

NIGHTINGALE

A Spike & Buffy Romance



HOLLY DENISE



NIGHTINGALE

ONE HUNDRED AND FORTY-SEVEN LONG, agonizing nights.

One hundred and forty-seven times he'd woken up to find it hadn't been a nightmare after all. His worst fears were more than real—they were *reality*. And he wanted so badly to not be here anymore, not feel this, but he'd made a promise, and Spike kept his promises. All he could do was hope the others had the right of it even if he knew they didn't. There was no getting better. There was no reprieve from the loss. Time healed rot. All it did was remind him that he was living a brand new day on the earth where she should be.

That she was dead, and he was not.

Not in the way she was, at least.

One hundred and forty-seven days. One hundred and forty-eight today. So many hours of not living. Of existing just to exist. Of breathing air that should be hers. Seeing her die night after night, replaying those horrible moments in a cruel display of slow motion. Pointing out his faults. Showing him what he should have done. Playing a fantasy of heroics over and over. Saving her when it was too late. Saving her when it no longer mattered.

He felt himself dying just a little more each day, even if his body wasn't good enough to finish the job. Sooner or later, his crypt would

become his grave, burying in a sea of regret and daydreams that couldn't erase his memories, no matter how much he tried.

A hundred nights plus forty-seven. In a blink, gone. Those days...gone.

Amid the chaos of a town sinking into its own hellmouth, she stood in the dress her friends had buried her in. Her hair was long and tousled, her eyes wide and confused. Demons were dancing in jubilee as Sunnydale burned, but god, it was her. She was standing there, every bit a fallen angel. His Buffy.

Buffy.

Spike fought the urge to crash to his knees. Battled the tears that stung his eyes, the breaths he didn't need to breathe. His quest to get back to Dawn ended then. She'd be fine. They'd all be fine because Buffy was here.

And it was her. He knew it. Buffy. Not the bot—not the bleeding bot. It was Buffy. He smelled her. He'd never forget that dress, the last he'd seen her in. The skirt, the shoes... Willow had even allowed him to pick out the earrings. That she would forever wear something that he had selected had eased the pain, but only a little. He wanted to make sure she looked as gorgeous in death as she had in life.

There was dirt on her face. Blood staining her hands, which were scraped and torn from where she had dug her way out of her coffin.

Oh god.

"Buffy," he gasped, staggering forward. "Bloody hell, Buffy. You're real, aren't you? Buffy?"

She blinked at him, her eyes unfocused. Lost.

Spike hazarded a slow step closer, bringing up his hands so she would see he was weaponless. The last thing he wanted to do was startle her. She was confused; disoriented. There was no familiarity behind her gaze. If she ran, he would follow, but god, he didn't want her to run.

"Buffy." He hadn't said her name this much since she'd died. Hell, he couldn't remember if he'd said it at all. He'd tried not to, even if it lived in his head. But now it felt like a lucky talisman—if he kept saying it, she'd keep being here. She'd keep being alive and not dead.

Bloody stupid, he knew, but he found he didn't care all that much. "Buffy, it's Spike. Spike. Do you remember me? I—"

A flash then. Something known. Something recognized. Suddenly her eyes were open, and she saw him.

She saw him.

"Spike," she whimpered, his name rolling off her tongue as though the answer to some prayer. He swallowed hard, ignoring the tears stinging his eyes. She was looking at him as though she had just arrived home. As though the tunnel was coming to an end and he was there in the light. The relief that filled her gaze overturned his heart. "You're here."

It happened in a blink—she was a few feet away and then she wasn't. She darted toward him, damn near crushing him as her arms went around him, and it was the sweetest pain he'd ever known. Sunnydale was burning, the dead were rising, demons were seizing control, and Buffy was back. Buffy was back, warm and alive, and she was in his arms, her tears wet against his chest. He shook right there along with her, not knowing what to do but that was all right. He had her. Quivering. Sobbing. And clutching at him as though the world was trying to tear her away.

"Buffy," he sobbed, collapsing with her to the pavement. "Slayer..." That was it. All he could stand. The thing that had been dead in his chest roared with life, and he knew he shouldn't but *shouldn't* had stopped mattering, so he kissed her. It was raw and primal and *instinct*, and not his. He knew that too. He and Buffy weren't people who snogged—a little thing like death couldn't change that. But she didn't push him away. Didn't exactly return the kiss either, but let him take it. Let his lips wander over her face, skate her cheeks, her brow, her pert little nose. Every bit of her he could touch while he tried desperately to reconcile knowledge with reality. The knowledge that she was dead; the reality that she wasn't. That she was here.

"Woke up," she said after he'd pressed another soft kiss to her lips. "It was dark. And I had to..."

"I know." He brushed his lips across her temple, willing himself to his senses. He needed to get her out of the street. Needed to get her to

safety. Needed to get her somewhere to take care of her the way she needed to be taken care of.

When he started to pull away, she whimpered and clawed back at him. “No!” she cried. “Spike—”

“Shhh, love. It’s all right. I got you.” He released a deep breath, shaking when she clutched at him tighter, even as he pulled himself to his feet. “Always. Never lettin’ you outta my sight again.”

“I was... I was...”

“I’ll find the others. They’ll—”

Her grip on him tightened. “No.”

The force behind the word startled him. “The Scoobies, pet. Willow? Xander? You remember them? They can—”

But she was shaking her head, choking back another sob. “No. No. Please, Spike. No. I can’t...not them. Please.”

“Buffy—”

“Tore me out. They tore me out. I saw them do it. I was watching. They tore me out. They tore me out. Don’t make me go to them. Please.” Buffy bowed her head, tears scaling down her cheeks. “Please.”

It took a few minutes for the words to hit him. The whimpers tearing at her throat, the tears in her eyes, the fact that she was in his arms at all. Her friends. The Scoobies. They had done this. They were the reason she was in his arms. The reason she was sobbing. The reason she was alive at all.

Somehow they had brought her back. And they hadn’t told him.

Not a damn word.

He wasn’t going to press Buffy for clarification right now. Not the time and definitely not the place. She didn’t want her mates—fine. Better, even. More of her for him. Not like they’d ever deserved her to begin with.

“Where do you wanna go, love?” he murmured into her hair. “I’ll take you anywhere you want. Just name it. You wanna go home?”

“Home?”

“Your place. With the Nibblet and...” The witches. No, that wouldn’t work. “The lover Wiccass’ll be there, though. Do—”

“You... You still have your crypt, right?”

Taking her to a graveyard seemed obscene, given the circumstances. "Slayer, you surely don't—"

"I can't be there. They tore me out. They..." She shook her head, stifling another sob. "They tore me out. I watched them and they tore me out. I screamed at them not to. I..." She buried her face in his shoulder once more, and he held her through another wave of tears. "Why did they tear me out?"

"I don't know," he answered honestly. "You're all right now, Buffy. Spike's got you." As if to punctuate his promise, he lifted her into his arms, rejoicing when she wound herself around him. "Spike's got you."

A sigh shuddered against his throat. "Thank you," she murmured.

Thanks. Thanks. Bloody thanks. As if he could do any differently. As if he could even consider it. His Slayer was offering him thanks. His Slayer was alive and in his arms. She had called out for him, and she wanted him to take her away. Away from the Scoobies; perhaps Sunnydale altogether. God, he didn't even know what had happened, but he could kill the ignorant wankers for doing whatever it was that made her feel this way. For torturing her after she was dead.

One hundred and forty-seven days she had been gone. Not tonight. Tonight she was back.

Tonight she was with him.

He just didn't know why.



HE TOOK THE SCENIC ROUTE BACK. HAD TO. MUCH AS HE FANCIED the idea of just holing up with the Slayer and telling the world to sod off, he knew he wouldn't be able to focus on Buffy if he didn't know that Dawn was safe. And he wanted an answer better than *beats me* when she asked, because she *would* ask.

Thankfully, it looked like all was right when he went by Revello Drive. Just to check, he'd told Buffy, not to go in. And they wouldn't get so close that anyone could spy them from the street, but close enough that he'd know all was well inside. She'd relaxed at that, nodded, and he'd seen the flash of relief in her eyes. The knowledge

that she wanted to know where Dawn was, too. That she was Buffy enough to have that worry.

Still the woman willing to jump for her sister, whether that meant into a sea of portals or a newfound hell among her friends.

But there was no need to go in. He saw Dawn sitting by the window, looking out—looking for him, most like—and the witches were behind her. If the witches were there, the house was safe, and thank god for that.

And despite everything, Spike had still stopped, had the internal debate. Wondered if he was doing wrong by her, cowing to what he wanted, what Buffy had asked, and what the sensible William part of him told him was the right move.

But they were responsible, weren't they? And incredible as all this was, something was wrong. Buffy didn't want them. He was no one to deny the wish of a walking miracle. So Spike didn't follow the voices, rather took comfort that Dawn was safe, and headed home.

That *obscene* feeling from before swelled uncomfortably as he guided Buffy into his crypt. It was a place of death, grim and shadowy, and unworthy of her. And yet, she didn't flinch. Didn't wrinkle her nose in disgust as she so often had in life, especially where he was concerned. Rather, she shot him a look of pure bloody gratitude and tightened around his.

Buffy was alive. Buffy needed him.

He was still so terrified that he was dreaming. That he would wake up and she would still be dead.

"There's nothing to eat here," he said after a minute, needing to fill the air. To hear her. "You've gotta be hungry, pet. Lemme go out and get you somethin'—"

"No. Don't leave."

The last thing he wanted to do was leave, but now that he was here—now that they both were—he almost needed to. If he left and came back and she was still here, that'd mean it was all real, wouldn't it?

Then again, if he left and she wasn't...

No. He wouldn't leave her. Buffy wanted him and that meant he was right where he was supposed to be. He would get Clem to run somewhere. Clem had been making a habit of dropping by every night

around ten, as the nights were typically worse for Spike than any other. And Dawn had begged his demon friend to keep an eye out in case the pain overwhelmed his senses and he ended his life one morning before anyone could stop him.

"All right," he breathed after a minute, and tried not to whimper when she curled into his side again. She hugged him as though they were anywhere. As though her wretched surroundings didn't exist.

God, but she deserved better. She was back. The last thing she needed was to be in a place where the dead belonged.

"Buffy," he murmured into her hair. "God, are you real?"

"It hurts here," she replied, voice muffled by his shirt. "Everything hurts."

"I'm sorry, love. I don't know..." A sigh tumbled through his lips. "I never thought... I don't know why you're here. I don't know why...god—"

She drew back a little, pressing her brow against his shoulder. "I'm here because you love me," she said, the words tugging at his heart. "And you won't make it hurt."

"Buffy—"

"You still love me, right?"

"Of course I—I never stopped. Never will." He pulled back at that, cupping her face. "Every day that you weren't here, I died over and over again. Tried to save you more times than I can count. Thousands of times. Every night. Every sodding hour, I saved you."

"How long..." She closed her eyes, exhaled, and opened them again. "How long was I gone?"

"Hundred and forty-seven days yesterday. Hundred forty-eight today...today doesn't count though, does it?" He tried for a smile. "How long was it where you were?"

"Longer," she replied softly. "And...not. Like no time had passed, but then there was nothing but time. And it was... I've never felt like that. I was warm. And soft. And it was... I don't know where I was, but I knew everyone was all right. I could see them. Could see you." She ran a hand across his face and offered a watery smile. "I saw everything."

The implication sent small shivers across his skin.

"Everything?" he rasped. "Everything since..."

"Everything. What you've done. I watched you...everything." Buffy released a long, quivering breath. "I've felt...everything. Watched you taking care of Dawn. Watched you. Felt you. Felt you both. God, you hurt so much."

Just hearing the words on her lips propelled his swelling tears over his cheeks.

"I felt so close to you," she whispered. "Wherever I was, I felt close to you. I felt that. It...it helped me rest. Helped me believe in peace."

"Me?"

"Yeah." For the first time since he'd found her, she pulled away, wrapping her arms around her middle. "I was loved. Not just there... I felt loved here, too. By you. You were going to let me rest. You cried. You hurt. You visited me, talked to me. I tried to talk back, but you couldn't hear. You were going to let me rest." Her face hardened. "They weren't. They... I tried to stop them. I tried screaming at them. Screaming at Willow. Hoped she could hear me, but she didn't. Or if she did, she ignored me. They pulled me out. They tore me away."

Everything inside him went hot. If she was saying what he thought she was saying, the Scoobies had done more than he ever thought them capable of. Letting her back now like this. They could have ruined everything. Any part of her that might not be Buffy, and he would have walked through fire before he allowed them to put it down. But that wasn't what had happened. What had happened was worse.

Her friends had torn her out of Heaven. Not just an idea, but a real place. The only place she could have been, far as he was concerned. The idea had been a cold sort of comfort when grief had threatened to shake him to dust—that he lived in a world where he knew death wasn't the end. No guesswork, no hopeful maybe, no prize to dangle in front of humans to keep them from offing each other. An actual place where people like her went after they kicked it. Maybe like the preachers said, maybe the eternal bloody Elysian Fields of old—the resting place for fallen heroes. He hadn't known, but he *had* known. Wherever Buffy was, she'd be safe. Loved.

Hadn't stopped him from wanting her here, though. From wishing

she wasn't dead. And if she knew everything else he'd felt, she'd surely know this too.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered, and brushed a kiss across her forehead. Reveling in the sensation of her skin against his lips, the warmth that she gave his cold. "I wanted you back. I didn't want you gone. I—"

"I know. I felt you."

"You felt how much I wanted you here. How much—"

"You loved me. You never would've let them do what they did if you knew."

"How do you know?"

She touched his face. "Because I do. Because I know you, now. More than... I just do. I watched you, Spike. I was there... I felt you." Buffy released a long, burdening sigh and stepped again into his embrace. Her arms around him. Her breasts pressed against his chest. He shuddered and clutched her tighter. "I knew I had to find you," she went on. "I clawed my way through and I... When I... I knew that I needed to find you. That you would take care of me."

"I'll always take care of you," he swore. "Always. Failed you once. I tried so hard... If I hadn't failed you, you wouldn't've had to jump. And then—"

"You didn't fail me."

"I did! You asked me to protect her—"

"And you have."

There was nothing to say to that. He didn't want to upset her by contradicting this bizarre confidence that had come back with her. He *had* failed her—that was all he ever needed to know. It was because of his failure that she had made the jump. It was because he hadn't been able to save Dawn that she'd had sacrificed herself to close the dimensional rip with her blood.

He took her hands and coaxed her to follow him. "Downstairs is a hole on the wall that I use as a shower," he said, trying to sound like it was something other than what it was. "Should get you cleaned up. Clem'll show here in a while and I'll have him go out and get somethin' to eat, all right?"

"My hands—"

"Had to claw your way out," he repeated, more to himself as he

lifted her bloodied skin to his mouth. "They raised you and left you down there. God, sweetheart..."

"I can't see them. I won't."

"They'll come here eventually. They'll wonder why I left the Nibblet by herself." Off her look, he drew in a breath and explained softly, "The town was under attack. Demons breakin' down doors and she wanted to go out. I told her I'd try to find the witches and the boy, get them to the house and put up protection. Seemed safer if she stayed inside. Told her to stay in the basement and made damn sure the house was secure before I left."

"You've taken care of her," Buffy said. "You've kept taking care of her."

"Every night. She's the reason I didn't join you as soon as I could." He paused at that, rumbled a short laugh. "Well, that and I doubt I'd've ended up in the same place."

"Spike—"

He shook his head and nodded at the hatch that led to his subterranean living quarters. "Let's get you cleaned up," he said again. "Then we'll get outta here. Go somewhere to camp it out till you think you're ready to face them."

"I don't want to face them."

"You will someday."

"No."

The certainty in her voice caught him off guard. "Not even to see Dawn?" he asked softly. "Nibblet needs her sis, Buffy. More than ever. She's..."

"Spike, please."

He shut up at that. The last thing he wanted to do was upset her, especially like this. Instead, he nodded again and guided her to the lower level of his humble crypt. He didn't presume the right to remove her clothing, and she didn't either. Thus he bathed her as she was, tending to her hands only—watching blood run off her skin. Her cuts were raw, and he felt each as if they were his own.

"I'm going upstairs for a minute," he murmured, disconcerted when she shot him a look of pure panic. "Just for a minute. Give you time to wash up without my pryin' eyes."

"I don't mind your prying eyes."

The knowledge both warmed him and made his heart lurch. So long looking at that damned Buffybot, listening to her recitation of bodily praises that he had programmed her to say...and now the real thing was in his home. Trusting him.

"Also don't want Clem wanderin' down here. If he tries, I'll hear him, but I wanna make sure I get up there before he... I doubt you'd want his pryin' eyes anywhere near you."

Buffy smiled.

"I'll be right back, kitten."

Tearing himself from her side was one of the hardest things he had done. And having lived in a world without her in it, that was saying something.

As it was, though, heading back upstairs was the right move. No sooner had he pulled himself out of the hatch did the door to his crypt burst open and bloody Harris stumble in as though he owned the place.

"Well," Spike drawled, not bothering to disguise his annoyance, "why don't you just come on in, then?"

Xander blinked at him dumbly. "You're here." It sounded like an accusation.

Because it *was* a bloody accusation.

"See your powers of observation are sharp as ever," he replied, keeping his gaze trained on one of his salvaged coffee tables, absurdly reminded of one of the last times Harris had invited himself into his crypt. Back when the Buffybot had been sent off to hide as Xander did some vague posturing to the tune of, 'Stay away from our Slayer.'

Now it really was Buffy. And she didn't want her friends. She only wanted him.

"*What* are you doing here?" Harris demanded.

"I live here."

"You're supposed to be watching Dawn. We found her in the basement, terrified that you'd been staked." The boy was trembling with buckets of righteous indignation, like he had the sodding right. "Do you have any idea what's happened tonight? Have you been outside? You left a fifteen-year-old alone in that?"

Spike bit back a snarl, lifted his head again to pin Harris with a glare. Had he any idea what had happened tonight? Oh, he had plenty of ideas. More than the useless lump could ever imagine. "I went," he snarled, "to find you an' the witches. Didn't think that was anythin' the Bit needed to see. She was safer in the house than she was with me."

"Have you forgotten that demons don't need invitations?"

"Have you forgotten that demons are sodding demons and tend to loot where there's a better chance of they can tear some ruddy pulser apart? An empty house isn't gonna be high on their priority list."

"She could've been—"

"Yeh. Wasn't though. Turns out she's just fine." Spike snickered and reached for his cigarettes, needing something to do with his hands so they didn't end up wrapped around Harris's throat. "So respectfully bugger off, all right?"

But Xander was not going to bugger off. He was here to do more than lecture Spike on his babysitting etiquette. That part was just a bonus. After a long beat, though, he seemed to give it up as a bad job, sighing and dropping his shoulders. "It's not just that," he said. "We got cornered by some big nasty demons and Willow completely blew them away. She's out of it right now, but Tara thinks she's going to be okay. We found Dawn and..." A pause. "You haven't...been by Buffy's grave, have you?"

Spike went rigid. "No," he answered honestly, the word rough with emotion he couldn't keep out, no matter that the living, breathing thing was downstairs washing the grave off her. "I, well, I went to see her before I came to take care of Dawn. But didn't swing by again after."

Because there had been no need. There would never be a need again.

"Something happened there," Harris went on. "We... Willow, Ahn, and Tara and me, we all tried... There was this spell, and we tried..."

It was worse, Spike decided, knowing the end of that sentence. He could play dumb but no sense doing that with a nitwit that wouldn't appreciate the play. So he didn't. "You what? Tried to raise her?"

Xander flushed and glanced down. "Yeah. We—"

"You didn't even think of the repercussions, did you? Just lah-de-

dah'd the entire bloody thing." The anger that Buffy's revelation had sparked was beginning to do more than simmer—hell, it was about ready to explode. "You ignorant wanker. Magic always has consequences. Especially the dark mojo I'm willin' to bet Red had to tap in order to get the leaves to do more than rustle. Tell me I'm wrong."

"Spike—

"And the lot of you didn't even tell me. How could you not tell me?"

"Spike, the ritual was interrupted. We didn't think it went anywhere—that we missed our chance. The urn smashed and... But the gravesite... We went back and it's been disturbed. Like someone..." Xander trailed off, haunted. "Like she was alive and we left her under there, and she had to climb out by herself." He paused, waiting for reaction. "Did you hear me? We think Buffy's—"

But he didn't get to finish the thought. The unmistakable clank of the lower hatch being raised echoed through the crypt, and Spike's eyes fell shut in defeat. Seconds later, her voice was in the air, cutting through the dark stillness around them.

"Spike?" she asked. "Are you—"

The boy jumped in before the vampire could stop him. "Buffy?"

Spike swallowed hard and raced through the darkness. The Slayer's wide, frightened eyes met his, unreadable. And then she was in motion, a blur of preternatural speed, and it barreled down on him. Like it had when she'd seen him on the street. Standing there like a git one second, his arms full of Buffy the next as she tried to climb him like a bloody jungle gym. He didn't know who was more startled—him or Harris.

Harris, who stood there blinking like the fuckwit he was, not reading the bleeding room. "Buffy?"

"No!" Her cry rebounded off the walls, an awful chorus, and she burrowed herself deeper into Spike's embrace. "Leave me alone!"

"Buffy, oh my god."

Harris hazarded a step forward, and that was when Spike lost the last of his control. His fangs sliced into his mouth, the bones of his face shifting, his senses sharpening as they always did. Flooding him even more with Buffy's scent, a scent ripened with something that wasn't fear—not in the traditional sense, at least, but a close enough

cousin. "Word of advice," he snarled at the boy. "Don't come near her."

"What the..." The look on Harris's face slid slowly from shock to anger. "What do you mean, don't come near her? It's Buffy. You can't keep her here!"

"She's not goin' anywhere."

"Buffy—"

The Slayer flinched, shaking her head. "Stay away from me, Xander."

"I—"

"I know what you did. Stay away from me!"

"Buffy, he's a vampire. You can't stay here. Whatever he's told you, it's not true." Xander met Spike's eyes, glaring. "You have friends and a sister who love you. We got you out. Please, don't let him—"

"She found *me*," Spike barked. "She's here 'cause she doesn' wanna see you. I'm not keepin' her. Now back the hell away before we find out just how much the chip can fire before it fries my noggin. Bet you'll be dead before I am."

"Buffy!"

"She doesn't want you. You're not gonna take her now."

Buffy lifted her head, still shaking but a bit firmer now. As though she realized she wasn't being carted off—that Spike would stand between her and anyone who tried. He would have been offended that she needed the reassurance if he weren't still spiraling from the fact that she was here at all. "Go away, Xander," she said softly. "I'm not leaving."

The boy gaped at her. "Buffy, it's over. Wherever you were, it's over now. We got you out. It's okay to come home now."

She shuddered and turned her face from him.

Xander found Spike's eyes, his own blazing with accusation. "She was in Hell," he spat through gritted teeth. "She must think she's still there. And you're taking advantage of that. Why am I not surprised? Do you even care how much damage you're doing?"

"Don't be preachin' about *damage*," Spike shot back. "Get the hell outta here before I remove you bodily. You're upsettin' her. She'll come

to you when she wants to. I'm not holdin' her hostage. If she wants to leave, she can. You brought her back, and this is what she wants."

Xander stepped forward, then thought the better of it when the Slayer flinched. "Yeah," he retorted bitingly. "You're just eating this up, aren't you? Brought Buffy back and since you found her first, you get to take advantage of it. Not sure why anyone expected anything more from you. I certainly didn't."

"That's enough!" Spike released his hold on the girl and rushed forward in a stormy rage. Then his fists were tangled in the rumpled cloth of Harris's shirt, hauling him up and then throwing him across the crypt. He wasn't gentle with it, wasn't nice, and the chip punished him soundly as a result. Pain had never been so easy to ignore. "Get the fuck out. If you come back and upset her, you'll get more of that and then some. You hear me?"

Harris rose to his feet shakily, gaze shooting to Buffy for answers.

But when Spike turned, he saw Buffy had none. Her eyes were empty and sad, but similarly resolved. He didn't know what had done it—shaken her from the state she'd been in a second before. Maybe it was seeing what Spike was willing to do to keep the others from snatching her up. Or maybe it was remembering she was the bloody Slayer, and more than anyone else in the room, she had the real power. Whatever the answer, the result was the same.

She was glorious.

"Go home, Xander," she said, voice firm. "I'm staying. I can't..." She shook her head, shivering. "I just can't be with any of you right now. Not after what you did."

"What we what?"

"Sod off," Spike barked again. "Sod off, and don't come back unless you fancy learnin' what it feels like to have your spine ripped out."

Xander didn't say anything. Just looked at him. Long. Harsh. Unforgiving.

And still without a word, he turned and left, leaving the slam of the crypt door to punctuate his exit. They were alone again.

Almost immediately, Buffy was in his arms again, shaking. "He will come back," she murmured. "They'll all be here. They'll bring Willow

and she'll... She pulled me out of Heaven. Forcing me to leave will probably be a sinch."

"The bitch'll have to go through me first."

"I don't want her to go through you." She released a heavy breath, the sort that stood in place of things unsaid. Then she straightened, all business, and tugged at him. "We need to leave. They'll come back. Even if they can't take me, they'll come back and it'll be bad. I can't stay here. Please. Please, Spike, can we leave?"

He nodded. "Of course. Told you as much, right? We'll go to the Sunnydale Inn. All right? I'll take care of you. We'll stay there as long as you like."

The relief that flooded her eyes damn near made him weep. And he vowed that this promise—the promise to keep her chums from forcing her away—was one he would dust before he broke. He'd failed her once; he never would again.

Never again.



HOW HE ENDED UP HALF-NUDE WHILE BUFFY DISROBED IN FRONT OF him, he would never know. Just seconds after they'd walked into their rented room, she had pulled him into the bathroom and began removing his clothes. When she reached for the button of his jeans, he grasped her wrist, swallowing hard, his eyes going wide.

"Buffy—"

"I'm not..." She flushed prettily. "I'm not trying to... I just don't want to be alone."

Spike bit back his moan. The last thing she needed tonight was a very physical reminder of just how much he wanted her—had always wanted her—but he was still a man, and a vampire on top of that. There were certain reactions he couldn't control.

Especially with his Aphrodite here and wearing next to nothing, stripping off the clothes she had worn in death. They had stopped at a convenient station along the way; Spike selected some cheap garments that would do for now, especially considering their hurry, along with some nosh. Well, a lot of nosh. He might have filched entire aisles'

worth of food, certain she was ravenous and more than a little surprised when she'd opted for the shower before filling her belly.

But then their experiences were hardly the same, were they? The hunger had been all consuming when he'd clawed his way out of the grave. The first and most important need to satisfy. Buffy wasn't a vampire, though. She was something else altogether.

And now they were in the bathroom and she had jerked his jeans down his legs, not reacting save for a slight blush when his cock, hard and aching, sprang toward her. She accepted him, then, in all regards. This Buffy that had seen both sides of Heaven and Hell. This Buffy was with him when she didn't have to be, and she wanted him there holding her as the water washed away the past and prepared her for the future.

Still, as she guided him backward into the shower, William broke through the surface, awed by her conviction. Just months ago, disgust. Months ago embarking on what might have turned into something had she not jumped. The softness in her eyes that he had seen since he endured Glory's torture to protect the Slayer's family—that softness had intensified to something he could not name. Maybe he was kidding himself, but the thought had been there, haunting him as much as her memory had. What might have happened if she'd survived. He'd told her he knew she'd never love him, but hell, part of him had wondered anyway. And the wondering had nearly killed him.

The shower itself didn't take as long as it felt. For long seconds, he held her under the nozzle's assault. Watched the dirt that had accumulated from nowhere dance around the drain; felt her hair dampen beneath his touch. Felt moisture at his chest that didn't come from the shower. Felt her clutch at him as though demanding proof of her own tangibility.

"I feel like I've been sleeping a hundred years," she murmured. "But nothing's changed. Except me. And everything I believed."

He smiled. "That's not nothin' then, kitten. Quite the bloody opposite."

"You haven't. Changed, that is."

Oh, if only that were true.

Living in a Buffyless world, though, who could help but to change?

He had felt more with her dead than he had in life. All those months prior to Glory's tower, he had relied on love through pure infatuation. It had been love there toward the end; from the moment she'd kissed him in his crypt. True, he had loved her through and through, but not quite as he had afterward.

Not so much as he had the moment he'd seen her broken, lifeless body lying in the aftermath of war. In the sunlight where he could not reach her.

These last months without her, his love had all but destroyed him.

"I've changed," he said, massaging shampoo into her scalp. He couldn't keep from letting his eyes drift shut when she murmured her encouragement, still expecting to wake up. Waiting for the cosmic joke to end. Waiting to open his eyes and find that none of this had happened.

Buffy shouldn't be alive. Shouldn't be with him. Shouldn't be choosing him over her friends.

God, but she was here. And he loved her so much.

"No," she said, suddenly level with his eyes. Staring through him. The wondrous abyss of her. Letting him share this moment. Making him a better man for it. "No, Spike, you haven't. You just got older. Me, too. I feel like I've aged so much."

"You were gone one hundred and forty-seven days. That's an eternity in some places."

The mirror was appropriately steamed over when they finally stepped out of the shower, obediently hiding his lack of reflection. He toweled her dry and fished out a hairbrush from the bag of hair goodies he'd selected at their pit stop. He wrangled himself into his discarded jeans—easier said than done, though, with his stiffy having gone nowhere. There hadn't been a big selection of pajamas at the 7-11; the best he had been able to do was a camisole and a novelty pack of Sunnydale panties in the size he knew to be hers. If he had thought of it, he might have packed her an overnight bag with assorted sweaters and unmentionables that he had stolen in the height of his obsession. Ah well.

He snickered as he read the design on the package of knickers he

had swiped for her. The sodding town wasn't even trying to be discreet anymore.

"What?" she asked a minute later, arching an eyebrow.

"Nothin'," he replied, tossing her the pack. "Just gotta wonder how the tourists feel when they stop in some dump like that and see variety packs of 'Welcome to the Hellmouth' underwear."

A ghost of a smile crossed Buffy's face. "I just can't believe you bought me underwear."

"Well, much as the thought of you goin' without drives me wild, I didn't wanna presume anythin'." He grinned a bit, feeling more like himself. The Buffy he knew was beginning to show her head. God, he had missed her so much. More than he thought it possible to miss a person. Just being with her was surreal. "Course," he continued a minute later, "that was before you volunteered us for a co-ed shower."

The red in her cheeks deepened.

Love her so fucking much. So much.

"I...there's something I should tell you." Buffy licked her lips and he experienced that funny lurch in his chest that reminded him his heart had thundered, once upon a time. "I just wanted you to know. I remember thinking that I would tell you this if we, you know, made it out of the last thing alive. God, I almost told you so many times. So..." She stopped and shook her head. "I almost said it the day that I told you the thing you did was real. Not everything, of course. I was only on the way to feeling what I feel now. But I stopped and I almost told you that you..."

"You don't have to—"

"I almost told you that you could take your crumb. You just...you were more than I had ever seen. Just more. And it kept happening." Buffy exhaled deeply. "I trusted you so much. Every time I... That last night, when we went to get weapons. I told the gang that I loved them. All of them." She raised her eyes slowly. "Yeah, I meant you, too. It was one of the things I was trying to say without saying. It wasn't... real love, the kind you wanted. It was the love you feel for someone who does what you did to keep my sister safe, but I thought it might grow. That feeling. I couldn't say yes or no when you asked, but god, I almost did when you told me later that I could never love you. I was so

close to telling you that wasn't true anymore. But it didn't seem fair. I think I knew I was going to die."

The air in the motel went still, almost cold. There were tears running down his cheeks that he didn't remember shedding. He was standing there with Buffy. That morning she had been dead, and now she was with him. Telling him...

"God, Buffy..."

"So I didn't then," she continued, looking away. "I wanted to. I just... I was worried. A part of me knew that I was going to die, I think. And I was worried that if I told you that before I died, you would... I didn't know what I thought you would do. I just knew that Dawn couldn't stand to lose the both of us." She smiled best she could, wet strands of hair falling into her face. "I was going to tell you if we survived."

Spike glanced down. Here it was. A final testament. The last chance for the Powers to pull the rug from under his feet and declare everything that had happened tonight some cruel practical joke at his expense. Buffy alive was one thing; Buffy loving him, really loving him...that was something he hadn't even dared to dream. Not after she was gone.

"I love you, Spike," she said finally, the words just rolling off her tongue. "I felt you while I was there and what I felt kinda sinched it. I just... I thought you should know that."

That was all he could take. In seconds, he had stormed across the room, cupped her face and brought her mouth to his. And the second her taste was in his mouth, his world came undone all sodding over. There was no way this wasn't real. Dreams were good but they weren't this good. Dreams couldn't mimic the way she felt or smelled, her warmth or the unique combination of flavors that made her Buffy. If it were only the hunger in her kiss, the passion he'd only touched once nearly two years ago while under some blasted spell, he might have worried. But it wasn't just that hunger, or the sensation of her tongue dueling his, or her arms around his neck, or the feel of her rolling her hips against his cock. It was all real, and it was all his.

"God," he gasped, breaking away to pepper her throat with kisses. "God, I love you so much." Tears were second nature now—he had

shed so many since last May that knowing he was crying was as ordinary as knowing it was morning or time to eat. "*Missed* you so much. You were gone. I saw you lying there. Didn't save you. Was too slow to save you."

"You saved *her*. That's all I asked."

"But I didn't. Wasn't quick enough, was I? He still got to her, that bastard. Still sliced her open. If I'd done what I promised—"

"It's okay."

"No, it's bloody *not*." He pulled back, needing her to hear him. Hear *this*. Needing her to know he didn't take it for granted—any of it. "All this happened because I failed you. If you hadn't died, they wouldn't have ripped you out. If—"

"I don't want to do this," Buffy said softly, and cutting through what would have been a really good ranting confession. "I know how I feel about it, Spike. And about you. I don't need you telling me how I should. That's not a *you* thing, anyway."

Well, balls, what was there to say when she laid it out like that? Nothing, he supposed, except, "I love you."

"I know, and I love you, too. And I'm...not *fine*. I don't know if I ever will be again."

"You will, love," he promised before he could help himself. But hell, he didn't want to help himself. This was the sort of promise he aimed to keep even if he had no idea how. He supposed they could figure it out together. "We'll get you there."

Buffy was quiet for a moment, then she offered a watery smile and nodded. "I think I can almost believe it."

He smiled and brushed her hair out of her face, then kissed her again, unable to help himself. "Almost is better than where you were a few hours ago," he muttered against her lips. "We'll find you what you need here."

"I need you with me."

"You have that." He could have stayed there forever—more than part of him wanted to. Just holding her to him, feeling her warmth, her skin that smelled of motel soap and earth. But when he opened his eyes, he caught a glimpse of the pile of empty calories he'd snagged

from the convenience store, and remembered that she hadn't eaten yet. "Are you sure you're not hungry?"

Buffy didn't answer—her stomach did with a long growl.

"Maybe a little," she admitted.

He grinned, relaxing. "Well, let's see what we can do about that."



HE FELL ASLEEP WITH BUFFY IN HIS ARMS, HER HEAD ON HIS CHEST, a leg draped casually over his denim-clad thigh, and everything that was warm and pure and her filling the parts of him that were anything but. It took a while to find sleep, though that much didn't surprise him. Stakes seemed a mite too high—too good a chance he'd wake up and find he'd dreamed the whole bloody thing up. So, for a few hours, Spike stared at the pale, boring white of the ceiling, and listened to the sounds of sloppy fucking that filtered in through the walls. He wondered if the Scoobies had told Dawn, and how he would manage to get the Bit away from the others and bring her here. Bring her wherever *they* were. She needed her sis. Buffy needed family. He would be quite content to spend the rest of eternity looking over them. All she needed to do was ask.

When he did awake, it was to his preternatural awareness of the sun struggling against the blinds, the steady, reassuring thump of her heartbeat, and her soft lips caressing his face.

He drew in a sharp breath and forced his eyes open, and by some miracle she was still there. Looking at him with a look was universal. Something he had once thought he could program into a sodding robot, idiot that he'd been. Her pulse was racing, her breaths coming fast but steady. Buffy in his bed.

Buffy cast herself astride him, nipples peaked beneath the cotton of her camisole. Her hands trembled as she trailed her fingers across his chest, her hips undulating in an erotic dance against his swelling cock. There was uncertainty again—the same she had shown him the previous night. As though she also couldn't trust that this was real.

He couldn't blame her, for it beat every dream of her he'd ever had. But god, she *felt* so fucking real.

“Buffy—”

She held a finger to his lips, her own twisting in a soft smile. “Good morning,” she said, lowering her head to taste the skin at his throat. Her teeth glided over Drusilla’s sire mark without thought—or perhaps because of it—prompting him to buck his aching erection into her dampened center. God, she was already so wet, her scent filling his nostrils and teasing his tastebuds. If he hadn’t thought it better to sleep with his jeans on, he might already be inside of her, which would be brilliant and hot and passionate but also fast. Too fast. That she was still wearing the *Welcome to the Hellmouth* knickers and a camisole didn’t matter. Both were thin enough to shred with a good tug if a man were properly motivated. And he was more than properly motivated.

“Buffy...” Spike screwed his eyes shut, gliding his hands up her arms, then down again until he was cupping her breasts. “What are you...*Christ*....”

“I had some good dreams,” she replied, finding his hands with her own and encouraging him to squeeze. She was so warm. So vibrant. He played his fingers across her pebbled nipples as they poked at the fabric separating them, and he was sure his heart was surprised back into living at her heady gasp. “I was warm.”

“You are warm, baby,” he replied roughly. One disobedient hand deserted her breast to scale down her front. God, he had to stop before stopping was impossible. Didn’t she know what she was doing to him? “You’re so warm. Gonna burn me till there’s nothin’ left.”

“Not really what I had in mind,” she said, dipping a hand to press along his cock.

Spike hissed in a breath. “That a fact?”

“I know it’s not Heaven,” she murmured, “but it’s something. I feel it. You made me warm, Spike.”

Of their own volition, his fingers were now skating over the crotch of her panties, all of him eager to feel just how wet she was. And she *was*. She gasped when he pressed against her folds, and again when he found her clit through the thin layer of fabric. It was all so much, so bloody much—the way she felt, smelled, the sounds she made, all of it grounding him in ways little else could. Reinforcing once and for all how real this was. How real *she* was.

“Fuck.” Spike threw his head back. “Buffy. Tell me to stop. Please. You’re drivin’ me crazy. Outta my bloody mind. Tell me to stop. You gotta tell me.”

He needed to hear it, else he wouldn’t, and she wasn’t ready. She hadn’t yet been alive for twenty-four hours. Just last night she had told him she loved him. That alone was more than he’d ever thought he’d get. And now, with the air spiced with her arousal and his cock hard and throbbing, he felt stupidly close to the fledge he’d been the first time Drusilla had taken him for a ride, only more so because this was Buffy.

Where Dru had been his guide, Buffy was his destination.

“I don’t want you to stop,” Buffy said, her voice thick. “I dreamed of Heaven last night. It felt far away, but I felt it. I felt everything. I was warm and loved...and I woke up, and you were here. I’m not saying I’m all right. I’m not. I...” She trembled and he sat up slowly, drawing her into his arms, melting when she sighed against his shoulder. “I feel like a part of me is missing. They stole something that I need.”

“Buffy—”

“I don’t know anything anymore. This...I’m...” Buffy looked down, but only for a second, then her eyes found his again. Strong, then. Certain. “You’re what I’m sure of. Right now. You’re the one... I don’t know what I’d do if you hadn’t found me last night.”

“I’d’ve found you,” he replied. “If you were back, I’d’ve found you. But...” He sighed his apprehension, trying his damndest to ignore the fact that she was sitting on his cock, that his fingers now carried her scent from where he’d touched her before. Then he had one perfect breast under his fingers, her pert nipple begging for his mouth as his other hand again pressing against the sodden cotton guarding her pussy. The thought of her flesh molding around him broke through the strain of what was right and wrong. So many years of lust, this last year of loving her so much and getting nothing in return. Surviving her death only to live it every night until the last.

But this wasn’t about him. He couldn’t let her do something now that she would regret. God, he never wanted to be one of her regrets. The prospect of doing something that would ruin this intimacy terrified him. If he went through with this...if he gave in...

"Buffy," he murmured gently, trying and failing to keep his voice from shaking. "We don't have to do this now. I'll wait for you till the end of time. I—"

"It's not..." She pulled back slightly, cupping his cheek. "You're the reason I'm here. Why I'm warm. I don't know what you did, but last night, it felt like maybe nothing had changed. No time has passed. You gave me what I needed. And I do love you, Spike. I should've said it before I died, but I...I just..." Another quivering breath tumbled through her lips. "I watched you. I loved you then, too. And your warmth kept me... I don't even know how to explain it." She glanced down again. "Last night, it seemed I lived and died centuries before you found me. That warmth was taken from me. When I was dead, you were just there. Now I have... I just love you. And I need you now."

Spike stared at her in awe, every cell in his body numbed with an emotion beyond his realm of understanding. Just in a fracture of seconds, everything he had ever tried to reach, tried to grasp, had somehow found its way into his arms. And he was gone. Finding her mouth with his and bloody inebriated at first taste. She fell into him willingly, urgently, meeting the strokes of his mouth with hunger that left him rattled. He licked and explored and stroked and delved, and slipped his fingers under the elastic of her panties. Then, *Christ yes*, tracing his way over the curls at her groan until he encountered liquid heat.

"Oh god," he murmured against her lips before tearing himself away so he could tug the camisole over her head and bare her breasts to his hungry mouth. He wrapped his lips around one of her dewdrop nipples, growling into her skin as his baser instincts overturned his intent. The next second, he had her under him, her panties ripped away and stuffed into his back pocket of his jeans. And Buffy giggled. Fucking giggled and kissed him.

"You're really here," he gasped. "Every day you weren't... I died over and over again." He whimpered as she pried his jeans open, prodding the fabric down his legs with her own. A cool slide, then her hand was around his cock, and he was dying all over again. "Fuck me."

"That's the idea, here," Buffy murmured as she began to stroke him. "If you're up for it."

"Oh baby, I am more than bloody *up* for it." Spike took her mouth again, hot and wild, rolling his hips against the pumps of her hand. Reveling in the way her skin felt against his, so warm and soft. How her lips felt against his throat. How she gasped when he stroked down the seam of her pussy and arched in welcome when he slipped his fingers inside of her. How she clamped around him, drenched him, squeezed and sucked him in deeper, and the little mewl she made when his thumb found her clit.

"So hot," he growled against her lips. "Gonna bloody bruise me with how tight you are."

"That's good, I hope."

He laughed, and the sound startled him. When had he last had occasion to laugh about anything? "Baby, it's perfect."

"Bruises don't sound sexy."

"The kind you'll give me will be."

Buffy seemed to consider this before returning his grin with one of her own and tightening her grip on his cock. Up and down, up and down, squeeze and slide, making sure to run her thumb over the head—sparing him a small smirk each time she did.

"You're playin' with fire, love," he growled, though the warning likely would have meant more had he not immediately choked back a sob. It kept hitting him anew—this glorious, golden knowledge that he was really here and this was really happening. Buffy, alive and beneath him, teasing him and stroking him and clenching her pussy around his fingers, and most miraculously of all, loving him. The pain of the past few months would never leave him entirely, but he had her now. And he would never let her go. Not for anything.

"I *want* the fire," Buffy shot back. "Please just give it to me."

Well, if the lady insisted... Spike dropped a kiss at the corner of her mouth, slipping out of her with a delicious wet sound that damn near did him in. But then he was batting her hand away from his cock, biting back a whimper when his juice-drenched fingers met his own skin. He stroked a line down his length before deciding he wanted the rest in his mouth. Wanted a hint of what he could hope to enjoy later

and tomorrow and tomorrow's tomorrow and every tomorrow that followed. "Fuck, you taste divine," he murmured. "Can't wait to—"

"Spike!"

"Shh, I got you, love." He pressed himself against the wet mouth of her sex, his heart in his throat and probably in his eyes and everywhere else that mattered. Then he was inside of her. One inch, two. Then another, and fuck, she was even tighter than he'd thought. Hotter, too. Scalding and glorious and clenching around his prick with muscles he'd only ever dreamed about. And she was there too, watching him as he became a part of her, her lips forming a little *O* that he couldn't help but kiss right off.

He was right—he had her. But she had him too, and had since the beginning.

"Oh," she said when he was buried to the hilt. "Oh... That's..."

But she didn't say what it was. And she didn't need to. He was in full agreement. Not to mention lost. He always had been where she was concerned, which might have bothered him once but didn't anymore, and why the hell should it? It had gotten him here—gotten him wrapped around Buffy. Gotten Buffy loving him and kissing him and gasping against his skin as he rocked his hips and began moving with her in earnest. Feeling his flesh slide along hers, how she clenched and gripped him so tightly, wet and slick and so perfect he could weep.

Oh yeah, he was bloody all right, and fuck if he ever found his way back. There was no heaven after this. There was nothing after being one with Buffy.

"My Slayer," he murmured, rocking in slow thrusts that would surely be the end of him. He felt the carnal drive to slam into her, take her hard, buck and fuck until they were nothing but an exhausted tangle of limbs. But something in him bade him patience—to just indulge. To revel in every sensation, because there was no second chance at a first time, and he wanted this to be perfect for her. For both of them. So he grabbed her hand instead and squeezed, was rewarded with a corresponding squeeze of those muscles he was already addicted to, kept his eyes on hers and hoped to whatever a soulless creature could hope to that he remembered this always. The little sounds she made, like each thrust was a surprise, how she looked

at him—him, Spike—with love and more than love, how she moved with him, rolling her hips and wrapping one of her lethal legs around his waist, anchoring him into her, as though there were anywhere else he'd ever want to be.

It was real.

Spike dropped his head to her shoulder, his thrusts gaining slow momentum as need began to ebb away at sensation. His own breaths came faster to match hers, and he brought his free hand into play. Cupping one of her soft breasts, toying with her hardened nipple, before deciding that his hand had better things to do and letting his mouth take over. Moaning around her flesh when she moaned in turn, flicking his tongue across her nipple, earning another of those delicious squeezes of both hand and cock.

"Buffy," he whispered, voice barely audible to him over the heady smack of their bodies coming together. "Fuck, you feel so good."

"Uhhh..."

"You're perfect." He started pumping harder, skating his fingers across her abdomen. "So hot. So wet. Love you much. God, tell me this is real."

Right tactless of him, but he couldn't help the words from escaping. He was a selfish bastard and always had been. At that moment, the thought that this could be anything but real—that he might wake up and find that she was still buried under six feet of earth—was the sort that could break him if he dwelled. So he tried not to dwell, rather focus on the sensation of her nails digging at his back and her hot breath crashing against his skin. Her scent in his nostrils, her body slick with sweat, the little grunts he earned with every thrust, the way she rolled her hips and clenched her pussy, all the while looking at him with eyes dark with something he'd never seen there before. And she understood—at least he thought she did—for she didn't berate him for being a prat. Instead, she sighed his name like she might a prayer. "Spike. It's real."

Fuck, it really was.

He dipped his fingers over her quim, felt along where he was inside of her, before settling over her clit so the jostle of their bodies would ensure she was nudged on every thrust. He watched her eyes go wide,

her mouth fall open, relished that he was the one doing it to her, before dropping his mouth back to her throat to lap up each bead of sweat. Blessing every one for existing. Then he was traveling the length of her collarbone with his lips, moving down until her breasts were under his tongue again, kissing her nipples and willing her to fall over that last edge so he could follow.

When she came, it was a bloody revelation. He felt her tense, felt her start to shake, then she clamped around his cock and spasmed, and he couldn't hold back. She crashed and he followed, surging and spilling and falling more deeply into her than he could have ever imagined. He knew perfection now. Knew where it lived. Beneath the goodness and want of it, what he'd always thought he'd had but had never touched until this moment. Until Buffy. Until he experienced her trembling in orgasm around him, all the while knowing she was truly with him as he'd never thought she would be.

He rolled them to their sides as the last measure of coherent thought, keeping sure to remain buried within her. He never wanted to leave. Being a part of her—the privilege of being a part of her—made the entire little experimentation of his existence so fucking beyond worth it.

And he would show her. He would show her everything, and soon. She would see her sister and perhaps the Scoobies would understand. If they didn't, he would play it like she wanted. If she wanted to leave, he would take her wherever her heart desired. If she wanted to stay, he would do whatever he could to make being alive the sort of thing she never regretted.

But that could start tomorrow. Right now, they had this, and that was enough.

"I love you," Buffy whispered. "In case I didn't mention it earlier."

A smile tugged at his lips. "I love you, too."

It was morning on the one hundred and forty-ninth day. And he knew it would be the best of his bloody life. Until tomorrow, at least.

And hell, he hadn't seen that coming.

