoring her reflection with a quick glance and wincing at the tussled state of her hair. "I should probably fix that before I go downstairs."

"Your *just been fucked* hair? I find it rather fetching."

"My mother won't."

"Which is why you should fix it."

Buffy grinned wider and leaned over him, brushing her lips against his. It seemed so natural—waking up beside him. Talking to him as she dressed. Kissing him good morning. She wanted this to last.

She wanted this forever.



AMAZINGLY, HER MOTHER TRULY HAD HEARD NOTHING. NOT A PEEP. Not last night and not this morning. Their conversation over breakfast was strained and somewhat awkward—Joyce for her discomfort with what had happened with Xander and Buffy for the knowledge that she had a very hot and very naked vampire waiting for her upstairs.

Sometime over discussing the pleasant Sunnydale weather, she managed to convince her mother that yes, she was feeling a little icky, and because of Joyce's aforementioned shame, she agreed to let Buffy stay home with no argument.

As it was, Joyce couldn't get out of the house quickly enough.

Which was just fine with Buffy, because she couldn't get upstairs quickly enough.

She didn't know what to expect when she returned to her room, but it wasn't to see Spike sitting on the edge of her bed, naked and stroking his erect cock with eyes that told her she'd found him exactly as he'd hoped she would.

Buffy stopped short in the doorway, her throat suddenly dry.

"We alone?" Spike asked, his voice roughened with arousal.

She nodded numbly as her eyes fell to the mesmeric movements of his hand. She'd never seen anything so hot. So raw. Spike, the man she loved, seated in her room—on *her bed*—pumping his cock without shame.

"Wouldn't you rather me do that for you?" Buffy's eyes went wide the second the words rolled off her lips. She was not used to being so forward.

"What do you think?" he rasped hoarsely, his fingers playing across his length. "Come here, kitten."

She started forward, only to be halted by a raised hand.

"Your shirt."

Buffy blinked and glanced down to herself, a slow grin spreading across her face. Perhaps this empowerment thing was a benefit. At the moment Spike was panting hard enough to make her believe he actually needed the air he was sucking into his body.

"You want me to take it off?" she replied, this time forcing herself not to pause awkwardly at the overtly sexual tone of her voice. With Spike, she could be as sexual as she wanted. He wouldn't mock her. He wouldn't roll his eyes. His reactions to her were so strong. And ever since their first night together—the first night they'd truly made love—he'd been nothing but wonderful.

Spike nodded, his eyes pinned on her cotton-clad breasts. "Wanna see your tits," he all but growled, the hand at his cock pulling harder. "Please, Buffy..."

"You saw them this morning," she reminded him, fisting the material of her camisole and stepping between his legs. She could barely conceal her grin at his whimper. "They're not that remarkable."

"So says you. They're...delicious."

"You're such a guy."

"Well, yes. Now gimme your tits."

"They're too small," she protested.

He favored her with a narrowed look. "More than a mouthful's a waste," he replied. "Would you like me to prove it to you?"

"Spike—"

"Buffy, please...ditch the shirt."

Heat tinged her cheeks, but she was powerless to resist him. Buffy inhaled sharply and slowly raised her camisole over her head, baring her breasts to his hungry gaze. Spike stared at her unrepentantly for several long seconds before raising his eyes to hers once more, a rakish

grin stretching his lips. Then he leaned in and favored one of her aching nipples with a long lick.

"Like I said," he murmured, grinning wider at her answering moan, "delicious."

She should have been ashamed at how hard she trembled, but she wasn't. It was futile attempting to hide her body's reaction, especially with Spike alternatively sucking her nipples. He cupped her breasts and pressed her cleavage together, lapping at the peaks of her fleshy globes with a groan of appreciation.

"You're so perfect," Spike sighed, tugging at one of her nipples with his teeth, sending jolts of hot pleasure-laced-pain through her veins. He released her with a sultry lick, turning his attention to her neglected breast. "So bloody perfect."

"Am not."

"Are too. Don't argue with me."

Buffy flushed, belatedly reaching for his cock. She moaned when he moaned at the feel of him against her palm. And very quickly, she realized stroking him wouldn't be enough.

"Spike, let go."

How it was possible for a man to pout while sucking on a woman's nipples, she didn't know. "Why?" he demanded around a mouthful of breast.

Buffy swallowed hard. Putting her intentions into words was still not her strong suit. "You'll see."

For whatever reason, she'd expected a fight and wasn't sure whether to be relieved or disappointed when he released her. She didn't let herself mull it over else she'd lose her nerve. Instead, she dropped unceremoniously to her knees, perched between his legs and eye-level with his cock.

Spike sucked in a breath. "Buffy?"

She grinned with confidence she didn't feel, her fingers encircling the base of his erection, her other hand sliding upward to cup his testicles. She loved the soft weight of him in her palm. The way he shuddered at the slightest touch. The way his eyes swallowed her with anticipation and desire. There was nothing like it in the world, and if she had a thousand years with him, she would never tire of it.

"I've been wondering," she heard herself say, trying desperately to ignore how hard her heart was pounding, "if you taste as good here as you do in the dreams."

Spike gawked at her, apparently taken aback by her forwardness. That was fine. She was pretty much astounded herself.

"Buffy—"

If she hesitated a second longer she would lose her nerve. Buffy dipped her mouth and drew his sensitive belled head between her lips, her forefinger running a long, tantalizing path root to tip.

"Oh *god*," Spike growled, fingers weaving through her hair. "Oh my god. Buffy!"

She murmured around him, inching his length further into her mouth. He tasted so good. So thoroughly male. So *hers*. Right now, right here, he was hers. And she loved it. She loved the feel of his skin against her tongue. She wrapped her tongue around him, exploring every delicious inch as she sucked him in deeper. By experience, she knew she wouldn't be able to take him in all the way without forcing herself to relax. He was too large and she was so small. Perhaps with some practice, she would be able to loosen her throat up without overthinking it, but honestly, Buffy loved the sensation of having him both in her mouth and in her hand at the same time. She loved the way she could suck on him as she squeezed his balls and stroked the stretch of his cock that she couldn't swallow. She loved the whimpers he cast into the air and the way his hips thrust forward, trying to claim more of her mouth. Trying to claim everything.

He couldn't conquer what he'd already won.

"Fuck," Spike moaned, massaging her scalp, his breaths rolling off his lips like small, heartfelt prayers. "You..."

Buffy met his eyes, her skin burning. Never in her life had she thought she'd ever look at a man from this position. Never had she thought she'd be brave enough or have enough love for any man to take him into her mouth. And watching him as he watched her, as his eyes clouded over with passion and her name was granted new life off his lips, she found she was falling further into an abyss from which she never wished to free herself.

"So hot," he gasped. "No idea how hot this is, do you? Watching you...swallow me. Lick the underside. Oh yeah..."

Her tongue ran several laps along the underside of his cock, her eyes refusing to leave his. "Like this?" she whispered between licks. "Do you like this?"

"Fuck, Buffy..."

"I like this." She brushed a wet kiss across his leaking head, favoring his balls with a tender squeeze. "I like doing this for you."

A strangled chuckle tore through his throat. "I'm the luckiest bloke in all the land."

"I mean it."

"So do I, pet. Any gent who lands a woman with a gift for sucking cock and the added perk of enjoyin' it—"

Buffy released him in shock, half-scandalized but thoroughly aroused. "Ugh. You're such a...a..."

"Guy?"

"Pig!"

Spike blinked at her, then used his hold on her head to direct her mouth back to his cock. "Yeah, I am. I'm a nasty, rude son of a bitch, baby. And I have a goddess at my feet. What's a man to do with that?"

"Practice self-restraint?" she offered before exploring the dip in the head of his cock with her tongue, the hand wrapped around his root starting to stroke him in earnest. "Mmmm."

"Oh *fuck*."

She lapped the drops of precum he fed her, making small yummy noises to drive him crazy.

And boy, did it work. It worked so much he was bucking off the mattress, his cock pushing desperately past her lips and deep into her throat as he grasped her hair as though he feared losing balance. "Can't...can't...restraint...when you...make those sounds."

She giggled around him, and the vibrations of her mouth only made his moans intensify.

"Jesus, pet...where'd...you learn—"

Buffy slid her wet lips up his length again, taking her sweet time, lingering at his tip once more just to drive him mad. Served him right.

He knew exactly where she'd learned this. Where she'd learned *everything*. "You."

"Oh...right."

He sounded so far gone she nearly giggled. Instead, she swiped her tongue at his slit before taking his cock fully back into her mouth. Back and forth, back and forth, the hand wrapped around him mimicking her movements as she massaged his balls with the other. She felt him tense in her palm. Felt his body tighten as his weighty gasps reached their peak. And she knew exactly what would drive him over the edge.

She forced herself to relax, then sucked him as deep as she could—until she felt him brushing against the back of her throat—and began contracting her muscles around him. Swallowing hard, eagerly, demanding, waiting for him to explode in her mouth.

"Oh my *god!*" Spike howled, the grip on her hair nearly becoming painful, but she ignored it. She remained focused on the wide, desperate look in his eyes and the involuntary thrust of his hips. "Ohh...*fuck*...so good. Feel so...baby, I'm gonna..."

She squeezed his balls again by way of granting him permission, and that was it. Spike roared, his demon tearing through his human guise as he spilled himself in her throat.

Damn, he was a beautiful man. Fangs or not.

Buffy honestly had no idea how much time had passed. Eventually, his penis slipped out of her mouth, but not before she gave it another soft kiss. Her head found his thigh, and she rested there. Enjoying the quiet.

She'd never come closer to feeling he might actually love her than she did now. With him stroking her head, panting hard.

But the moment didn't last. One second he was sitting passively, and the next thing she knew, she was the one on the bed. She was on her back, her legs in the air as he tore her pajama bottoms off her body. Then he was on his knees before her, spreading her thighs apart.

"You didn't bring me anything to eat," he said, almost accusingly.

"S-sorry?"

Spike nodded, his eager fingers spreading her pussy lips apart, baring her swollen clit to his hungry eyes.

"You better be," he replied, lowering his head. "I have a wolfish appetite, love. Might take a while to fill me up."

His tongue plunged inside her sopping hole without warning, thrusting once, twice, then licking a wet path up to her clit. Then he sucked her into his mouth and moaned, making her so dizzy with pleasure she didn't realize she'd screamed until the ringing in her ears began to fade.

"Hope you don't mind," he murmured, releasing her with a wet plop. "I intend to eat my fill."

Unsurprisingly, Buffy didn't mind at all.



IT HAD BEEN A DAY UNLIKE ANY SHE'D EVER HAD. AND IT WAS OVER.

How could she part ways with him now? Now when she'd had him in reality? How could she return to the way things had been? How could she go back now that she'd tasted everything?

How?

"It's not forever, love," Spike promised her, though he refused to meet her eyes. "We'll...Angelus and Dru...we'll take them down."

"We will?" she murmured, feeling very small. She was trying hard not to look at the open window. In seconds, he would have to slip out of her room and back into the night, and she didn't want to think about it. She wanted to keep him here. She wanted to relive the day over and over again.

"Course we will," he replied. Then he was standing right against her, his fingers under her chin and guiding her up to meet his eyes. "Think I can go back? I told you, love, you've ruined me. I live for dreamin'. I'll keep living for dreamin'. I'll have to until we can have this again."

"You want this?"

Incredulity filled his eyes. "Buffy, please—"

"All the time? After...after it's over? You'll still want me?"

Spike's nostrils flared. "Of course I bloody will. Of *course* I will. I love you too bloody much to let this go. You hear me? I love you. God help me, Slayer, I love you."

And then he was on her, consuming her lips with his, and swallowing her euphoric sobs as she sagged against him.

He loves me. He loves me.

There was nothing she could do but cry as he kissed her. As he showered her face with his lips and whispered his confession into her hair over and over again.

“I love you. I love you, Buffy. I’ve loved you for so long...”

She flung her arms around his neck. She couldn’t let him leave. Not now. Not ever. She’d just found this—she wasn’t about to give it up. Not for her mother. Not for Giles. Not for Angel. Not for anyone.

This was *hers*. At long last.

She wasn’t giving him up.

IT WAS hard to imagine there had ever been a time when she didn't look forward to sleep, though logically, Buffy knew it had happened. She well remembered the agony of only a few weeks ago—curling up with her pillow every night, her cheeks stained with tears and the hole in her heart so deep her chest ached with every breath. She remembered crippling pain and violent crying jags. She remembered gray. She remembered thinking it would never end, and she would never know life without such pain again.

She remembered—it just felt years away. It felt like a horrid nightmare. Something that couldn't truly happen.

Especially now.

Spike loved her.

A week had passed since the magical day they had spent in her bed. The burn of Spike's touch had yet to fade, and though every cell in her body ached for him, she felt at last that she could breathe freely. All the bad was behind her. Her heartache had somehow transformed into joy. She saw him when she slept. He was always there. Always waiting for her.

Always with love in his eyes.

And while she immediately missed having him within reach, Buffy

treasured the dreams they shared. The dreams had given her everything, and if they were all she had for now, she would enjoy every minute.

"We have to be careful now," he whispered the first night. The first night with the words between them. Her memories were reshaped after the day they spent together. From now on, their *first* time together would always coincide with the first time she heard him whisper his love for her.

"Careful?" she replied, frowning up at him. He was poised above her on the bed, lazily playing with one of her breasts and rubbing his hard cock along her inner thigh. "Why?"

"Angelus knows somethin'."

A cold shiver commanded her body. "He knows?" she repeated, her heart suddenly galloping. "How—"

Spike grinned and pinched her nipple. "He doesn't know rot about us, Slayer," he purred.

"You just said—"

"He knows *somethin'*," Spike clarified. "Doesn't know what to do about it. Doesn't know if it means anythin'. I told you already that he wagered I was playin' you, right?"

"I remember you telling me," she replied softly. "And I know it's not true."

"Yeah?" Spike replied, his lips grazing hers. By his tone, he was somewhat nervous.

"You love me."

It was a strange thing, saying those words to his face with such confidence. She'd expected at least some fear, but there was none. There was no fear whatsoever. She knew he wasn't going to rebuke it. Wasn't going to retreat within himself and hide away until she started talking about something else. She'd seen his eyes and felt his honesty. She felt his love for her in every touch. Behind every kiss. His love shone now and he made no attempt to hide it. And she knew in looking at him that there was absolutely nothing to fear.

A soft smile tugged at his mouth and he kissed her again. The taste of him made every nerve in her body tingle. "I love you," he whispered. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

"Don't I know it." He grinned and nipped at her lips. "You're gorgeous."

"Am not."

"Oi! I'm the bloke who's in love with you, so don't argue with me." Spike pinched her nipple again with a smirk. "Point bein', kitten, I came back to the sodding factory drenched in your heavenly scent. You were all over me."

Heat flooded her cheeks. "Ummm...sorry?"

The heat that stormed his eyes had her insides melting. "Don't be," he replied hoarsely. She was astonished at the wealth of emotion in his voice. "Don't ever apologize for that. I couldn't wash you off me. It was bloody hard enough leavin' your side as it was."

"But if Angel knows—"

"He doesn't."

"But you just said—"

"He knows what he thinks he knows, kitten," Spike replied, kissing the corner of her mouth to placate her. "He's figured as much of it out as he ever will. He knows about you...you and your...with me."

She went rigid and did her best not to melt when his lips took chart down her throat. As addictive as his touch was—as much as she loved the feel of his kisses against her skin—she knew what he was saying was more important. Spike was so certain Angel didn't know anything. He was so certain, and that scared her. She had everything to lose now and wasn't in the mood to gamble.

"You really think that's all there is to it?" she asked softly, trying and failing to hold in a gasp when his mouth reached the breast he'd been playing with. He sucked her aching nipple between his teeth, palming her neglected breast as his knee persuaded her legs to part for him. "You...think...he just...thinks you're...playing?"

"Settin' you up," Spike agreed and flicked her nipple with his tongue. "Makin' you so bleeding hot for me that the kill will be all the sweeter." He grinned, his eyes dancing. "You are hot for me, aren't you, kitten?"

She gasped and nodded hard before she could help herself. Helping herself was not an option when his mouth and hands were on her,

when the hard length of his cock was rubbing a sensuous path against her pussy. He never once came close to penetrating her, and the anticipation of his body's invasion was almost sweeter than the actual thing. Almost.

"You have no idea what you do to me," Spike murmured, his hand abandoning her breast to slide down her abdomen. "Seein' you like this..."

Buffy threw her head back and moaned. What right did he have to tease her about what she did to him when he was doing his damndest to drive her crazy?

"Spike..." she mewled. "W-we should... I-if he knows—"

"He doesn't." Spike's teeth scaled along the tender flesh of her breast. "He doesn't, baby."

"H-how do—"

His fingers grazed her clit, the head of his cock slipping between her soaking pussy lips. Her body split with pleasure, need commanding her every nerve. Logic and reason, in such instances, became expendable. All she knew was that it had been forever since she'd had him inside her. Whatever was on her mind could wait. It could. She needed him like she needed nothing else.

"Shhh," he whispered, his lips making a wet path back to her mouth. "Forget I mentioned it. Everything's all right. Just let me love you."

Then he sank balls-deep inside her, and all peripheral concerns blinked out of existence.

That had been a week ago. They hadn't mentioned Angel since. Likewise, Angel hadn't made a peep. Life continued as it had. Buffy went to school every day. She did her training, went for patrols, staked the bad guys and went home to meet her lover in her dreams. Most often, she would find Spike sitting on the bed. He'd look up the minute she popped into the room and melt her with his smile. They'd fall into each other's arms, battling hands competing to see who could disrobe the other the fastest.

Their nights were blissful. The events falling in between sleep and awakening often calm. Sure, there would be a vamp or two. Vamps who said they were messengers from Angelus, but never the man himself.

Buffy kept training if only to keep vigil, for even as she grew more and more complacent with the quiet state of affairs, she knew Angel wouldn't keep silent forever.

She knew he was biding his time, waiting for her to grow completely secure in her glass house. Even if she never saw him, she knew he was there. He was always in shadows with a waiting stone in his hand.

Spike shook her foundation every night. He whispered words she'd never thought to hear from anyone. He loved her body as though he'd been placed on this world to do nothing else. He held her when she slept, and even though she had to face the mornings alone, she took solace in the knowledge that eventually her dreams would again be reality.

They were just waiting for Angel to make a move.

Though if Angel didn't move soon, Buffy privately swore she would.



THE NEXT DAY, ANGEL MOVED IN A BIG WAY.

Buffy was still numb when she made it to the room. She still had yet to really cry, having found herself in a dull limbo between shock and devastation. She didn't remember falling asleep and didn't know whether or not she was grateful when Spike's head shot upward. Relief purer than anything she'd ever seen crashed behind his eyes, and before she knew what was happening, he was right up against her.

"Are you all right?" Spike demanded before taking her face in his hands, his lips furiously brushing kisses across her skin. "Are you burned? Did you get hurt? Tell me you're all right!"

It took a few seconds for her thoughts to catch up with reality. Her skin was a little singed. She'd seen Spike tonight in the flesh—flames as wide as a gorge separating them. She'd seen the look on his face and felt an impossible cold shiver race down her spine when their eyes clashed. He'd been quickly wheeled away by Drusilla, and the divide between them had seemed endless.

She'd forced her thoughts away from Spike almost immediately. She hadn't come to the factory to see him. She'd come to prevent Giles's

suicide attack. And yet, seeing the man she loved so clearly sided with the vampires responsible for her surrogate father's grief—for the hole in the world where Jenny Calendar once resided—hurt her more than any of the blows Angelus had dealt tonight.

"Tell me you're all right, Buffy. I bloody swear—"

Buffy's lips parted, but no sound came out. She couldn't tell him she was all right—not when she knew she was anything but all right. A woman was dead because of her. A woman her watcher loved. A woman Buffy knew and saw every day. A woman whose biggest sin had been concealing her true name and purpose in the hope of preventing the very thing that had happened from happening.

Jenny Calendar was dead, and it was all her fault.

"Did you know?" Buffy demanded. She didn't know how or why it happened now—why it took seeing Spike to make her inner dam break—but without warning, she was crying hard, thick tears splashing down her cheeks with no sense of control. "Did you—"

"No."

It was the answer she'd expected—the answer she believed—but for whatever reason, it felt hollow. All at once, she was standing at the edge of a canyon and feeling reckless enough to jump. Nothing she knew made sense anymore. A friend was dead. Someone she knew. Not a faceless name in the obituary. Someone she knew. A teacher. Giles's girlfriend.

"Did you?" Buffy screamed. "Did you know? *Did you know?*"

"No," Spike repeated calmly, his hands coming up.

She heard him but the words didn't register. And at that moment, the face of the man she loved dissolved into something unrecognizable. Her fists found Spike's chest, but even blind as she was, her swings lacked conviction. Spike didn't fight her; he didn't even try to move away. He just stood as her fire roared to explosion, and waited until she was too weakened with grief to support herself.

"He killed her. He killed Ms. Calendar."

The empathy on her lover's face was almost more unbearable than the pain weighing her heart. "I know, baby," he murmured, his voice as steady as his eyes. The desperation she'd seen upon entering the room had long since faded. There was nothing but calm.

“How could—”

He seized her wrists and jerked her forward until she was pressed against his chest, his mouth finding hers. Buffy’s mind blanked and her body went soft. In careless seconds, she was battling him with her kisses, teeth nipping at his lips and her tongue assaulting his in mindless need. She tried to jerk her wrists out of his grip—her mind on a one-track to remove his clothing—but he refused to release her. He just kissed her, sapping what little fight remained in her tired bones. He kissed her and the earth ceased moving.

Time no longer held meaning. Buffy didn’t remember their lips parting or the caring way Spike guided her head to his shoulder. She didn’t remember anything beyond his kisses and the warmth he could give her in a world that was nothing but cold.

“I didn’t know till he got back,” Spike murmured. “I didn’t know.”

Buffy didn’t reply beyond nodding into his shoulder.

“I’m so sorry.” He kissed her temple. “So sorry, sweetheart.”

She nodded again, but her mind was spinning. She knew Spike thought he meant it, and as far as how this affected her, he did. But there was a huge gap between being sorry about how it affected her and being sorry that a woman was dead. And despite how much she loved Spike, the distance between what he felt and what she wanted him to feel was, at that moment, striking.

“She was...” Buffy shook her head and sniffed hard, pulling back. “She was...Giles, she was—”

“She was his girl. I know that, Slayer. Angelus left her in his bed for a reason.”

She shivered at the mention of her once-kind-of-boyfriend, her mind flashing back to the fire. To Spike’s face through the flames. To the passive way he’d sat in the wheelchair when she knew damned well he could’ve bolted to his feet, staked Dru, and helped her end everything tonight. It was hard to reconcile the tenderness he showed her here to the reality of the outside.

And before she could stop herself, she was suddenly determined to call him on it.

“You didn’t do anything to stop him,” she whispered.

“I didn’t know, love. I swear I didn’t.”

"Tonight," Buffy clarified, raising her head to meet his eyes, daring him to play dumb. "Giles was there to inflict major damage. Angel tried to kill him, then me. You didn't—"

"You really think that?"

"I saw! Don't lie to—"

"I'm not lying, Slayer." He seized her chin when she tried to look away in anger. "Dru wheeled me away the second—"

"And you can walk! I've seen you walk! Don't tell me it never occurred to you to, oh I dunno, get *out* of the chair and—"

"The bitch knocked me out!"

Buffy's jaw fell slack and her eyes went wide. Drusilla had knocked Spike out? Was that even possible? There hadn't seemed to be a struggle when she'd wheeled him out of the room, but then, Buffy hadn't seen them up close. She'd seen them with fire racing along the rafters, with Angelus swinging at her and Giles collapsing to the ground. She'd been a bit distracted.

"Kn-knocked out?"

Spike nodded, though his anger was now focused elsewhere. "Brutal bint," he hissed, his voice pure venom. "The second you came in, I knew...but a part of me was hopin' your watcher would off Angelus and that'd be the end of it. He was doin' a right good job, too. But Christ, it happened fast. The room went up, the old man stormed in, and by the time I saw you, Dru popped me in the head and the lights went out. Woke up on the sodding ground god-knows-how later, covered head-to-toe in ash and worried my arse off about you. If Angelus hadn't been flapping his trap over how he'd make a bloody mess of you the next time he saw you, I would've bolted to your house to make sure you were all right. Bugger the consequences."

Buffy frowned and worried a lip between her teeth. She hadn't seen Drusilla strike Spike, but that didn't mean it hadn't occurred. Their eyes had connected only for a fleeting second—a second that had felt like hours, yes, but a second nonetheless. And all it really took to decide the truth from Spike was the look on his face. He was open and earnest, imploring her for trust.

Spike wouldn't lie to her. He never had. Not even when the truth had broken her. He wouldn't lie to her now.

"Okay."

He arched a brow. "Okay?"

"Okay. I believe you."

He dropped his shoulders, sighing, but the shadow in his eyes refused to fade. "Bloody load off, that," he pointed out dryly. "Thought you knew me better than that, Slayer."

"I've thought a lot of things that were wrong," she said, refusing to apologize. "And you don't care that Ms. Calendar is dead."

Fire sparked behind his eyes. "I do care—"

"No, you don't. Not really. Not about *her*. You care about me but not her. If it hadn't been her tonight, it would've been someone else. It *has* been someone else. Angel...you and Dru killing and doing this to people over and over again."

She was saying nothing she hadn't already known, but the knowledge felt darker now—real in a way it hadn't before. And as much as she loved him, she also hated him in that moment. Him and herself, because she'd been so focused on what was going on between them that she hadn't spared much thought for the lives he'd taken before or after the dreams had started.

"Slayer."

She didn't look up.

"Buffy."

At that, she did.

Spike was breathing hard, his expression a mask of concern. "I know what I am," he said a moment later. "That was the problem, wasn't it? Part of the reason I tried to get you to hate me. But I..." He looked away, sucking in his cheeks. "I knew it'd come to a choice between having you and not."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying I'm bagging it. Have been for some time now."

"You're...bagging it?"

"Bagged blood. Pig's blood, cow's blood—whatever they have at the butcher shop." He paused. "The chair's a good alibi, seeing as I can't hunt and Angelus doesn't see much reason me fed. Sometimes Dru brings in a townner she's offed, and yeah, I've indulged then too. If they'd already kicked it—would raise too many questions if I didn't,

and yeah, that's not the only reason. But beside from that, I'm off the hard stuff and once this is over, not going back on it."

Buffy just looked at him, her mind blank. She had no idea what to say to that, or how the gesture could seem both huge and not enough.

"Told you I didn't wanna hurt you, didn't I?" he offered with a soft smile. "Did you think I didn't know what that meant?"

"I... I don't know." She swallowed. "You're a vampire."

"Yeah. I like to fight. I like to fuck. I like to kill. Those things aren't changing. Only thing that's changing is the team I'm on." Spike paused again. "When I'm all in, love, I'm all in. Not in the habit of doing anything half-arsed. Took me a minute to get here but I'm settled now, not goin' anywhere."

Buffy stared at him a moment longer, her breaths coming harder, her temples pounding. Part of her, a very real, very deep part of her, believed she needed more. Right now, with the world ripped apart, she needed Spike to want this for him and not just for her. Irrational as that was, it was how she felt.

But then she thought of how things had been just a handful of weeks ago. How far they'd come from that initial night here in their secret room. How Spike had rallied against her, backhanded her, mocked the thought that anyone could ever want her, to the day they'd spent in her bedroom. How much he'd changed in such a short period of time—how he'd gone from hating her and how she made him feel to needing it as much as she did. That he had gotten this far on his own, taken these steps on his own, was nothing short of miraculous.

How would he feel in a week? In a month? Next year or the year after? People didn't just stop changing, and that's what he was. A monster slowly becoming a man.

"Okay," Buffy said, her throat hoarse. "Okay."

"Okay? This a different okay than the last one? Or you still doubting me?" Spike studied her a moment before breaking off with a huff. "I know I don't deserve you, love, but I'm trying here. I've been trying ever since I met you."

"I didn't know. It wasn't that long ago you tore my heart out—"

"That was before—"

"You loved me. Yeah, I know."

Spike shook his head. "No."

"I—"

"It *wasn't* before I loved you, you daft twig." He stared at her intently for a few seconds before sacrificing a laugh and rolling his eyes heavenward. And though his hold on her never loosened, she suddenly felt distant from him. Distant and somehow close all at once. "God. Do you really think I only started loving you the second I said the words?"

Buffy's mouth ran dry.

"I've been in love with you for *months*. Before you said it. Fuck, before you even *thought* of saying it. Before the organ fell." Spike shook his head with another sharp, humorless laugh and ran a hand through his platinum-colored hair. "All of this? Every bit of it? It's happened *because* I love you. And yeah, I *hated* it in the beginnin'. I've never lied to you about that, or anything, for that matter. I hated the way I felt about you—the way you made me feel. I wanted out. Wasn't until I got what I wanted that I understood any of this. I'm still learning, love. Probably will be forever. But I'm doing it with you."

There were no words. Buffy stared, her heart thundering and her mind speeding out of control. Her body began to shake. Shapes blurred and colors merged as the walls around her began spinning. The concept was too large to grasp.

She'd had Spike's love all along? *All along?*

"I didn't wanna love you," Spike continued softly. "Not at first. But after...after you disappeared on me, I knew I was hopeless for you. Absolutely hopeless. And I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. I didn't..." He broke off and sighed again. "I'm sorry, love. I shouldn't ask so much of you when I've given you so little. I just...I'd hope you'd know I'd be there, fightin' the good fight with you if I could. The second I saw you tonight, all I could think about was getting to you. Dru knew it immediately, of course. She's known it all along. The last thing I saw was you kicking the wanker in the head. Everything went dark after that."

"Oh god..."

"You with me?" Spike murmured, gently running his fingers through her hair. "Sweetheart?"

"I'm with you."

"I'm sorry about the teacher, love, I really am."

Buffy nodded, trembling hard. "I..."

"He didn't hurt you, did he?" Spike's hands slid to the hem of her shirt—an actual shirt this time—she'd fallen asleep in her clothing. "Do I need to—"

She shook her head. Her mind refused to move beyond the point of his confession. She didn't want to think of the reality pounding around her. She didn't want to think about what she'd have to face when she awoke. Right now, all she wanted to think about was the mind-boggling notion that Spike had loved her all along and that he wanted to change. That the fears which had chased her for months had never truly had a leg to stand on. Spike had loved her. Before the organ. Before he'd tried to shove her out. Before...

"Buffy? I don't wanna strip you to make sure you're all right, but—"

"You don't?"

Spike smiled wryly. "If you get naked, I'll get naked, and I'll wanna shag you silly."

"Not really seeing the problem there."

"It's not what you need right now." He flattened his palm against her stomach. "When we make love, I don't want this between us. I want you completely with me." Spike grinned, almost managing to look shy. "I want to give you more than...I wanna give you comfort beyond just...well, sex."

The words had her melting into a Buffy-puddle of Buffy-goo. "Spike—"

"But that's gonna be bloody hard if I have to strip you down to your skivvies to make sure the wanker didn't hurt you."

"He didn't."

The words rang with false truth. Angel hadn't hurt her. He hadn't touched her. He hadn't so much as left a bruise on her skin. Sure, he'd gotten in a few good kicks and punches, but she'd barely felt them. She'd been too busy kicking his ass.

Had Giles not been unconscious and in need of saving, Angel would be dust.

No, Angel hadn't hurt her. Not physically.

But she was aching inside.

Of course, Spike already knew that. And though he undoubtedly heard the inherent lie in her words, he didn't call her on it. Instead, he brushed his lips against her temple again and murmured how much he loved her into her hair. He didn't press her for promises she couldn't make. And yes, it was enough.

And when she awoke, she would be alone.

The thought had tears forming in her eyes all over again. And before she could stop herself, she whispered, "I want this to be real again. I want this to be real so much."

"It will be soon," Spike promised her. "It will be."

The words provided little comfort. With the chasm formed by Ms. Calendar's murder, *soon* might as well be *never*.

Beyond the tears and the sorrow, the hatred and the outrage, lay terror.

The fear that had been living with her for weeks resurfaced, stronger than ever. That something would happen to Spike before this was over. He was surrounded by enemies, going through all these changes while sharing space with those who would dust him if they knew.

She wanted Spike out. She wanted him out now.

It was just a matter of convincing him.

SHE WAS STILL TREMBLING when she drifted off to sleep. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw the yellow flash of Angelus's piercing gaze. The taste of his possessed kisses wouldn't wash out of her mouth. His callous cackle refused to stop ringing in her ears. He was with her in every move she made. Every innocent blink, every intake of breath. She needed to wash Angelus out of her life once and for all.

She needed Spike. She needed him now.

"Tell your boyfriend I'll see him at home."

Spike was pacing long furious strides across the dream-world floor when she faded into the room, and the snarl on his lips and the demon in his eyes told her without words that he knew.

He knew everything.

"I need you," Spike growled, storming forward and seizing her by the shoulders. "Right now."

"Spike—"

"No talking."

There was something in his kiss that melted all rational components of her brain. Buffy sagged helplessly against him the second his mouth came down on hers. His tone was harsh but his lips were soft. He nipped at her, teased her with his tongue, begging entrance into

her mouth which she willingly surrendered. He battled with the hem of her camisole for a few brief seconds before ultimately ripping the fabric over her head with an impatient growl. Her breasts found themselves cradled in his cool palms, his fingers tugging at her nipples as his mouth broke from hers to taste the skin of her throat.

“Touch me,” he snarled, seizing her wrist and guiding her to his denim-clad erection.

Clarity battled desire. Her trembling fingers undid the button of his jeans and jerked down the zipper, even as her warring thoughts collided and clashed with intent. Her disobedient lips wrestled another kiss from his, moaning when he whimpered and growled into her. There was no feeling on earth like that of knowing what an effect she had on him—especially with a simple caress of her mouth.

“Buffy.” Spike sighed against her lips, his fury melting. “Touch me,” he murmured again, brushing a kiss against the hollow of her throat as his hands danced southward. “Please...”

She slid her fingers over the hard protrusion of his cock with purposeful slowness, soaking in the way his gorgeous face dissolved in pleasure. “Like this?” she asked softly.

“Fuck yes.”

“Spike—”

The next thing she knew, her back was on the floor and Spike was clawing her pajama bottoms down her legs. By habit now she wore no panties, and when his eyes fell on her bare pussy, open and wet for him, he moaned again and fell between her legs as though magnetized. At some point his clothing had dissolved—perhaps he’d wished it away, as he’d indicated he could. All she knew was he was perched between her thighs, and looking at her like she’d fallen from the stars.

“So pretty,” Spike murmured, spreading her labia with his middle and index fingers so his tongue could take an eager lap at her aching clit. “So pink and wet...”

Buffy gasped so hard her chest hurt and arched off the floor, shamelessly pressing her swollen flesh against his hungry mouth. “Oh *god*.”

“I smelled you tonight,” he continued, his voice deceptively quiet.

The words swam around her head, meaningless shapes and sounds

which, when applied, spelled something dangerous. Buffy blinked dazedly and glanced up, though her efforts were quickly rewarded with another lick that had her back on the floor.

"What?" she gasped, her bones melting at the gentle kiss he brushed against her clit. "Oh my god..."

"T'night...when *he* came back." The word was punctuated with an angry growl.

Realization slammed into her all at once. "That wasn't—"

It was useless trying to speak, for the next second, Spike plunged his tongue inside her wet opening and proceeded to drive her to some previously unknown level of dementia. He was obviously determined to kill off her remaining brain cells until she was a useless mass of slayer goo. But for the world, Buffy wasn't complaining. If this was his idea of punishment, she would take it happily. And eagerly. And find new ways to earn it in the future.

"Do...you have," he growled between wet, furious licks, "any...sodding...idea..."

"Ohhh!"

"How...much..."

Buffy whipped her head back and forth, rolling her hips off the floor in some mad attempt to drive him deeper inside her. And when his mouth abandoned her pussy to return to her clit, she was certain this was the way he intended her to die.

That was until he slid two fingers inside her. And that was it; she was a goner. A complete goner. With a hoarse cry, Buffy trembled hard and came, drenching his fingers and clawing at his head wildly, determined to both hold him where he was and rip him away before her nerves died of pleasure.

Everything went numb for a few seconds. Her bones had liquefied—she couldn't move now if the apocalypse depended on it. Instead, she laid uselessly, her sated body humming under his cool touch. Spike held her gaze as he licked her dew off his skin.

"I smelled you on him," Spike said again, arching forward until he was on all fours. And then he was prowling up her body with slow deliberation, his chest grazing her aching nipples and his cock nudging her slippery labia. Her body sparked impossibly with arousal, and

before she could stop herself, she'd seized his cheeks between her hands and dragged his mouth to hers in a hungry kiss.

"It...it was...the...ghosts," she said once their lips parted. He was rotating his hips above her, the head of his cock nudging every wet, sensitive inch of her. His left arm curled under her shoulder, his other hand busy between them, fingers stroking her swollen clit with a tenderness which betrayed his intent. "What...whatever..."

"I bloody know it," Spike replied harshly, his eyes dark. "Doesn't make it right, does it? Doesn't mean I oughta jus'—"

"There was nothing—"

"You kissed him." He nipped at her lips gently. "You kissed him with this gorgeous mouth."

"Against my will!"

"Slayer..."

"I didn't go there to see Angel. I went there because—"

"I know." Spike rubbed her clit harder as he pushed his cock inside her. And in an instant, every doubt blinked away; every fear vanished. The pressure of the outside world dissolved into a wondrous nothing. Buffy threw her head back, wrapping her arms around his neck, blinking back tears. The skin beneath her fingers felt real. The lips kissing her sweetly left the taste of him in her mouth. And when he pulled back to meet her eyes, the crystal blue sea of his gaze washed over her with an undeniable sense of peace.

He consumed her in a tender kiss as his cock slid all the way home. Until she felt his balls resting against her wet flesh. A whimper rumbled against her lips and every bit of her sighed with completion.

"I love you," Spike whispered, his voice thick, his hips rocking slowly against hers. The carnal slide of his cock from her pussy had her tumbling through an abyss of sensation. "I love you so much."

Buffy sobbed and nipped at his mouth. "I love you too."

"I hated...smelling you...on *him*," he growled, his thrusts becoming hard in a matter of seconds. Need blazed across his face; need she knew well. Need she'd felt for months before realizing she had what she'd wanted all along. There were no phantoms here, but the knowledge didn't go far in banishing idle fears. "Wanted to...tear him...apart."

She nodded helplessly, arching off the ground in wild desperation to

recapture his cock every time he slipped from her body. There was no completion if he wasn't with her—if his lips weren't moving against hers, if his eyes weren't piercing into hers. She needed this always. Beyond dreams. Beyond the walls of this room. She knew the way this felt in reality, and she needed him there.

She needed to stop worrying about the looming fall of the *other shoe*. She needed him. She needed him out of the hornet's nest and with her.

"Things...he said..."

"He knows," Buffy whispered.

"He doesn't—"

"Spike, he *knows*. He knows about us."

"Slayer—"

"I *can't* lose you," Buffy sobbed, smashing her hips upward. She bit desperately at his lips, seizing one of his hands to guide him between their thrusting bodies. He slapped against her furiously, his cock striking places with her she was certain only he could reach. And when he began to rub her clit, she knew she wouldn't last. Her skin was still humming from the orgasm he'd given her with his mouth, and now as he danced her toward another edge, she could only hope she'd survive the fall. "I can't—"

Spike's eyes softened, offsetting the growl that tore through his throat. He massaged her clit tenderly, the wet smack of their bodies in the otherwise illicit silence of the room making her shiver with heat. "You won't," he panted, "lose me."

"You—"

"I'm not...goin'...anywhere."

Anxiety clawed her insides. "Please—"

"You're mine. God, Buffy...you're...mine." His mouth dipped, tongue wetting her throat. "You're mine."

"Unh..."

"You're *mine*. Not...letting...you go."

There was a flash of amber and a blink of ivory, and then she exploded with pleasure. He growled around her broken flesh, feasting as his hips drove madly against her. And Buffy screamed. She screamed until her voice died in a chorus of echoes, fisting handfuls of Spike's

hair and holding him to her throat. Wanting to keep him there—wanting his fangs inside her just as his cock was inside her. She wanted to take as much of him back with her to the real world as possible, so that even when she opened her eyes, she was never truly alone.

“Mine!” Spike growled. “You’re *mine*, Buffy.”

“Oh yes.”

“Fuck...”

“Yes, yes, yes...”

“Buffy...my god.” He whimpered and licked her bleeding throat, hugging her tightly to him as he shuddered hard and spilled himself deep inside her. The rug at her back burned her skin but she didn’t care. This feeling was worth anything—the sting at her throat, the tremors seizing her over-pleasured body, the welcomed weight of him as he collapsed, his cool, heavy breaths crashing against her skin. It was worth anything.

“I love you,” he murmured after a few minutes. He raised himself up on his arms, spearing her with a meaningful look. “You know that, right?”

Buffy nodded without hesitation.

Spike smiled gently and kissed her lips. “I should’ve told you every day. That first night...should’ve told you then.”

“You knew then?”

“No. Shoulda told you, though.” He grinned, brushing his lips against the corner of her mouth. “Shoulda known I’d be a bloody sucker for you.”

Buffy made a face. “Gee, thanks.”

“It’s a compliment!”

“Uh huh.”

Spike’s grin just grew wider, his wandering fingers finding the tender spot where he’d bitten her. “This hurt?”

“No.”

“Good,” he murmured. “It was brilliant, tasting you. Better out there, where it’s real, but phenomenal in here too.”

A blush deepened her skin. She wanted to say something profound but words died in her throat. There was nothing to say. Not when he looked at her like she was a goddess.

"I meant it, Buffy."

"Meant what?"

"You're mine." Spike smiled, but his eyes weren't laughing. His eyes were filled with determination and love. His eyes told her in no uncertain terms how much he meant what he said. "You're mine, kitten. As much as I am yours."

"I know," she replied, her chest swelling.

Spike loved her.

"I'm gonna do this again when we're together," he continued, still stroking the mark on her throat. "I'm gonna do it out there."

"I'm going to let you."

"No amount of *let* about it."

Buffy quirked an eyebrow. "You don't think so?"

"You'd really wanna stop me?"

"No. Hence the letting of you." She grinned at his playful scowl and tugged him down for a tender kiss. "I know what it is, dummy. Hello. Slayer, here. Slayer with a mucho-fang-happy boyfriend."

Spike's eyes narrowed, though no amount of narrowing could hide the way they danced. "Fang-happy?"

"You've bitten me before!"

"Love bites."

"Same diff!"

"And...boyfriend?"

So much for letting him define whatever this was first. But from the pleased smile on his face, and the way the word rolled off his lips, he didn't mind.

"That's nice, that is," he said a moment later. "Boyfriend."

"Gee, thanks," Buffy retorted dryly.

Spike shrugged and rolled off her without warning, tugging her after him so that she was lying across his chest. "Never been anyone's boyfriend," he purred, stroking her arm. "I just like the sound of it."

She snickered but snuggled into him all the same. "Yeah. You who hold the record for longest long-term relationship have never been anyone's boyfriend."

"I dunno about the *record*..."

The note in his voice made Buffy recoil and bury her face in his

shoulder. Even if she had been the one to bring it up, she didn't like hearing Spike even refer to whatever he and Drusilla had shared in the years before fate brought him to her. It had been difficult enough imagining Spike with the horrible woman before; now that she knew he loved her—now that he was hers—any hint at all of the life he'd lived before made every bit of her darken.

He shifted beneath her, kissing her temple. "Something wrong, kitten?"

"No."

She felt his mouth spread into a grin against her skin. "Liar."

"Shut up."

"Doesn't matter anyway," Spike murmured, brushing his lips across her brow again. "Any record out there'll be shattered by the two of us. After I claim you out there. Make you mine in blood and not just word."

"Mmm. Claimage."

"You do know about claims?"

Buffy drew in a breath and fought off a playful eye-roll. "We've already done this. Yes. Bites happen. Blood is swapped. Something about a forever-long commitment."

"And you're okay with that?" he asked softly, stroking her arm. The solemn note in his voice surprised her. "The forever part?"

"Spike—"

"It's longer than it sounds, love."

She giggled but quickly sobered the second his eyes met hers. "What?" she retorted. "Forever is longer than forever? 'Cause forever sounds pretty long to me."

"Buffy, this is serious—"

"I know."

"It requires more than just a thought—"

"I've given it more than just a thought." Buffy inhaled sharply and sat up, meeting his eyes with a loving smile. "I mean, I kinda had to. You vampire. Immortal. Me human. Not-so-immortal."

"So you've mulled over claimin', is that it?"

"I mulled over immortality."

Spike frowned at her. "There aren't many alternatives to—"

"In my world, there are always alternatives." She shrugged and brushed her lips across his chest. "I didn't study it long. I didn't really have to. I knew immediately that if it was possible...if you wanted—"

"What do you mean *if I wanted*—"

"I love you. If there's a chance I don't have to give you up, I'm gonna take it."

Spike grinned, threading his fingers through her hair and gently massaging her scalp. "I'm not gonna try to talk you outta anythin'," he murmured, "specially when I thought I'd have to talk you *into* it. But... I don't even know how long forever is, and I have been at it a little longer than you."

"I don't care."

"You—"

Buffy smirked and stuck her tongue out at him, retracting it quickly before he could suck it into his mouth. "You said you weren't going to try to change my mind, right?"

He didn't answer immediately, but the weight in his eyes told her everything she needed to know. And if possible, she found herself falling more in love with him by the second.

"I don't wanna be somethin' you resent," he said at last. "A decision you regret. I can't...I couldn't bloody bear it. The thought of eternity with you is more than I ever thought a bloke like me could get. But Buffy, I—"

She closed the space between them with her lips, swallowing his concerns in a loving, gentle kiss. There were so many things she wasn't good at conveying—so many things she wished she had the courage to say. So many emotions she wished she could give words. However, even if she possessed the ability to construct verbal poetry, she knew no amount of reassurance would silence his fears.

They were fears she had anticipated. Fears she knew only time would ease. And time was one thing she was determined to share with him. As much time as the world allowed. Until the apocalypse bested her and they were cast into the void of whatever lay ahead. And even then, she wouldn't part from him. She'd follow him to Hell and petition the Devil himself for her lover's freedom. She'd pay whatever was asked of her.

Spike would realize this eventually. Until then, he would just have to trust her.

"Stop talking about silly things," Buffy murmured when they broke apart, then kissed his jaw. "I want this."

Emotion stormed his eyes. "I want it, too. Christ, I want it so much."

"Then there's no problem."

It looked for a second like he might argue with her. He didn't. Instead, a slow smile spread across his face and he pulled her down for another kiss, his lips moving demandingly against hers. In seconds they collided in a nonverbal battle, challenging each other with furious strokes of tongue and clashes of evenly hungry mouths. She draped a leg over his thigh and rubbed his swelling cock with her knee, laughing into his kiss when he moaned against her. At last, when oxygen became crucial, she tore away with a giddy giggle, willing to believe if only for a second that things could truly be so simple.

"You're amazing," Spike said. "So bloody amazing."

"Took you long enough to notice," she replied teasingly, skimming her hand down his abdomen.

He rolled his eyes good-naturedly, but not without an ounce of genuine exasperation. "Woman—"

"All I'm saying is you spent plenty of nights with that ho-bag, meeting me and *not* telling me this—"

Spike blinked at her, though he was smirking. "We back on Dru again?"

"You better not be."

"Slayer, what do I have to do to convince you—"

"A little groveling never hurt anyone."

He shook his head, his smirk growing wider. "Groveling? I already worship the bloody ground you walk on! Isn't there—"

"Plenty of nights," she repeated firmly. "With Dru. While dreaming of getting naked with me."

"Buffy—"

"And hey! Still with the dreaming and the naked and you're *still* over there."

He kissed her nose and grasped her hips, shifting her so that she

was completely astride him, her pussy pressed intimately against the underside of his erection. "I love it when you're jealous."

The shit-eating grin he sported certainly wasn't helping matters. "Try it from this end," she pouted.

"Baby, I have to deal with jealousy every time I wake up." He shot her a knowing look, and she was immediately humbled. It was the truth. He had to look at Angelus every day. He had a walking, talking, stalking, killing reminder of her one and only sexual encounter that she hadn't experienced with him. It didn't make her hatred and resentment of Dru subside any, but at least, on some incredibly petty level, it put them on even ground.

Still, even ground or not, she liked to feel she was entitled to her indignation.

"I was never sleeping with Angel, though," Buffy pointed out, her voice small. "It was...it was never like that with us. Never. Not like it was with..."

Spike was quiet for a long minute, considering her words. "It hasn't been that way with me and Dru since you."

"What?"

"I haven't touched Dru since the first night with you," he continued softly, almost as though he didn't want to be heard. "I haven't touched her since...I just haven't touched her."

Time, it seemed, froze. Buffy turned into a statue astride him, her eyes wide, her heart thundering. It didn't seem possible. Not with what she knew. Not with everything he'd told her. He'd hated her in the beginning. He'd hated her even as he fell in love with her. He hated her with everything he was. It didn't add up—didn't follow through that he would refrain from touching the woman to whom he'd previously devoted himself for Buffy, whom he'd fought loving for so long.

"Not once?" she whispered, her voice trembling. "Not...not even..."

Spike's eyes softened and he reached up to cup her cheek. "Sweetheart—"

"You hated me."

"No—"

"Even when you—"

"She wasn't you, kitten. After I knew what you tasted like..." He sat

up slowly, his arms wrapping around her waist and helping her as she lifted subconsciously in his lap, her silken folds dancing over the sensitive head of his cock. "After I knew...how..."

"Ohhh..."

"Sink down on me," he pleaded softly, even as she began the slow descent. "Take me home."

There was nothing in the world she would trade for this. Her pussy clamped hard around him. Tears stung her eyes and her body cried out in bliss. "It's only been me?" she asked, knowing already that he'd told her the truth. Spike always told her the truth. Always. When it hurt and when it healed. When it stung and when it soothed. He would never lie to her. Not about them. Not even when he should.

"Only and always," he agreed, nipping at her shoulder, his hands falling to her ass to guide her thrusts. "Just...been biding time for you."

"Spike..."

"Love you. Love you so bleeding much..."

"Spike, you have to...leave."

He blinked in surprise and pulled back, confused hurt written across his face. "What?"

"The others," she clarified, contracting her hidden muscles around his cock. The ones she was near certain were there simply to make his eyes cross with pleasure. To coerce him into doing whatever she needed. "Leave them."

"Buffy—"

"I can't lose you."

He shook his head stubbornly. "You won't."

"But if Angel knows—"

A shadow fell behind his eyes and his grip on her hips tightened, angling the stabs of his cock hard and deep within her trembling body. "Don't. Bloody. Mention. Him," he growled harshly, "When. I'm. Fucking. You."

Buffy mewled and tossed her head back. "Oh god..."

"You're *mine*."

"God, yes."

She bounced contentedly on his lap for mindless seconds, focused solely on the wet slide of him from her aching pussy and trying to navi-

gate him to strike a different place every time he slammed home. But the fog dissipated quickly—her determination was stronger than desire. She needed to get him away from the others, and she wasn't going to take no for an answer.

"Spike, please—"

"Mine," he snarled gutturally.

"Yes." It was damned hard concentrating when her every cell was on fire. When the air around them was alive with the wanton smacks of their bodies. When Spike was staring at her like she'd fallen from the heavens and landed in his lap, on his cock, and had proceeded to screw him into salvation. But she needed him to understand...

She needed...

"Come...to me," she panted, her hips smashing against his. "Please."

Her name rode out like a prayer on his tongue. "Buffy..."

"Please. *Please*. I can't...if you..."

"I—"

"Please say...you'll leave them. Get to...get to me. Or just...away. Just get away, Spike." She seized his cheeks spontaneously and kissed his lips off, pouring every fear into the union of their mouths. "Please just...get away...before—"

"Slayer..."

"Before I lose you. Please!"

"Buffy...oh god..."

"Please!"

"All right. All right." He smiled softly—truly singular from the hard way they moved together—and kissed her so sweetly she was sure she'd dissolve. "All right. I'm out. I'll leave. I swear it. I'm gone."

"Oh, Spike..."

"Anything you ask. Just... Oh god, ride me just like that. My sweet slayer..."

His eyes glistened—or was that her eyes? She didn't know. All she knew was the relief consuming her insides. The boulder on her heart rolled away, and she finally felt she could breathe.

Though she knew those breaths wouldn't come easy until he was safely free. Until tomorrow night, when she saw him again.

But for now—until then—they had this.



IT WAS THROUGH A COMBINATION OF WHISPERED RUMORS AMONG the lackeys Spike still had power over and the raid of the local museum that Buffy discovered what Angel was planning.

Seemed fitting that Angel would attempt to end the world now. Finals were approaching, Snyder was bullying students more than ever, and even though Spike had abandoned his demonic family just as he promised, Buffy was still beside herself with worry. He'd told her the night following his vow that it was too dangerous to try and see each other, especially since his absence would have alerted Angel without a doubt where his allegiance lay. And while Spike didn't fear a confrontation with the vampire, he wasn't too keen on the odds of two versus Angelus, Dru, and a legion of their loyal followers.

He had too much to lose now, he said. He wasn't about to gamble Buffy for the sake of pride.

He was also worried about her, even if he remained silent in his concerns. She knew it, though, from the guarded way he looked at her in their dreams. The way he caressed her body, as though committing every inch of her to memory. Every night when she fell into their secret room, he'd yank her into his arms, inspect her for wounds she was still convinced wouldn't carry over from reality, and demand details of her nightly patrols.

She had a feeling he was only demanding details for the sake of appearances. Too often, she felt him with her as she stalked the cemeteries. Not too close but never far; always watching her back. Always ready to leap into action. Always ready to save her life.

Then one night, everything changed.

"We found it," Buffy said by way of greeting, stepping through the wall and into the dream-room. As usual, he was waiting for her on the bed, his eyes cast with worry. His head snapped up at the sound of her voice. "Willow and me. We found it."

Spike frowned and rose to his feet. "Huh'sat? Start at the beginning."

"The curse. Angel's curse. We found it. I-it was on a disk in Ms. Calendar's...in the room where she taught." Buffy sucked in a breath and glanced down quickly. "We found it. She was... That's why she died, isn't it? She was going to do the curse."

"I don't know, sweetheart. The great prat and my wonky ex haven't exactly been forthcoming with information in recent weeks. I told you I had no bloody clue about any of what happened between Angelus and—"

"But if he knew about the curse—"

"Then yeah. He'd make sure the teacher snuffed it."

Buffy shivered hard and tried desperately not to focus on his callous reasoning, though it was difficult when every fiber of her very human psyche screamed for vindication. So not only was Ms. Calendar a part of the tribe originally responsible for Angel's curse, she'd also been looking for a way to harness him again.

And Angel had killed her for it.

"Well, we have it," Buffy said quietly. "We have the curse. And Willow thinks she can curse him again."

Spike blinked. "She what?"

"Willow thinks she can curse Angel again. She's been...well, subbing for Ms. Calendar and apparently going through her witchy stuff. She thinks she can do the curse." Buffy sighed and licked her lips, tentatively meeting Spike's eyes. "What do you think?"

"About what?"

"About cursing Angel. Making him...not evil again."

There was a long silence; Spike tore his gaze from hers and cast downward, tension suddenly tightening every muscle in his gorgeous body. She didn't know why she'd asked—she'd had the answer all along. Ever since she and Willow had discovered the disk. Hell, she'd known ever since Angel lost his humanity what Spike's view on returning him to his less-evil counterpart would be. Angel, in his mind, was competition. And while he knew that Buffy didn't love Angel, it didn't make the idea of the soulful half's reappearance any more welcoming.

He'd want Angel dead, not rescued.

"I'd do it."

Buffy's heart stopped, astonishment locking her in place. She implored Spike silently to meet her eyes, but he was staring at the ground.

"What?" she asked at last.

"I said I'd do it. Curse him again, or what all." Spike shifted uncomfortably. "It'd make things safer for you, right? Make his chances of endin' the world... I hate the wanker, Buffy. I hate him so bloody much. And the thought of what the two of you did...of him with you..." He clenched his fists and still refused to look up. "But it'd make things safer for you. As long as Angelus is out there... Christ, you don't know him like I do. Thinkin' of you out there alone every night while he's bleeding obsessed with you...knowin'—"

"Spike—"

"I don't want him near you again. Ever. Souled or not. But I'm not a blind idiot, love. I know it'd be safer for you if his pansier self was the one steerin'. And that's all that matters to me."

It wasn't until he finally met her eyes that she knew he meant it. And just like that, the last piece fell into place.

She knew what she had to do.

It was only a matter of doing it.

THE CURSE WAS no longer an option. Buffy had thrown it away the second she saw Kendra lying in a pool of blood on the library floor. For this, for everything, there would be no forgiveness. No second chances. The attempt to restore Angel's humanity had failed. Now there was only vengeance.

He'd murdered her friend. He'd kidnapped her Watcher. He'd made her a fugitive. He'd gotten her expelled from her school. He'd cost her everything.

There was nothing left. The curse was a no-go. She needed this to be over.

She needed it to be over *now*.

She hadn't seen or heard from Spike since the night before. Angel hadn't mentioned him during their fight in the cemetery—the one he'd lured her into with his flaming immolation-o-gram—and she didn't know how to take his silence. Angel knew Spike wasn't in his corner and had probably deduced that he hadn't been from the very beginning. Not mentioning her boyfriend had been a deliberate, intentional ploy. Either Angel had done something to Spike or he was planning on doing something, and though her nerves were screaming to locate her

vampire, take him somewhere secluded and will the world away, Buffy forced herself not to panic.

She refused to consider the possibility that Angel had ripped Spike out of her life. That atop everything he'd already stolen, he'd taken the man she loved as well.

Spike was a fighter—a fighter who loved her. He'd be all right. He'd better be.

The heart-stopping wail of a police siren sliced through the heavy night air. Buffy froze inside but kept walking, her back to the approaching squad car. She began mapping the best route to the nearest sewer in mind of a fast escape. She knew she could outrun the cop; his bullets were a different story.

In all her life, she'd never imagined needing to outrun bullets. Demons, vampires, the race to the end of the world—sure. But never cops. Never human authorities. Never anything like this.

Angel was so completely dust.

“Hold it right there!” the cop commanded.

Buffy spun around, her heart thundering and her ears ringing. Her eyes immediately landed on the very real gun in his hands.

“Put your hands on your head!” the cop barked. “Do it!”

Hours passed in a matter of seconds. There was nothing but her and the gun. Slowly, her hands remembered themselves and began the slow lift above her head; so fixated was she that she didn't notice the angry snarl that pierced the air until the weapon in question was airborne. It soared to the pavement with a reckless crash, but by the time the noisy clatter reached her ears, the gun was the last thing on her mind.

Spike's territorial growl consumed her completely. He barked something unintelligible as his foot smashed into the cop's chubby chin, then again as he seized fistfuls of police-uniform and tossed the man onto his patrol car, rendering him unconscious.

In a blink, he'd whirled around to her, the malice in his eyes fading into warmth.

“Hello, cutie.”

Buffy stood frozen for another long second, relief spearing through her tired body as she soaked in his every gorgeous inch. There was a

cut above his left eye and the pale skin of his right cheek was swelling impossibly into a knot of purple and red. Someone had hurt him.

"Catchin' flies, love," he murmured, his bruised lips pulling into a smile. "Don't tell me you're not happy to see me."

"Spike," she sobbed, jerking swiftly back to herself. And before she could blink, she found herself in his arms, her mouth pressing needy, desperate kisses across his face. She tended every heated patch of skin, every bloody cut. She tasted copper and grew angrier with knowledge. Someone had hurt him. Hurt her Spike.

If Angel wasn't dust before, he so was now.

"What happened?" she demanded, not pausing long enough to hear an answer. She couldn't stop kissing his beautiful, broken flesh. Not that he seemed to mind; rather, his arms had closed around her waist and his mouth was exploring every inch of her he could reach. "What—"

"Took bloody forever—"

"What did he—"

"—to get away."

Buffy kissed his lips desperately. "What did he do to you?"

"This? Nothin' but a scratch."

"Spike!"

He shrugged off-handedly, more interested in licking her throat, a purr rumbling through his chest. "Ran into a few old friends," he replied. "Bit of a brawl. Nothin' more."

"You're bleeding!"

It occurred to Buffy out of nowhere that this was the first time she'd seen Spike, touched and kissed Spike, since Valentine's Day. Since the night he'd touched her like a lover in the real world. It was the first time she'd felt his skin beneath her fingertips and tasted his lips with her own in months. They saw each other so frequently, but they hadn't touched each other in what felt like lifetimes.

That would end tonight. This forced distance. After the battle, they could go somewhere together. She wouldn't need to wake up alone ever again.

Not that her mother would approve, but that was a horse of a different color.

"Yeah? You should see the other guy." Spike paused thoughtfully, jarring her back to him. "That'd be guys, actually. Plural. Doesn't right matter, kitten. They're dust. Would've figured Angel'd know it'd take more than a handful of sodding cronies to stop me."

Buffy blinked. "Cronies?"

There was a sharp, almost resentful nod. "Right," he agreed shortly. "I'd wager Dru was too busy with the raid, yeah? Snaggin' the Watcher?"

"How'd you know—"

"Cronies tend to yap. A bloody lot. One of the reasons they always end up dust."

She swallowed hard, her mind racing. The world was in a no-end spin. "Giles?" she echoed, her voice barely a whisper. "They do...they do have Giles?"

"Wanker couldn't figure out how to wake up ole Stoney. Figures enough torture'll get the old man talking." Spike sighed and kissed her lips. "He won't kill him so long as the librarian doesn't talk."

"He won't," Buffy said. "If Giles knows how to...he won't talk."

"Then he won't die. He'll get the stuffing tortured outta him, but he won't die."

An image, unwarranted, of her surrogate father bleeding and tied to a chair flashed across her mind. And her insides hardened again with rage. She was placated only for a second with the reassurance that he would still be breathing by the time they stormed the mansion. Those who harmed her Watcher would taste death.

All of them. The cronies. Angel. Dru. All of them.

Buffy held her tongue. Killing Dru would drive a wedge between her and Spike that she didn't want to consider, but there was no alternative. No talking her out of it. Dru had killed Kendra. Dru had dragged her Watcher into a torture chamber. Dru wasn't going to walk away from this. She and Angel would dust together, and their remains would choke their way into the bowels of Hell.

"After the world is saved, you're in for a tongue lashing," Spike told her, drawing her out of her murderous reverie. "You went after Angelus? *Alone?*"

"I—"

"Christ, Buffy...do you have any idea..." A long pause stretched between them. Spike shook his head and slowly eased her out of his arms. "When this is over," he continued, his voice tight as though trying to rein in control, "you and I are gonna have a little chat."

"You and I are gonna have a little something, all right."

He grinned in spite of himself. "Cheeky."

"He has Giles."

Spike nodded and turned with her as she twisted in the direction of the mansion. Behind them, the cop was starting to moan and stir on the hood of the car. They had to get away—and now.

"The Watcher has fight in him, love. Beat the living hell outta the wanker, if memory serves."

"He's still—"

He nodded again, his hand finding the small of her back. "We'll get him out, love."

Yes, they would. They would get Giles to safety. She wasn't going to lose anyone else. Not her vampire. Not her Watcher. Not anyone.

The ground would be scattered with the ashes of her enemies.

Tonight, she settled all debts.



BUFFY HAD BRAVED ARREST ONCE ALREADY TO MAKE SURE HER friends were all right, and Spike was quite adamant that she wouldn't again. Thus she watched from a safe distance as he carted her barely conscious Watcher through the emergency-room doors. It killed her not being there with him. More than the bruises on her body and the cut seeping blood down her left arm—the same Spike had attempted to seal with his mouth, therein proving the myth of vampires and the healing powers of their saliva was indeed just a myth. She wanted to be with Giles as he was carted away. She wanted to see his face and be assured by the proud warmth of his eyes that he was indeed all right. She wouldn't be satisfied until she saw him.

He was alive, though. And on Spike's assurance, she knew he would stay that way.

Buffy tended to the few other matters she had while Spike took

care of her surrogate father. She called her mother, assured the hysterical woman that her daughter was not a murderer, and told her she'd be avoiding the house for a few days. At least until Xander, Cordelia, or someone not currently in the hospital could provide detectives with a statement that exonerated her as the number one suspect.

It was better to keep busy. If she stopped and allowed the events of the past two hours to sink in, she was sure her body would dissolve into tremors and she would lose herself to the hysterical shrieking which threatened to deafen any rational thought she had left. If she stopped, she would relive Angel's last minutes over and over again, and that was something she couldn't do.

What was done was done. No going back. And while she appreciated the finality, there was a part of her that had immediately retreated into mourning. No matter what else, Angel, as she'd known him, hadn't deserved his fate. He was gone, of course. He and his soulless counterpart were long gone.

It was hard to imagine a world wherein she could breathe freely. She'd dreaded facing Angel for so long, and without so much as a blink, it was over.

It was over.

Buffy sighed and crossed her arms, pacing herself away from the payphone before she called her mother more again for reassurance she didn't need. She wanted Spike.

"Sweetheart?"

She jumped and whirled around. "Oh."

"Oh?"

"I was just thinking I wanted you and..." She smiled awkwardly and gestured. For whatever reason, it felt like they'd been parted for hours rather than minutes. And with as jumpy and unsure as she was, she needed him at her side without fault. "Here you are."

Spike's mouth tugged into a tender smile and he nodded, wrapping an arm around her middle and drawing her near so he could kiss her brow. "He's fine," he said softly. "Was talkin' coherently and everything when I left. Told me to take you somewhere and disappear for a few days."

"Did he really?"

"Well, I think that's what he would've said if he'd worked out the fact that I'm not the sodding enemy anymore." He grinned, his eyes brightening when she giggled. "I think I had him close to convinced by the time your meaty chum came up and accused me of offin' you and the other slayer."

Buffy rolled her eyes. "Xander," she muttered. "I'm sorry."

"He was just worried about you."

A soft smile stretched her lips. "You must be even more tired than I am."

"I was just more eager to get back to you and lick your delectable body than bruise your flabby friend." Spike kissed her brow again and tucked her into his side. "Let's get home."

Nothing in the world sounded better right now. "Where's home?" she asked tiredly.

"Right now, the dingy little place I've been staying." He shrugged. "It's not the Ritz-Carlton, love, but it has a telly and a loo. Not to mention a big cushy bed."

Buffy sighed, exhaustion spreading through every cell of her worn body. She didn't care where they went as long as he was at her side. The world was still spinning around her dizzy head and her thoughts raced against reality to reconcile everything that had happened in the past few hours. She hadn't stopped shaking, and at this point, she doubted she ever would.

It was over, though. It was over. And as soon as the dust settled, all would be all right.



IN LATER DAYS, BUFFY WOULD LEARN THAT WILLOW HAD PLANNED to do the restoration spell from the comfort and safety of her hospital bed. The spell never took, of course, and Angel had dusted alongside Drusilla in a fit of rage beside a stone statue that had refused to awaken. Giles had remained silent in the secret of how to unleash Acatla's wrath. He would have died rather than forfeit his knowledge and had Spike not burst in when he did, there was a good chance she would have lost her Watcher in the crossfire.

As it was, the final battle had been rather anticlimactic. Angel's best cronies had tasted dust when they'd attempted to take out Spike. The egomaniac hadn't expected to see the blond vampire again, and he certainly hadn't expected Buffy to storm in looking to cause some serious hurt. No, he'd thought he pretty much had all the time in the world. Time to extract the secret to awakening Acatlha from Giles, and then time enough to do some research of his own should Giles's silence prove to be a truly permanent condition.

Angel had dusted with shock burning his eyes. He'd glanced to the stake protruding from his chest and back up to Buffy's determined face, and dissolved into a thousand bronze particles. Just like any vampire. Nothing spectacular. Nothing remarkable. At the end of the day, he was just another vampire. She'd killed him. He was gone. Angel was gone.

And so was Drusilla.

But not by her hand.

Spike hadn't mentioned what had transpired since leaving the mansion, and Buffy wasn't about to brave the subject with him. He hadn't reacted much as he'd watched the woman he'd devoted himself to crumble into nothingness. His jaw had clenched and he'd heaved a long sigh, but otherwise said nothing.

Then again, silence was often the loudest form of communication. Buffy didn't know what to say so she wasn't going to try. All she knew was Drusilla had been looking to kill her after Angel dusted. She'd tackled Buffy to the ground, clawing and screaming, yellow insanity stretching her demon eyes. It was a face of the vampire Buffy had never expected to see—Drusilla had always seemed composed and elegant, even if she was out of her mind.

She'd never struck Buffy as the proverbial animal.

Angel's dusting, however, had reduced her to a howling beast. It'd taken Buffy by such surprise that she knew without a doubt she'd be dead if Spike hadn't been there.

If Spike hadn't snarled and thrust her fallen stake through his ex-lover's back.

It had happened quickly. Too quickly for second-guessing or

anything else. And while Buffy had already resolved herself to end Drusilla's unlife, she hadn't known what to expect in the aftermath.

It wasn't this. It wasn't the awkward knowledge that Spike had slain the woman he'd spent a century beside.

There would be time for reflection in later days, she suspected. Right now, she just wanted rest.

Rest and celebration.

There was something else—an unspoken fear lurking deep within her psyche, one Buffy didn't want to breach but knew they needed to discuss. And as Spike ushered her across the threshold of his motel room—a real motel room, not the one in the dreamworld—she found her nerves dancing toward the end of madness.

Dreams had brought them together. They hadn't done this outside dreams. Not really.

A relationship consisted of more than stolen moments at the end of the day. She wanted Spike in her life if he was to be a part of it. She wanted him patrolling with her, dancing with her, laughing with her, arguing and sparring with her; she wanted everything. She wanted the added bonus of having him in the bedroom as well as at her side. Dreams had brought them together, but could she trust reality to make sure nothing tore them apart?

"It's not much," Spike said, flipping on the bedside lamp. The small amount of light didn't stretch far into the room, but then she wasn't interested in taking the tour. Buffy just wanted rest. "Covers the basics and what all. Never expected I'd be bringin' you here."

She licked her lips, her heart pounding. There was a strain in his voice she'd never heard before, and for half an instant, she thought he might be as nervous as she was. There were no barriers here. The knowledge was both exhilarating and terrifying. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry, which was just as well, as she was afraid she'd melt into hysterics if she made a sound.

"Buffy?" Spike was suddenly right in front of her, his azure eyes consuming her whole. There was no condemnation there, no resentment for having cost him his sire. Instead, there was only tenderness and concern. "You with me, kitten?"

Her throat tightened and her pulse raced, but she managed to find her voice all the same. "What happens now?" she asked hoarsely, resting a hand upon his chest.

"Well...way I figure it..." He dipped his head and brushed her lips with his. "I have you to myself now, yeah? No wonky dreams. No hint of your mum lurkin' outside the door. Just you...and me. I think we should pop into the shower and wash the fight off."

The fight. It almost sounded innocuous. As though nothing had changed. As though nothing was different.

Only everything was different.

"Do..." Buffy licked her lips and sighed. "Do you think...it'll be different now?"

Spike cocked an eyebrow, carefully sliding her jumper over her head. "Different?"

"You...me...no dreams."

He considered her for a long, quiet second. "It'll be brilliant, love. I'm not...at my best right now, but I swear to you, we'll be brilliant together."

"You killed—"

The words came from nowhere and wouldn't be silenced. Her subconscious, it seemed, was much more adamant about getting all the pieces on the board, regardless of what her conscious wanted. However, the light in Spike's eyes didn't fade at the short reminder of what had transpired. If anything, the resolution there hardened into something stronger.

"She was tryin' to hurt you, pet," Spike replied softly, shrugging. "Not sayin' it didn't smart to...to do what I did. It did. Bloody right, it did. But I love you. Bugger if I know anythin' beyond that. I love *you*. I'm so in love with you it's sodding hard to remember I don't need to breathe at times. Dru...she tried to hurt you. If I'd just stood there...Christ, I never would've forgiven myself."

Buffy's eyes watered impossibly with tears. She thought herself too weak to cry—she was wrong. It seemed she was wrong about so many things. And if nothing else, she resolved then to never underestimate his love for her again. Their start might have been rocky, but there was

nothing but honesty and love between them now. Now and for the rest of forever.

After all, Spike never lied to her. He hadn't yet and she knew he never would.

Never.

"This isn't the end of anything, sweetheart," he murmured, casting her pullover to the ground before turning his hands to the hem of her tee. "I finally have you here. You're really here..." In seconds she was naked waist-up save the sports bra she wore, and he quickly rendered her without that as well. Then her breasts were in his palms, his thumbs rolling her nipples as his ragged breaths crashed against her throat. "You're really here. This isn't the end of anything. No...God, no..."

Sensation was a funny thing. Sensation had a way of moving the boundaries of time and distance. It was for the sensation of Spike's lips on her skin that Buffy didn't notice his slow, methodical removal of her clothing. It was for the sensation of Spike's hands caressing her body that Buffy didn't register the fall onto the mattress. It was for the sensation of Spike's cock sliding between her wet pussy lips that Buffy didn't register the sight of his fangs until he murmured her name. Until he coaxed her back to him with a gentle whisper, his fingertips gently stroking her face.

"Tell me you love me," he murmured.

Buffy gasped as he dipped a hand between them, her pelvis arching off the mattress and against his wandering fingers. He found her clit in easy seconds, his hungry eyes devouring her pleasure as though it were his own.

"I love you," she gasped, bucking hard beneath him. "God, Spike, I love you so much."

"Do you now?"

"Oh, yes..."

A smile crossed his face as his mouth neared her throat. It should have terrified her; he was full demon at that moment. The vampiric ridges marking his brows and the yellow glow of his eyes—everything about him was monster. But he was her monster, and she loved him.

And to Buffy, that was all that mattered.

"You still want me, baby?" Spike asked softly, the head of his cock caressing her labia as his fingers massaged her clit. Sparks of euphoria spread through her burning skin, and without warning, she was wide awake. The exhaustion that had commanded every muscle in her body was suddenly nonexistent. "Want me inside you?"

"Unh...Spike..."

A smile stretched across his gorgeous lips. Then he kissed her, and the tenderness behind the caress had her melting all over again.

He was right. God, he was so right. And she would never doubt again. There was no end to them. No end to this. The fight was over, but they were just at the beginning. And as long as they had each other, they always would be.

"I want you marked mine," Spike purred, his eyes flashing when she mewled and arched beneath him. "Remember what I told you?"

She nodded hard, a strangled gasp tearing at her throat. "Forever," she panted.

"You still want that?" he asked, his voice calm but strained, his amber eyes blazing with need. "You still want me forever?"

"Always."

An impassioned growl ripped through the air as his head descended. He licked her lips and kissed her mouth as his cock slid against her slick flesh, drenching himself in her wetness and driving her about as far out of her mind as she'd ever been. "I love you," he murmured. "God..."

"Please..."

He nodded hard as he sank inside her, groaning loudly against her skin and clutching her so tightly the world might well have blinked away. Pleasure split her insides, her pussy tightening and clenching around his cock, determined to keep him locked within her forever.

There was no completion if there wasn't this.

"Fuck, Buffy," Spike moaned, his fingers abandoning her clit to scale up her body, his fingers weaving through hers. "Feel so wonderful. So tight. So perfect." He kissed her again, his mouth sliding southward until his fangs were grazing the column of her throat. "Now, Buffy? Can I make you mine now?"

Tears stung her eyes and she clenched her vaginal muscles around

him, the wonder of his body's invasion melting into desperation for the slippery feel of his cock sliding in and out of her. She needed to feel him. She needed him stabbing at that perfect bundle place deep inside her. She needed his incisors inside her as his cock worked her pussy. She needed everything he had to give her, and she needed it now. "Please!" The word rode out as a pleading gasp. "Please!"

For a second she thought he might tease her, deny her, work her into a mindless frenzy before giving her what she needed. She thought he might, but he did not. Instead there was a moan of surrender coupled with the pleasure-laced pain of his fangs slicing into her skin. It hurt only for a second—only a second—then her body exploded with bliss.

This. This was hers.

"Mine," Spike purred against her throat. "You're mine, Buffy."

"Yes. Oh yes."

Something within her locked and she knew nothing but completion. It was something she'd known so long. Something Spike had told her over a thousand times. Something she'd confessed long before she knew how desperately she loved him, before she ever dreamt she could be here. Beneath Spike as he moved against her. As his body pushed her into realms of pleasure she never thought to touch—she'd never imagined existing.

And then he was guiding her upward, his hand cupping the back of her neck and pressing her mouth against the flesh of his jugular. "Bite me, baby," he begged, his hips rotating, his cock moving deeper within her. "Please. Make me yours."

She bit down until his blood bathed her tongue, and drank. And when she heard him whisper, "Yours," in answer to her claim, she knew she'd come home.



SHE COULD SPEND HOURS MAKING LOVE WITH HIM. MEMORIZING every corner of his gorgeous body. Exploring the scars time had refused to forget with her tongue, finding his ticklish places, stroking his cock with her hands and taking him as far into her throat as she could. She

could love him for hours, and in the aftermath of their union, she didn't want to sleep.

"I'm gonna want this every day," Spike murmured from where he rested between her thighs before stealing a lick of her clit. "You taste..."

Her body protested impossibly when his mouth left her pussy. She was exhausted beyond exhausted, but she wanted more. She wanted him inside her again. "Don't stop—"

"Not stopping. Never stopping. Can't...not with you around." He grinned and raised himself on all fours anyway, prowling up her body, very much a canary-stuffed-cat. "Was that a yawn?"

"No."

"Buffy..." Spike dipped his head and nuzzled the mark on her throat. The one proclaiming her as his for the entire world to see. "I'm gonna get this mated stuff right, you hear? Starting with...we just saved the world and shagged each other blind. My girl needs her beauty rest."

Buffy pouted but she hadn't the strength to argue with him. Instead, she stifled another yawn and curled into him as he rolled them onto their sides, his chest pressed against her back, his arm over her waist. She molded into him as though they had been fashioned that way.

There would be no fearing whatever lay ahead. Not when she'd already won the day. Spike was with her, and he was hers.

He was really hers.

"Sweet dreams, kitten," he murmured, not without a dose of irony.

"A dream is a wish your heart makes."

He chuckled. "No need to tell me."

"Mmmm," Buffy murmured, drifting off into unconsciousness. "See you soon..."

Spike kissed her throat with a contented purr, tightening his arm around her middle. "Lookin' forward to it."