

REQUIEM

What Dreams May Come #2



HOLLY DENISE



REQUIEM

THE WORST PART of these dreams was that he knew he was dreaming. No comfortable illusion for Spike—no, he always knew exactly where he was. And worse, where he wasn't. Where *she* wasn't. The terrain always too familiar, the steps too choreographed, the moves too anticipated. Step right, avoid that, take a swing, watch as Doc went sailing over the side of the platform, his knife clattering uselessly after him and know, *feel*, that this was the way it should have gone. That this could have been his reality if he'd been just a little bit quicker, a little cleverer. If he hadn't gone to see bloody Doc for help in finding Dawn and put him on the scent.

There was a clear path in Spike's head and it all led to the same conclusion, no matter how often he tried to rearrange it. He had gotten Buffy killed. He'd failed in keeping his promise to her and the cost had been her life.

She'd known, too. She'd known before she'd torn up those steps to go to kid sis's rescue. He'd been on the pavement, stranded halfway between conscious and passed out, the sounds of the ongoing fight trying to pull him back to where he'd known, even then, he was needed. But then Buffy had been there, running her fingers through his

hair and talking low and fast. Telling him that she was sorry, that they'd had it wrong and she wished they had more time. But they didn't.

It had been brief and sweet and devastating and, hell, perhaps all in his head. He couldn't really say, could he? He'd been a heap on the concrete. But Spike believed it had happened. There were times now when he was on the cusp of falling back into the dreams that brought both comfort and despair, when he would swear he felt her scratching his scalp. Heard the soft lull of her voice, perhaps even felt her lips as she pressed a farewell kiss across his brow. In any other circumstance, Spike might be able to believe she was haunting him, but he wasn't quite that daft even if he was more than that desperate. Buffy wouldn't linger around here, and she certainly wouldn't around him. Wherever she'd gone was the sort of place that he couldn't follow.

And that was the worst of it, he thought. Might be easier if he was the sort who could believe death was the end, goodbye and goodnight. But he wasn't—he knew there was a hereafter because souls came from somewhere, didn't they, and Buffy's would have gone on to the place where heroes went. Heaven, maybe, or the Elysian Fields of old. Wherever she was, it wouldn't be the sort of place he could follow. She was out there somewhere, waiting to be reunited with the people she loved. All except him.

The most of Buffy he'd get was this lie he told himself every night. This revisionist history in action. He was working his way down the rickety tower, mindful that every move made it creak and sway. Dawn was with him, clinging to him as much as he clung to her, whispering her thanks as he helped her navigate the looser steps. The others waited in a semicircle as they did every night, the Scoobies regarding him with unflattering shock—he'd said he'd take care of her, hadn't he?—and Buffy looking at him with so much love and happiness he felt he would burst with it. The sun was coming but there was time enough to spare for her to come near him, throw herself into his arms and snog him well and full and right there in front of her friends, uncaring what they thought or that they knew, because Dawn was safe and the day was won and she loved him. She'd wanted to tell him before they'd left her house and he'd asked her to wait, knowing it would be sweeter in the rush of victory.

And fuck, had he ever been right.

In his better version of events, Dawn squealed and threw herself into Buffy and Spike's arms, chirping happily about how she'd known it all along. That he was a much better beau than Riley or Angel—obviously—and Buffy better not screw this up.

Buffy rolled her eyes as she always did, leaned her head back to give Spike one of those searching looks he'd come to cherish over the last few weeks. No screwing up, she agreed. And he did too, because he knew that between the two of them, he was the one to watch. The one with everything to lose.

But there was still more dreaming to do, so they had to move. Race the sun, get back to Revello Drive, where Dawn insisted she wasn't tired right before conking out so hard a sodding bomb could go off without stirring her from sleep. And Buffy flashed Spike a tired smile, all warmth and gratitude and *love*, and tugged him into her room where the real celebration would begin.

This was his favorite part and also the part that hurt the most, for that knowledge was always there. That awful, unforgiving awareness that this wasn't real, that he wasn't really there and neither was she. But it was the closest he could get to her, so he took it. Every second his sleeping mind gave him was a blessing in that regard, just as much as all the seconds Buffy had spent with him when she'd been here. So he shoved that thought back and kissed his way across her collarbone, tasting skin that was salty with dried sweat and dirt, loving every breath he inhaled because it just reinforced how alive she was. Here, in this place where he could keep her. Where she was always with him, never dead, never gone, never lost.

"Spike," she whispered as he began his descent. That white shirt she'd been wearing was on the floor somewhere, her bra along with it. He ran his tongue over her nipples, groaned when she groaned and sank lower, lower, until he was on his knees, pressing kisses along her belly. Feeling the way she trembled, enjoying the sensation of her fingers in his hair, wanting more and needing to stay frozen in this moment at the same time. But the moment kept moving and so did he, dragging her slacks and her knickers down her legs in one effortless tug.

Tonight, he wanted her in his mouth when she said the words. He loved the way she looked then, her eyes wide and her lips parted and her cheeks flush with heat. She'd fist his hair and roll her hips, bucking and gasping and crying out, and it was like her love exploded out of her, a force she couldn't contain any longer.

"It's after now," she'd whimper, then gasp, throwing her head back with a long, wanton moan. "You told me I could tell you after."

He'd growl and tap her clit with his tongue. "Nothing's stoppin' you, pet."

"I love you."

"Again, Buffy. *Again.*"

She'd give it to him again. And again. He'd ask until his throat hurt and every time, she'd be there to answer.

Yeah, that's what he wanted tonight. Tomorrow, he'd take her from behind. Or maybe watch her ride him, her hair curtaining her face, her gaze intent upon his, his cock slick and pushing inside of her at a rhythm. Or maybe just cuddled up against him, her cheek on his chest, the weak sunlight streaming in through the blinds. He'd kiss her brow and she'd grin the sort of grin he felt more than he saw, her pulse ticking up as she hugged him to her and breathed it into his skin.

"I love you," she'd whisper again. Same way she did every night. "God, Spike, I love you so much."

He'd close his eyes and shudder, the words exquisite torture. "Never stop sayin' it."

She'd sit up a bit—not a lot, just enough so that she could see his face, her own bright with the love she was about to give him again. And he'd start to cry because she was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. And because she wasn't really there and neither was he. It was harder to ignore when they weren't shagging, mostly because the quiet moments with Buffy had been those he'd cherished most, when he'd known for certain that she was truly with him, not because he fucked her delirious or because she needed a hand fighting whatever baddie was making her life even harder than usual that week, but because she wanted to be. Those quiet moments had been theirs and theirs alone.

They were the hardest to replicate, too. He'd never quite managed it.

But that wasn't tonight. Tonight, he was out to forget, best he could, that he would wake up alone in a dank motel room far from the Hellmouth. So he pushed her to the edge of the bed, relishing the light giggle that peeled off her lips when she bounced on the mattress. He didn't bother pretending his gaze wasn't fixed on the sway of her breasts, and smirked when she rolled her eyes and lightly swatted at his arm before edging herself back a bit so she could spread her legs and captivate him with her slick, swollen pussy.

"Spike," she whispered, "I need you."

He groaned, knowing she knew exactly what those words did to him. "I'm right here, baby," he said, lowering himself to his knees before her. Her skin was feverish under his hands and even hotter in his mouth. Spike licked a path along her inner thigh, running his fingers along one smooth calf before hooking his grip under her knee and fitting her leg over his shoulder. "Fuck, Buffy..."

Without warning, the details—which were always splendidly vivid—became so sharp he wondered for a second if he'd been forced out of sleep. The edges of the room hardened, things that had been a little fuzzy becoming crystal clear. More of her filled his lungs as well, the scent of her arousal, the thrum of her blood, the steady pounding of her heart—all of it the pieces that made up Buffy, that had driven him out of his sodding head when she'd been alive and haunted him in death. Spike choked a sob, burying his face between her legs and digging his fingers into her thighs, desperate to hold on just a little while longer. To submerge himself in this so thoroughly he could drag it out with him when it was time to wake up. If he gripped her tight enough, she'd have no choice but to follow him back. Want him out in the waking world? Fine. But there were bloody conditions and she was nonnegotiable.

If only he could make it work like that.

"Well, this feels familiar." Her hands were back in his hair, her fingers making light paths along his scalp. "Spike?"

Fuck, even her voice sounded clearer. More like her. He wouldn't

have known to spot the difference before, but now that he heard it, it was jarring. "Right here."

"This is a dream. You're dreaming."

He frowned and glanced up, prepared for the jolt when their eyes met—if everything was sharper now, then she was ten times so, and all the more painful to look at because of it. "Don't usually care to be reminded of that until after I wake up, if it's all the same to you."

But Buffy was shaking her head, pushing him back, which was something he could safely say she'd never done before in any fantasy he'd had, living or dead. Spike blinked, his chest going tight and he didn't know why. Only it was there—that blip of hope that had no basis in rational thought, that would exist no matter how many times he lost just because he couldn't imagine a world without her in it. The impossible had happened before and would happen again, but never to him, and when it did, never in the ways he wanted most. But it was there and he couldn't help it. Not with her looking at him the way she was.

The way *Buffy* would. The real Buffy. The one he'd lost.

"It worked," she said, her voice shaking, a watery smile crossing her face. "It worked. *It worked.*"

"What are you on about, love?"

"The stone," she said, and his stomach dropped. "The moonstone. I stopped using it after we got together and a lot happened between then. I tore my room apart looking for it. I thought they'd thrown it away. The others. Or I had. But I found it and it worked."

Spike sucked in a breath so deep his lungs whined in protest. The blip of hope had become something more substantial—something large enough to swallow him whole, and he hated it. Hated its existence and its cruelty, for he knew how this went. Could see where it was headed and that if he wanted to spare himself even more heartache, now was the time to pull back.

But he didn't pull back. He couldn't. He needed to hear her say it.

"What worked?" he asked.

And she delivered.

"Spike, it's me. *Really* me. They brought me back from the dead. And you aren't here so I needed to find it. How we started—"

“Stop.”

“Stop?”

“Hard enough dreamin’ about her and knowin’ she’s not waitin’ for me out there,” Spike said in a rush, words tumbling out, filterless and free. “You’d think I’d get at least one dream where I don’t know. Where I’m not bloody lucid the entire time. But I know. I feel that she’s gone. I don’t ever *not* feel it, and as much as that hurts, it’d be worse if I didn’t. I’d lose her every time I woke up.” He supposed he was a special kind of pathetic, trying to bargain with a figment of his own head. With *himself*. And here everyone had always thought Dru was the insane one. “Can’t survive that. So please, *stop*.”

A beat, then she scooted forward on the mattress. Not listening, then. He wasn’t sure why that surprised him. Buffy never had listened to him—not well, at least. His mind was nothing if not faithful to her memory.

But fuck, it hurt. And the dreams were the one place it wasn’t supposed to hurt.

“Spike.” She cupped his cheeks and pulled him close so their foreheads were touching, so her breath crashed along his mouth, so that he could feel her trembling. “The real dream part is over. Like it was before. This here? This is real. Willow and the others did a spell. They brought me—”

“No,” he snapped, tearing away from her before she could draw him in any deeper. No matter how much he’d wished it, no matter how much he’d bloody *hoped*, he wasn’t going to do this to himself. He wasn’t going to listen to his own fucking mind make everything about what he’d lost even worse. “Just don’t. It’s hard enough seein’ you here like this. I start thinkin’ things like that—”

“It took me a while to find the moonstone,” Buffy said. She’d sprung to her feet and was approaching him the way he imagined others might approach a wounded animal, which was bloody apt, far as he was concerned. The day she’d died, he’d started bleeding, and he’d never stopped. “But I looked. I looked that first night when I got back. They didn’t tell me where you were, so I thought—”

“This isn’t real.”

“—I thought you might be dead.” Her eyes began to shine in that

way they did before she cried. He hadn't seen it all that much, but like everything else about her, he couldn't forget it. There had been the night on the back patio after her mum had passed, when she'd sobbed herself into exhaustion. Then when she'd come to the crypt following the funeral, found him drinking himself blind because he'd caught her snuggled up with Angel. After Glory had turned him into her personal knife-sharpener, Buffy had spent a good amount of time patching him up in his crypt, and though she'd tried to keep from letting him see her teary-eyed over him, there had been times the candlelight had caught her face just right. "They said you'd been gone longer than they thought," she went on. "And that... Before you left, Dawn told me you weren't eating."

Spike stared at her, his chest heaving, his mind trying to split itself in understanding just what the hell was going on. What the bloody point of this was, his own psyche turning traitor on him. And why now, after all this time. He'd had a right little routine, hadn't he? Couldn't control a lick in the waking world, but the sleeping one, the one where he got to see her every night? He got to call the shots here. Got to save her however he liked, as often as he liked. Have as many renditions of their celebration shag as he could imagine. Yeah, it was torture, and yeah, it left him feeling hollow every time he opened his eyes to the terrible reality that she only lived in his dreams, but it was better than nothing. Or maybe it wasn't, but it was a damn sight better than this.

What was the point of this, then? His mind's way of telling him to toughen up and try to move on? It had only been a hundred and fifty-four days since he'd lost her. How was he supposed to get over something like that in less than half a year? Or *ever*, for that matter?

The answer was, he wasn't. The answer was, he didn't want to. He didn't want to live in a world where the pain of not having Buffy was bearable. Where it didn't hurt every time he opened his eyes, where her absence wasn't something that threatened to consume him if he stood still long enough. He didn't want to live in a place where he had let her go. No part of him did.

"Spike," Buffy—no, not Buffy, because this *couldn't* be Buffy—said, stepping toward him again. "I really need you to hear me. I need you to *believe* me. Because I'm... They think I was in Hell. That when I

jumped, because there were all these hell dimensions, that I ended up in one of those.”

“Bollocks,” he snapped.

“What’s bollocks?”

A lot of things, but at the moment—“You, in Hell. Your friends are a load of tossers, yeah, but even they wouldn’t be that bloody thick.”

She cracked a smile that had no warmth behind it. “That’s what I would’ve thought. Joke’s on us, I guess.”

“You aren’t *gone*, Buffy. You’re *dead*. You didn’t vanish, you were just there. Lyin’ there on the bloody ground. Now you expect me to believe the Scoobies did somethin’ as daft as try to bring you back because they thought you were in *Hell*? That it worked? That you’re still... That you’re...” Spike blinked, looked away before he lost control and started blubbing. Not wanting this to turn into that kind of dream. Hating that it was, and that he had no control over it. It was his own sodding subconscious and he couldn’t get it to do what he wanted.

Because now he was thinking about it—truly. This insane notion that Buffy had been brought back, that it was even bloody possible. He’d seen some horrific things in his days, times others had tried to do the same. Hell, he’d gone to the Slayer when he’d sussed out that Dawn intended to work some mojo to bring back Joyce, strictly because he knew exactly how the play would unfold. Something that looked like her, sounded like her, walking inside her body and using her voice—something that *wasn’t* Joyce. And Buffy couldn’t have that, couldn’t survive it. She’d been barely holding together as it was. So he’d tattled and they’d had a big talk with kid sis, one that started with a lot of shouting and ended with tears and a sappy hug. Dawn had hated him for a bit after but also understood. And though it was something they’d kept between the three of them—just them—he knew well enough that the Nibblet had learned her lesson the hard way. They’d had a conversation a few days after, one in which Spike had enumerated the many ways playing with that kind of magic could turn out. If the Scoobies had been idiot enough to give it a shot, Dawn would’ve stopped them. Would have told them what she knew.

Right?

Spike’s throat tightened, doubt twisting his insides. He hadn’t seen

Dawn in a minute—not since the meeting where the lot of them had sent him out of town on this job of theirs. That was by design, too, he knew. They wanted him gone, being he was a nutter. All his tall tales about how he and Buffy had been secretly together for weeks and had planned on making the announcement the second the battle was over. That it had started because of a spell gone wonky—Willow had remained tightlipped, but he'd seen her eyes go wide with recognition—and how he'd loved the Slayer, promised to protect her sister, and was damn near certain she'd meant to tell him she loved him too before she died.

Little convenient that the Scoobies had uncovered a job only he could do right after that. If it hadn't been for the fact that doing the job would go a long ways in ensuring he kept his promise to Buffy, he'd have told the lot of them to get stuffed.

"It was dumb of me to think you'd just...believe it." Buffy—or the part of his brain doing its bloody damndest to make him think that it was Buffy—tried for another smile, though it looked more like a wince. "I don't think I would either. But I need you to believe it. I can't do this alone."

Spike's heart twisted, logic and instinct at war. They hadn't had much time together, all told. A few blissful weeks that had come to redefine his entire existence. And at some point over that stretch, it had become Pavlovian to take her into his arms anytime she betrayed the smallest bit of vulnerability—the parts of her only those she truly trusted got to see—for he'd known each time that she'd been telling him that she loved him. The words might not have been there but everything else had, and no amount of time could quash that impulse. Impossible as it was, the things she was saying, he wanted to crush her to his chest, bury his face in her hair and tell her that she didn't have to do anything alone. Promise that he'd do whatever he could, give her whatever he could, love her as best he could. This figment, echo of the woman he'd lost.

Spike lost Buffy every night. He lost her every time he saved her, every time he let himself believe that he might have actually been quick enough to pull off the impossible, so much so that time itself decided to bend to his whim and give him the chance to really do it

right this time. It had been true last night, the night before that, and all the nights streaming back to the last one they had shared together. It would be true tomorrow, too.

So what was one more loss, in the grand scheme of things? What did he have except time to waste?

"All right, love," he said thickly, not sure he'd ever hated her more than he did right then. "What's it you need me to do?"

The relief that burst through her eyes was so pure he had to bite his tongue to keep from sobbing. "Call the house. I'll pick up."

No, she wouldn't. "All right then. I'll call the house."

"Could you...do it now?"

"What?"

"Wake up and call now." Buffy drew her lower lip between her teeth. "I know it's late. Here, at least. I don't know where you are. But I don't care. As soon as you wake up, call. I need to hear you."

"Buffy—"

"You will wake up, same as I do. I-I remember that, from before. The charm Willow worked on the stone lets me make with the escape hatch anytime I like." Buffy shifted a step closer, flooding his senses anew with all things her. The scent that would remain forever branded on his psyche, even if he was starting to lose it in real time to the indignity that was an imperfect memory. Here, at least, he had it still. Had her. Even if she was about to remind him how little that meant in the real world. "Call the house. I'll pick up."

Spike shook his head. "No, you won't," he said. "You're gone."

"Trust me."

"Buffy—"

"Trust me." She ran her curled fingers along his cheek, raised up on tiptoe to brush a kiss across his lips. "Trust me, Spike."

That was the bitch of it. He did trust her. Implicitly. He had from the start. That part had never been the problem. It was what came after that was—the knowledge that no matter how much he trusted her, he couldn't trust himself a lick. He'd open his eyes and discover he'd spun another lie, only this one he'd been pathetic enough to dream could be truth.

He'd do what she said just to prove it to himself that his brain was a right bastard.

Then carry on trying to find a way forward in a world that didn't have her in it.



EVEN STILL, HE ALMOST DIDN'T DO IT. MITE RIDICULOUS, REALLY, making good on a promise he'd been fed from the ghost of a dead woman.

But when Spike awoke just as she'd said he would—instantly, and feeling like had just seen her—he knew he had to. Insane as it was, he had to hear it. What he planned to say to Willow or the Bit when he rung them at bloody four in the morning was another matter. He'd think of something. He always did.

So, he switched on the lamp and sat up, blinking against the sudden brightness that flooded the shabby room he'd rented for the week. That much had been the witches' idea—rented rooms rather than setting up camp in some cemetery. Easier to get ahold of him that way, or so they'd told him. Though no one from Sunnydale had bothered to reach out to him at all, which he took to mean everything was status bloody quo, and there wasn't much he had to say to them to begin with.

Even still, that didn't keep him from following their script. Motels rather than graveyards, vamp hours rather than the human schedule he'd taken to keeping when Buffy had been alive. The sunlight battling the curtains for entrance now was bright enough he didn't even need his preternatural senses to know it was mid-morning, but those senses were there. All parts of him were there. All parts of him insisted on working, surviving just to exist, all in raw defiance of this damn near-constant pain.

The pain he was about to make worse, and all because he'd told a figment of his bloody imagination that he'd do something. And if there was one thing Spike did, it was keep his promises. Even when it hurt. Maybe especially when it hurt.

He tried to ignore the way his hand shook when he reached for the

phone, cursing himself for nerves that would amount to nothing. It took a minute to figure out how to place an outgoing call—he didn't think he'd ever had occasion to bother with it before—but then he had all the right numbers punched in and the line clicked, barely giving half a ring before it picked up.

"Spike?"

He drew in a sharp breath, so sharp his lungs actually whined in complaint. For a second, he wondered if he'd just snapped entirely—the final break of a heart that couldn't face another day waking up without her, his body tired of cannibalizing itself with grief. That it was her voice wasn't a novelty in itself. There were times he thought he could hear her calling his name, though never quite so clearly, and never over something as mundane as a bloody phone. Still, he'd been without her for a hundred and fifty-four days now, surviving only by virtue of a promise he'd made and couldn't—wouldn't—break, even if the rest of him was in pieces. That he might start hearing things, impossible things, didn't seem quite so out there.

But it wasn't just her voice. It was the cadence of her breaths, which were as unique as a bloody fingerprint. It was the way her heart thumped, faint though it was through the line, but there all the same. It was the dull sound of traffic outside and the hum of the telly from the next room over. It was all the visceral reminders of a world that wasn't confined to dreams, where there were tells grounding him to reality.

Buffy was on the phone.

Buffy.

"Spike?" she said again, tentative this time. "Please say someth—"

"How long?" The word came out half a sob, half a scream, his eyes stinging with cold tears. "Buffy?"

A beat, then a long sigh sounded through the phone. Buffy breathing air in, Buffy breathing air out, Buffy bloody *breathing*.

"How long?" he asked again, his voice so rough he barely understood what he was saying. "Buffy—"

"A...a week," she replied, and he could tell she was crying too. His girl was crying and talking and breathing and *alive* and he was halfway across the bloody planet, unable to do a sodding thing about it. Unable

to touch her, smell her, crush her to his chest and breathe her in. Fill his senses with an overdose of all things *Buffy*. Buffy, who had been back from the dead for a fucking week. A *week* and no one had told him. “It took me that long to find the stone,” she went on, her voice a bit wobbly. “I was worried someone had thrown it away. Or I had. We didn’t need it after...”

Spike pressed his eyes closed. He hadn’t thought of the stone more than a handful of times since she’d jumped, and not really since the first night when he’d about torn her bloody room apart looking for it. Convinced, somehow, that if he found it, he would see her again. Whatever magic Willow had used to give it power would reach into the beyond, put him close to her, maybe all the way to the other side, and he wouldn’t have to worry with things like promises made or living without her anymore.

But he hadn’t found it. He hadn’t had time. The others had stormed into her room before he could overturn much of anything and dragged him out, ignoring his struggles and his protests just as he’d ignored the chip’s answering rush of pain whenever he’d thrashed a little too hard. What the fuck did his head matter these days if she wasn’t around?

It hadn’t been until he’d seen Dawn that he’d remembered in full. And that had been that, for he *had* made a promise and he would keep it even if it sodding killed him. Which he’d started to suspect it might, but he hadn’t cared all that much—just enough to stay alive so that he could die with a clear conscience.

But now...

God, *now*. He had no idea what to say—where to begin. All the things he’d built up over the last hundred and fifty-four days, all the conversations he’d had with her ghost, the list of promises and declarations he’d kept running on a loop in his head blinked out of existence. That she was there on the other end of the line, holding the phone in her warm hand above the ground, was incongruent with the world as he knew it but damn, this was no dream. He knew what those felt like.

“A week,” he said at last, his voice thick. “You’ve been back a week and no one told me.”

No surprise there, he supposed, but it still bloody stung.

"They wouldn't tell me, either," Buffy said softly. "Where you were. I asked. They've been...weird about it."

"Bloody typical."

"Where are you, Spike?"

It took him a beat to remember. There were so many more important things to worry about. "Casablanca, last I checked," he replied, pressing the heel of his palm to his brow as though that would help push the reasons why more quickly to the surface. Then, in a rush, it was all there. Every call he'd made since he'd lost her, every decision he'd been forced into, every argument he'd waged and lost or won in equal measure. And he couldn't help himself—it all came out, hurried and unchecked. He needed her to know all of it. "I'm doin' what I said I would. Protecting her. Makin' sure no one could come at her again. Willow worked up this mojo, see. Wagered that the sodding Knights of Bollocks wouldn't stop comin' after the Nibblet just because the danger was gone. Never knew how many of them there were, did we? So the witches got out their herbs and came up with a solve for it."

Willow had explained the full thing to him once—how it worked, the properties involved, and the steps he'd need to take to make sure the spell was effective each time he did it. Not that Spike had had much occasion to follow those steps, seeing as the knights that had been so keen to hunt down Dawn had bloody well scattered to the point he would have doubted they'd ever existed if he hadn't seen them with his own two eyes. Plus, the consequences of this particular spell going wrong hadn't seemed all that terrible. Waking up one day not knowing who or where he was, not knowing that the worst thing that could ever happen to him had already happened, not having to live with the hole that was her absence—all of that sounded downright pleasant at times.

Except, of course, that not missing Buffy would mean he wouldn't remember knowing her, and as much as that might spare him pain, he couldn't think of a worse fate. That he got to grieve Buffy meant he'd had her in his life, and that was something he'd trade for nothing. Even if it made waking up every day bloody unbearable.

But that wasn't his world anymore, was it? She was on the other

end of the line, separated from him by several thousand miles of wire and cable. Breathing into his ear. Saying his name. Being alive.

"Can come home now, though," he said hoarsely, wishing so much that just saying the words could make it so. "I'll leave tomorrow, soon as I can—"

"No," she replied, and he would have whimpered like a sodding pup if her voice were even a little less pained. If it weren't clear she was saying that because she felt that she had to, not that she wanted to. "No, I... What you're doing... It's important. I'd forgotten these knights even existed. They did tell me that much—Willow, I mean, and Xander. Not where you were but what you were doing. Like I said, they've been weird."

Spike pressed his eyes closed, shuddering. "Probably my fault, that."

"Huh?"

"They know about us. Or I wager they do now, at least. Didn't believe me when I tried to tell them before, but if you're askin' about me and makin' like you really care, it might have their heads—"

"Oh, yeah." A short laugh sounded through the line, surprising and delighting him in equal measure. "They know about us, all right. Everything was muddled in the beginning and I didn't remember that they *didn't* know. I kept telling them I wanted you and not getting it when they were confused."

"Fuck, Buffy..."

"But the knights... What you're doing to help keep Dawn safe... It's good. We don't need any more crusades."

He nodded despite the screaming in his head, the bone-deep need to just say *bugger it* and start closing the distance between him and Buffy now. It would take a minute to figure out—coordinating global travel was easier than it had been even a few decades ago, but there were still considerations that he had to make that would make time seem to bloody crawl. Dru had never been one for airfare, both not trusting what kept a plane in motion, never mind in flight, and having the rather practical concern about daylight. Leave the ground and lose your options. Travel by sea had been her preference, and his too by

default. But fuck, he'd hop on a plane tomorrow if Buffy asked it of him, sod the sun. Sod everything.

"I just needed you to know," she went on. "I thought maybe if you didn't know I was alive, you'd never come back. After Dawn was protected, you'd just...stay away."

"Never," Spike swore. God, the possibility that she could have ever thought such a thing made all of him ache. "Till the end of the world, remember? As long as the world kept spinning, I'd be there. Standin' between her and whatever thought it was owed a good bloody day. Only reason I'm not there now is I wagered this was the best way to protect her—go after the threat we know is there. I was always coming back, Buffy. Always. The Nibbles's gonna die of old bloody age, surrounded by her sprogs and their sprogs and *their* sprogs. Only way that doesn't happen is if I'm dust."

The line went quiet, save for her deep breaths. And he relished each and every one of them. Their weight, their shape, how he could picture her now, holding the phone to her ear as her chest rose and fell. Pumping her with air, with life. This girl who had been below the earth, lost to him forever, was alive and breathing, and he wanted to see her so badly he ached.

Then her voice was filling his ear again. Soft and strong and clear and her. *Buffy*.

Fuck, it really was her.

"I had something I wanted to tell you," she said. "I do remember that. Right before we left for the fight. You said we needed to wait until we won."

Spike sniffed, wiped at his eyes. Yeah, he'd wanted to wait. Had seemed important at the time—like it'd mean more after the world didn't end. Christ, but he was a thick git. "I remember."

"Well, better late than never?"

The tentative hold he had on himself threatened to shatter. "Buffy..."

"But not now. I still want to tell you, but I want to look at you when I do. And I can't do that if you stay away when you're done."

"I was always comin' back, pet."

"Good. Just...do it fast, okay?" She inhaled, the sound shaky. "What

you're doing is important and I want you to make sure it gets done, but I also really, really want you here." A pause. "I *need* you here."

He pressed his eyes closed, his jaw going tight. "You're killin' me."
"Sorry."

"Don't be. Best death I've ever had." Spike forced out a breath and opened his eyes again. All this time having conversations with himself, keeping hold of the things he'd tell her if he had the chance, the times he'd wanted to reach for her but she hadn't been there—all of it was pressing down on him at once, threatening to drag him under, his mind and heart overwhelmed in equal measure. It was real, he knew, but not fully, and he knew it wouldn't be until he could breathe her in. Until she was standing right in front of him, looking at him with those warm eyes the color of the earth, and he could touch her. Feel her softness and her strength beneath his fingertips, savor the echo of her heart-beat, and enjoy the sensory experience that was Buffy Summers. But for now, this would be enough. It had to be. "I love you," he said, smiling his first genuine smile in what felt like ages. "There've been times recently I wish I didn't for how much I've missed you, but I can't help it. Could never stop. I love you, Buffy. I will until I'm dust."

She made a strangled sound that was both pain and elation—he knew because he felt it too. "Find the knights," she said. "Find them and protect her and come home."

"I will."

"I know you will."

And she did. He heard it in her voice, her words, that same belief that had been there toward the end. It had come on slowly, so slowly it hadn't been until after her death that he'd appreciated it. At some point over the weeks he'd been able to call her his, Buffy had started to trust. To believe. To rely on him as more than muscle, more than someone she could strong-arm into doing some good through threats or bribery. She'd kept turning to him and he'd been determined to meet her every time. Not to prove anything to her, just to be available. Do what needed doing. Be what she needed him to be, whatever that was.

The faith she had in him now, the same that she'd had in him then, had been how he'd known she loved him, words or not.

But hell, he wanted the words. And he agreed with her—he wanted her to give them to him when he could see her and more than see her.

Until then, he wasn't sure he'd fully believe she was truly real.



MAYBE IT WAS BETTER THIS WAY.

Maybe it was better that he was nowhere near those so-called friends of hers.

Maybe it was better that *she* was nowhere near *him* until he figured out how the fuck he was supposed to balance being elated beyond bloody belief that she was alive again with his fury at what had been done to her.

He'd known it, but her friends hadn't. They'd come knocking on the door to paradise and dragged Buffy from eternal rest, kicking and screaming back into a world that had never deserved her.

They'd brought her back to him, yeah, but at what bloody price?

That question and its answer went to immediate war with the part of him that was well and truly soulless, the part that didn't give a fuck how or why it had happened because it *had* happened and she was back. What was a little human suffering compared to the knowledge that the woman he loved was alive and he would get to see and hold and touch and kiss and shag and love her, love her, the way they'd planned before she'd died. Sure, she'd been ripped from Heaven, but Heaven was getting her anyway, right? Until then, the Pearly Gates could bloody wait. This was Spike's time with her and he wouldn't be cheated of it.

Spike didn't much care for *that* part of him and he knew Buffy didn't either. So he tried to keep it at bay, not wanting her to catch a glimpse of it. She didn't need any reminders of the monster he was, didn't need to shoulder that burden along with all she was already carrying. Though it was there every night when he'd slip into his dreams and find her waiting, that unbridled joy of seeing her, of knowing it *was* her, and he was probably a fool to think she hadn't noticed it as well.

If she did, though, she didn't mention it. And she didn't censor

herself, either. The world had been a hard enough place to live in the first time around. The second, knowing what came after, made it nearly unbearable. More than that, she felt detached, broken away from the life she'd been living before, the friends who had loved her so much they hadn't been able to let her go, even the sister she'd died to protect. What she felt for Spike, too, was muted in ways she hated, because she had the memory of how it had been before and didn't know how to get back there. She knew she loved Dawn and her friends, knew that her feelings for Spike hadn't changed, but they were distant and unreachable, as though her soul had overshot the life she'd been resurrected to resume and didn't know how to make its way back. Even seeing Giles hadn't helped all that much—she'd acted relieved and grateful, but she also didn't know how to be either of those things.

"I want to feel again," she'd whispered, curled up beside him, it all feeling real enough to temper the voice that demanded he give up this stupid bloody quest and make it back to the girl who needed him. He hadn't appreciated that before, how the dream magic had worked—how it mimicked the waking world with such precision a man could fool himself into believing it was the real thing. There was clarity here that regular dreams lacked, and everything was sharper. The details of her room, the posters on the wall, the knickknacks scattered across her dresser, the way her naked skin felt against his, even the texture of her hair. The dreams they'd shared before hadn't had this much definition, but then the *where* hadn't mattered in the past. The *where* had only started to matter after she'd jumped, and the fantasies hadn't been just about shagging her, but saving her and coming home. Saving her and being with her for real, in the life they were supposed to share. "I want it so much."

Spike had kissed her shoulder, asked if she felt that, dream or not. She'd said yes. He'd kissed the hollow of her throat, asked if she felt that. *Yes*. Then across her collarbone—*yes*—and up her neck to her earlobe, and she'd felt that too. Felt it when he closed his mouth over hers, when he rolled her under him, when he wished away their clothing and slid inside of her. She'd felt that and more, her legs around his waist, leveraging him against her as he pumped and thrust and felt her tighten around him, sobbing softly into his skin, asking for more

and more and more and crying harder when he gave it. Digging her nails into his shoulders before biting into his flesh with enough force to draw blood.

She said she could feel his love for her in the way he moved, the way he looked at her and kissed her. And feeling it then gave her the hope that she would be able to feel it all again someday in full—not in snippets stolen in dreams or fragments of memory, but all of it. The parts of her that *hadn't* felt finished when she'd made the jump. The things to live for, whole volumes of her story she'd felt were still being told, and a drive to tell it. She remembered wanting to come home after everything was behind them and begin anew. See where the next step led, and the one after that, and the one after that. And that was something Spike had given her. Something Buffy had carried with her and grieved in those brief seconds before she'd hit the current that had taken her life.

The hardest part of living was putting on a happy face for everyone else. For Buffy being Buffy, she'd decided to bear the weight of what she'd lost all on her own. Not to let the others know what their magic had cost her, beyond the ghostly hitchhiker that had come as part of the bargain—the one that had tried to off her so it could take her place. Spike told her that she didn't owe them a single sodding thing, least of all her happiness or her gratitude, and she'd said she knew that but there was no point in causing them pain. There was nothing to be gained by telling them the truth.

"There is if it's hurtin' *you*, baby," he'd replied, tightening his arms around her. They'd lain on her bed, the place he still came in his dreams, Buffy curled around him, her wet face pressed to his bare chest.

"But they didn't mean to hurt me," she'd whispered back. "Not like telling them would."

Spike couldn't give a damn if it hurt her mates and hadn't been shy about saying so. Way he figured it, they'd earned whatever they got. And Buffy needed *someone* there if she was insisting that he not come home until the knights were all handled. Someone who could be there for her during the day, talk to her when he couldn't, hold her in something other than dreams. The thought was the sort to gnaw and grow

and gnaw some more, until it was all-consuming, both the visceral desire to be what she needed and to ensure if he wasn't that she had someone who was. Someone she trusted as much as he thought—*hoped*—she trusted him.

On the second or third night, he thought he might have gotten his wish. Though, true to form, it was the monkey's paw variety. Someone to be there for her, all right. Someone she trusted. Someone who *wasn't* him.

"I saw Angel."

It was the first thing she said when the Buffy who was memory sparked to the sort of life he had come to associate with her arrival. Always a bit jarring, that. Going from shades of a girl to the girl herself. But now that he'd watched it a few times, Spike wasn't sure how it was he hadn't noticed it right off when it had first happened. The Buffy who lived in his mind was a bloody good approximation—looked and sounded like her all right, even when she was taking the mickey out of him. Rolling her eyes, shooting off with that brilliant mouth of hers, teasing him with bits and pieces of the new things he learned each day. But then she would pause and frown, shake her head and when she looked at him, it would really be her. No longer a projection, just *there*.

And tonight, with news that she had dashed off with her former.

Spike inhaled as though he'd taken a blow to the gut. Hell, it felt like he had. At once, he was bombarded with a slew of ugly resentments and bitter feelings he'd done his best to keep buried, and he wasn't strong enough to fight them back. Stumbling across Buffy in Angel's arms at her mother's graveside, hearing the low rumble of their conversation, how intimate and cozy they had sounded. How it had taken almost everything in him to keep from storming forward and just plunging a stake through Angel's over-large, exposed back on the hope that maybe then, the big sod's shadow wouldn't dwarf him wherever he went. But then remembering how broken Buffy had been over the last couple of days—not only that, remembering, himself, what it had felt like in the aftermath of losing his mum. How he hadn't felt open to mourning her properly because of what he was and the company he kept. Because he'd been the reason she was dead in the

first place. How he'd have given anything to have been able to really sit with her death as a man should, and how Dru had cackled madly anytime she caught him reflecting on the subject.

So he hadn't staked Angel, no matter how much the wanker deserved it.

Spike didn't recall all of what he'd said when she'd come to the crypt afterward, only that a lot of it had been muffled and made him feel perhaps more vulnerable than he had since he'd crawled his way of his own grave. And Buffy had done what she shouldn't have had to do—told him it was all right, that Angel was gone, that he wasn't what she wanted. That she was where she wanted to be and who she wanted to be with.

Even if he hadn't been able to fully believe it, he'd loved her for saying so. Hated that he'd put her in a place where she thought she had to worry more about him than tending to her own pain.

Now he had a chance to do it over. Do it the way he should have the first time. If he'd sworn to stand by while Buffy leaned on a man he loathed to help her process her loss once, then he'd bloody well stick to it now. No matter how much it hurt—no matter how much worse it was this time, being half a bloody world away from her.

"Yeah?" he forced himself to say, his voice like sandpaper. He cleared his throat but doubted that did much to make it better.

If Buffy noticed, she didn't let it show. "Yeah. He found out I wasn't dead and wanted to see me. We met at this place between Sunnydale and LA." She licked her lips then raised her gaze to his. "It wasn't... It was weird."

"Weird?"

"The entire way there, I thought I'd tell him. Just...unload it all. Let him know about Heaven and how hard everything is right now. Even tell him about you."

Spike breathed out in a rush. "Did you?"

But he knew, even before she shook her head. Buffy had never been good at keeping things from him. Not talking about what was on her mind, sure, she was a bloody natural at that. But tucking away how she felt wasn't her strength. He remembered her telling him that she thought it was—or that she had stopped feeling things the way she

should, if not altogether, following her mum's death. Never putting it together that the reason she kept all inside was she'd gotten a lesson at just how quickly her feelings could be weaponized. Poured her bloody heart out and gotten it trampled for her efforts. Fool her once, and all that.

"I don't even know why," Buffy said, wrapping her arms around herself. "Except... I dunno, I thought maybe he wouldn't get it. Or it just didn't feel right. We're not in each other's lives anymore, and that's not something he should just get to know about me." Her mouth twitched. "The problems I went to Angel for seem so small now. My life was... I hesitate to use the word, but here I go. It was *simpler* then. It's just not now and to make him get that, he'd have to... I don't *need* him to get it. And what was he going to do, anyway? Pat my back, tell me how much that sucks and he'll always be there for me right before he hits the road back to LA?"

It was times like this that Spike knew, unequivocally, that he was a masochist. The right thing to do would be to nod and mutter something commiserative, let her know he understood. Not make it about him or his own bloody insecurities—but that wasn't what he did, because under it all he was still a bad, selfish man whose knowledge of what was right was obscured by his own needs and petty self-doubt. And whatever she had to tell him wouldn't be the sort of thing he wanted to hear, but bugger if that slowed him down a lick. It was Buffy, wasn't it? Buffy talking about the man Spike had spent the better part of his life failing to measure up to. There was no way he could leave that alone.

So, before the Buffy that lived in his head, serving as his litmus test for what was right and what wasn't, could speak her piece, he heard himself blurt, "That what you want? Angel?"

She furrowed her brow. "What?"

"All things bein' equal, do you—"

"Did you just hear me? I said it was weird and we're not in each other's lives anymore."

"But if you could—"

"I *can*," Buffy shot back, stretching the word out. "There's no apocalypse going on. No reason I couldn't just up and move to LA, take

Dawn with me. Hell, that might be easier in the long run. Mom's bills are piling up and no one seems to have had any plan in mind for handling them. Meanwhile, Angel has this whole hotel with a bunch of empty rooms, and I could have my pick if I wanted. What exactly is keeping me in Sunnydale? Patrol? Willow and the others managed all summer keeping the Hellmouth under wraps. Did you know she's gotten so powerful she can pretty much just dust a vampire on sight? Feeling super valuable over here. She and Tara have this routine down pat that makes what I do look... I can't even think of an analogy, I'm *that* useless."

She huffed a little laugh that bloody well broke his heart. That made him feel like even more of a git than he was already. Fuck, he'd done it again. Different scenario, same choices. Wasn't he a prize? "Slayer, you could never be—"

"She says she's gonna scale back, but she just got so used to doing it that she pretty much has patrol handled for me now," Buffy rambled on, not pausing for breath—reacting like she hadn't heard him at all. "So yes, I could take Dawn and just move to LA and Angel would have to put me up because he said he'd help however he could. But I don't know him anymore. I'm not—not *that* person anymore, either. I wasn't when he was here after Mom died and I'm definitely not now. That girl had a different life *and* a different death. What I felt then... It feels like it belongs to someone else. I know it doesn't, but... It's who I was and who I'm not anymore. Also, I think it's kinda crummy to go live with your ex when you're in love with someone else."

Everything that had been mounting, ready to pour out, blanked out of his mind in half a sodding second. "When you're what?"

"No," Buffy replied bluntly, her eyes flaring. "I'm not saying it again. Not until we're face-to-face."

And she looked so much like herself in that moment—the Buffy he remembered from before, the one who had jumped, in all her stubborn, brassy glory—that it took everything he had not to break. Especially not now. Bugger *waiting*, she'd said the words. She'd said them and he'd heard them. This thing he'd known, or hoped, for months now coming to life much the way she had. He'd waited too long to hear it, spent too many nights cursing himself for not letting her say it

before the big battle. If this was the way he'd hear it, then he bloody well wasn't going to fold like a ninny.

Only then the words registered, and his heart fell. "But you *did* say it," Spike argued, perhaps a mite more desperate than he would have liked, but god, he couldn't help himself. "Just now. I heard you. Hardly see how it matters when you say it a second time, since—"

"Spike, you're the one who had this whole rule about not telling you until after the apocalypse. I followed that. You'll follow this." She paused, some of the fire beginning to fade. Her lower lip gave a telling wobble and she shifted her eyes away. "I don't want to say it and never see you again."

"Never see me again? Slayer—"

"You're in freaking Casablanca right now, hunting down knights that might want my sister dead. You're sleeping during the day—"

"Not exactly novel, that."

"But if the knights found out, they could come at you while you're sleeping. And don't pretend that it wouldn't work because we *both* know what a heavy sleeper you are." Buffy shook her head, her voice growing thick. "Ever since I realized that, I've worried every night that I'm going to put the stone on my head and nothing will happen. I dunno if that's how it would be, how I would know..."

Spike was moving before he could stop himself, cupping the back of her head to bring her mouth to his. And she went as she always did, the tension in her body going lax, all of her melting into him with a soft little mewl. There wasn't much anymore in the world that surprised him, but everything that did was inexorably tied to Buffy Summers. If it wasn't that he loved her, it was that she might fancy him too. If it wasn't having the chance to be with her outside of dreams, it was having her come to his rescue after he got nabbed by some demented hellgod. If it wasn't the bitter ecstasy of knowing she was alive again, it was that she spent any of her time worrying about him.

It was in the way she kissed him now, all desperate hunger and more than that. How much of herself she gave while not realizing it. Not seeing how her every action, every look she gave him, every smile, every tear or snuffle and everything in between told him that she loved him in a language that did more talking than words could ever hope.

He needed to remember that. As much as he loved the words, as much as he wanted them, this was better.

"I swear it, Slayer," he rasped when he pulled away. "I'm comin' home. Just gotta do this first, don't I?"

Say the word, though, and I won't. Say the word and this bloody scavenger hunt is over.

But she didn't say the word, and he didn't expect her to. That would make her someone other than Buffy, and Buffy was the woman he loved.

Rather, she nodded, clutching at his shoulders, her grip as firm even if her voice shook. "Yeah. Just...try not to take too long, okay?"

He'd already taken too long by his estimation. He should've been there for her when she'd clawed her way to freedom. He should've been the one to tend to her bruised and bleeding fingers, should have leaped between her and the otherworldly wanker that had hitched a ride back. He should have beaten the tar out of the Scoobies, chip or no bloody chip, for doing something so careless that could have easily gone wrong. There was no limit to his *should-haves*.

"As fast as I can," he swore into her hair. "I promise."



TWO HUNDRED AND THIRTEEN DAYS. THAT WAS HOW LONG HE WAS on the prowl before he found a lead—the sort that actually led somewhere real. All it took was to stop searching for the bloody Knights of Byzantium and *start* searching for the Order of Dagon. Turned out secret societies dedicated to an unholy crusade were a little more difficult to sniff out than a bunch of righteous monks. And finding the monks' place of worship—tucked inside Jerusalem under the guise of a different religion—meant finding their library. Texts on the Key, on its powers and abilities, early drafts of the spell they'd used to give her human form, the complicated magicks that had built memories around her, and records on the knights who wanted it destroyed, all at Spike's fingertips.

The general had been lying when he'd boasted of thousands—an army that would never stop coming, no matter how many were slain.

Spike couldn't say he was surprised at that, as exaggerating strength and influence was one of the key tactics to being a halfway decent villain. In fact, the bulk of the knights' numbers had been mowed down by Glory outside that abandoned gas station. Whatever was left was almost certainly in Rome, according to the monks' notes, attempting to rebuild what they'd lost if they hadn't just scattered to the bloody wind.

But he had to know, didn't he? And so he made arrangements to head to Italy, which wasn't as easy as it had been once upon a time. Yeah, he could flash his fangs, and yeah, that did a decent enough job a lot of the time, but when push came to shove, he couldn't follow through on any threat beyond posturing and sooner or later, someone would notice. In the interim, he honed his pick-pocketing skills, took on the odd paying gig from other demons who were in political turf wars and couldn't take someone out without it becoming the sort of nightmare the Slayer would have to get involved with. But he did it all. Of course he did. He had a goal in mind now. One with a firm destination and a path home, and that was all he cared about.

Meanwhile, his nights were full of Buffy. It was bittersweet, hearing about life in Sunnydale from a distance, not knowing how his being there would make it better yet still convinced it would. That he could scare off the bint sniffing around Dawn and threatening to take her away, help Buffy scrape up the dosh to keep the bloody bill collectors at bay, keep Harris from summoning demons that turned the whole town into a Broadway production, especially when the cost had nearly been Buffy's life. That one had taken a bit to walk off—the knowledge of how close he'd come to losing her again before having her, that he *would* have had she not snapped herself out of her little death dance before she had a chance to go up in flames.

It hadn't been easy, to hear her tell it. She'd felt what was waiting for her if she let the music build to its crescendo. A heat that started from within, tingling at first but only at first. Then flames had licked her heels and she'd known, *sensed*, that if she kept moving she would die. And she hadn't wanted that—hadn't wanted to die.

"I didn't know it," Buffy had said. They had been on her bed—or the dream-world version of her bed—just talking. For as often as they

made love, they spent even more nights like this. It was the only chance they had, after all. She'd been tucked against him, her back to his chest, drawing lines along his arms with her fingertip in that mindless way of hers, feeding him her honesty as she always did. Even when it hurt. "Not...not really. Not until then. When I realized it was going to happen and how. I looked at Dawn—she had on this demon child-bride dress that was all with the creepy—and it was like looking at her on the tower all over again. That moment when she...when she saw what I was going to do. But this time there was a choice. If I chose to live, the world wouldn't end and I didn't have to give anything up. And I knew I'd... I knew you'd be waiting for me, too. So I thought of you, and Dawn, and somehow I got my legs to stop spinning. Then it all came out that Xander was the one who'd summoned the wacky demon and said demon was less enthused about making Xander his child-bride, so he let him off the hook and everything went back to normal. Except they know, now. All things Heaven kinda came lalalala-ing out of me before I made with the Fred Astaire act."

Spike had snorted, pressed a kiss to the side of her head, and wondered idly about the body count Xander had racked up with that little deal. But he hadn't said that. Hadn't wanted her thinking about anything but the fact that she was glad to be alive. That was something worth celebrating.

The following night, though, she'd come to him all distraught, telling him that Rupert was insisting on leaving again for reasons that made bugger-all sense. He'd been quick to hop a plane when he'd learned she was back among the living, but—to hear her tell it—thought she wasn't managing the business of being alive as nobly as she should. Even after learning about the whole Heaven stint, and his answer was to take off. The one person Buffy had there, aside from Dawn, who hadn't ripped her out of paradise, whose job it was to prepare her to face monsters and demons and vampires and death itself, but who found *life* too much of a bloody hassle. Spike had fortunately been a day or so shy of hopping on a freighter to Rome, so he'd had the time to hunt down a phone booth, punch in the number for the Sunnydale Inn and scream his lungs raw at the watcher for being so thick and selfish as to abandon the girl when she needed him most.

In the rather considerable history of conversations he'd had with Rupert Giles, they'd had their fair share of disagreements. None had ever been like this. First with Giles's surprise at hearing from Spike—apparently the going theory was he'd decided his job was too taxing or he'd gotten distracted trying to get the chip out again—and then the man's ire at being lectured by a soulless thing that had once tried to kill the whole lot of them. Spike had told him where he could stick that attitude and had spat out some poncy metaphor about birds and broken wings and how they didn't get better by being booted from the nest. Then he'd cracked and told Rupert what Buffy had told him, the bit about how she'd only just realized she didn't want to die again, and how bloody careless it would be to leave her then when she didn't remember how to fly just yet. And somewhere in the middle of the conversation, the light above Rupert's noggin had flicked back on and he'd blurted the obvious.

"You're in love with her."

"Yeah," Spike had spat, his grip on the phone tightening to the point where the plastic cracked under his fingers. "Been tellin' you that for months now."

"And...the rest was true, as well? You were together?"

"We *are* together, you self-righteous old sod. Willow cooked up a little sleep-aid for the Slayer last year with a catch. Spell went wrong, as it always does, and instead of ringing up the soldier, Buffy got me instead. The thing's juice still works. Get to talk to her every night. Which means I get to hear how bloody broken she is and how much she needs someone to see that she needs help. Can't be me, not until the job's done. Can't be her mates 'cause they're the ones who did this to her in the first place. Can't be Dawn 'cause kid sis doesn't need this on her. Has to be you if you're half the father to her that you think you are. Personally, I don't think you have what it takes. It's on you to prove me wrong."

He'd slammed the phone onto the receiver before the watcher could summon a reply, shaking with something beyond fury and hoping he hadn't just made things worse. Not sure how he could but very sure not to get too complacent in thinking he couldn't. Nothing with the Slayer was ever straightforward.

The next time he saw her in dreams, though, Buffy greeted him by tackling him into a hug. One that started at the foot of the tower—she had just come down from having saved Dawn again—and ended with her on top of him in her bed, pulling kisses off his lips and muttering her thanks into his mouth on repeat.

Giles was staying. He'd apologized for being a git and sworn that he would be there as the support she needed. He'd let her lean on him as she found her footing. And all because he'd listened to Spike.

And as it turned out, Rupert *would* have left at exactly the right time for everything to go pear-shaped. Willow had apparently gotten herself hooked on dark mojo, causing a car accident that had nearly landed Dawn in the hospital. Steamed as Spike was to hear about it, the entire ordeal evidently served as a wake-up call for both witch and watcher, and a load of things started happening at once. Willow and Tara, who were on the outs but trying to make things work, shipped off to England to visit a coven that had helped Giles out in the past. In the meantime, the watcher moved into Revello Drive to help out with living expenses. He had also been there as the voice of reason when three human would-be Big Bads were unmasked as being behind a series of annoyances that had occurred to and around the Slayer, phoning the police to turn in one, who had folded like a cheap table and given up the other two without anything resembling a fight.

"He said it was payback for making Giles buy his swimsuit calendar two years ago," Buffy had told Spike, grinning like a little she-devil. Looking more and more like herself every time he saw her, and leaving him to wonder how much of that bled over in the real world. If he was seeing Buffy as she was or as she wanted him to see her—if she was consciously projecting, if she had any control over that at all. "All I can say is, god bless that swimsuit calendar and the grudge it inspired. Jonathan and his friends are going away for a long, long time."

Spike had been tempted to ask about the story behind the swimsuit calendar, but decided, at the moment, he had better things to do with his mouth than talk.



HE'D CHASED THE KNIGHTS TO ROME BASED ON SOME SCRIBBLING he'd found in the abandoned house of worship of an extinct group of monks. Suffice to say, Spike hadn't had much in the way of expectations that his hunt would actually yield results. So much of his searching had been showing up in places based on bits and pieces of rumor from unreliable sources, only to find the lead had been rubbish or the location had been long abandoned. The first time he'd done it, he'd had a plan—one he'd worked to stick to, no matter how dull it was. After all, the chip in his head didn't give him much option. Just walk in, verify the information was good, trigger the mojo that Red had worked up, and make tracks before it went off.

But that time had been a bust, as had every time before it. While the Rome lead had a tad more promise, considering the source, experience had left him jaded.

So no one was more surprised than Spike when he showed up and found the missing knights. Gabby bunch, too, or at least enough to confirm that the monks' records had been accurate and they were the last of the last. Once they'd sussed out why he was asking, he hadn't had much time to think, let alone react—just dove a hand into his duster pocket and pulled out the talisman Willow had enchanted, muttered the incantation he had long memorized, chucked it, and run like all hell was chasing him. Would serve him bloody right if the thing *did* go wonky, all those times he'd wished it might blank him out too. But not now—he had far too much to lose and a slayer to get home to.

The next part was easy enough, as Spike *had* been paying attention to cargo freighters and the like to plan the quickest route back to Sunnydale. Quick being a relative term—it was still more than a bloody month at sea, but at least he knew she was at the end of it. After doubling back to make sure the job was done proper and the knights' minds were nice and wiped, Spike had rushed to make the necessary arrangements. Found a freighter heading the right way, found the right sort of bloke who could be bought, and in doing so, found himself a nice, inconspicuous corner where could bunker down for the next stretch.

"A month?" Buffy had asked when he told her—which happened to

be after it had been too long to change course. "A month. Seriously? You couldn't just... I don't know, hop on a plane?" She'd held up a hand before he could answer, wrinkling her nose. "I know. I know. But a girl can pout."

He didn't blame her. Patience already not being a thing he was known for, the prospect of staring down a month at sea with nothing to do but count down the hours was just short of torture. Throw in the fact that he was going to see Buffy, touch Buffy, hold Buffy, snog Buffy, be inside of Buffy, and hear that Buffy loved him, and *torture* was a bit mild a term. But Spike had long ago gone over the various obstacles that came with the different modes of travel these days, in particular with how he would get back to her. He didn't love the sea solution, but it seemed the best without relying on magic, which he and Buffy were both keen to avoid. Too much possibility for things to go wrong just when they had started to go right.

Insofar as food, he'd made an arrangement with the bloke he'd bought to keep him stocked on blood. Human blood from a roster of three live donors, all of whom got their jollies off the bite the same way the soldier had once upon a time. Buffy, understandably, wasn't wild about this but agreed it was the best way to remain discreet. Though she'd been rather insistent that all his food sources were blokes, which he'd found amusing but hadn't dared say as much, as she'd be quick to tuck away her jealousy if she knew how vividly it was on display.

So for a month and some change, Spike spent his time in a darkened corner of a freighter, visited occasionally by someone looking for a rush, reading whatever he could get his hands on, nicking booze from the galley whenever he could and sleeping the rest of the time in the hopes that Buffy would be there. She often was, especially in the beginning, but as the distance between them closed, his daytime gradually bled more into her daytime, which meant their time together was increasingly short. The human hours he'd been so accustomed to keeping once upon a time had been lost to him after he'd set off on his job. He'd get them back, he knew, but it was hard while at sea, especially since the dreadfully boring ship was even more closed off to him when the sun was out.

They came in ahead of schedule, but only by a few hours, docking

at the Port of Los Angeles just as the sun was starting to breach the horizon. Spike hadn't much hope that the DeSoto was where he'd left it, and it wasn't. Part of him had known that he was running the chance of saying goodbye to the car when he'd set off on this wild goose chase and the rest of him hadn't cared much because he hadn't cared about anything then. Only he cared now, and it was a right inconvenience that he was this bloody close but unable to seal the last stretch of distance because of something as asinine as daylight. Something he told her after he crashed into the bed at his motel just before the sun would've turned into a real problem. Catching her before she awoke had been a bit of good luck, but he hadn't questioned it. He thought she might have started sleeping in just a smidge to make sure they got at least some time together, the closer they got to each other's time zones.

But fuck, for the way Buffy lit up when he told her where he was, Spike reckoned he couldn't begrudge the sun a bloody thing.



FOR A FULL SECOND, HE JUST STARED AT HER, HALF-CONVINCED HE was lost in another dream. Only this wasn't a dream—not even close. While the space they shared in that strange pocket world felt closer to reality than he would have thought possible, it had nothing on the real thing. Which was what this was. *Real*. Buffy, standing on the other side of the door to his room, the sunlight hitting her hair and brightening her cheeks, her strong heartbeat filling his ears and her scent filling his nostrils and his throat and just all of her dominating all of him simply by existing. Spike trembled, at once aware that he was panting and unable to stop, for stopping meant not drinking her in anymore and he didn't have the wiring for that.

At last, the haze in his mind cleared enough for words to return to him. Or *word*. Just one. The most important one.

“Buffy...”

She smiled that radiant smile he'd never thought he'd earn and stepped across the threshold and into his room, his space. Her eyes were watery and her lower lip was trembling, and she was *here*. Here in

front of him, with him, and he loved her so much he could almost dust with it.

"What can I say?" she said in a voice that shook. "Couldn't wait."

"How...?"

"Bus," she replied, and turned to address the open door behind her. He had the fleeting, irrational thought that she might vanish when it closed but she didn't. She just shut the rest of the world out. "I woke up and realized you had all this time to kill, and, well, like I said..."

"Couldn't wait."

"Yeah." Buffy's smile was a bit smaller now, but no less radiant. "You really didn't think it was weird that I asked which motel?"

"Thought you just wanted to make sure I was on the right side of the city to get to you faster."

"I did." She stepped toward him, damn near into him, and the last vestiges of thought thinned and scattered. "Then I decided the fastest thing was to just come to you myself. So here I am."

Spike nodded, dropping his gaze to her mouth. "Here you are."

There was a beat, then another, and then it was over. They moved together as one, clashing in a fury of lips and tongue and teeth and wandering hands that couldn't be everywhere at once but tried anyway. Spike stumbled back, Buffy stumbling with him, still in sync despite everything else.

"You're wearing jeans," she mumbled against his mouth as she tore the denim down his legs.

"Put them on to answer the door," he replied, tugging her top over her head, and whimpering when he saw she'd forgone a bra. Her soft, perfect breasts filled his hands, and this time the echo of her heartbeat through his fingers was real. Spike whimpered, dropping his mouth to the column of her throat, his lips and skin and senses burning. There was nothing like having her in real life. Nothing at all like this. Good as the dreams were, brilliant and bloody life-changing, the reality that was Buffy Summers was the sort that couldn't be replicated anywhere. If anyone knew, it was him.

"You put *on* clothes?" Buffy was grinning. And wiggling. Sure, it was to help him get her sweats off quicker, but it did glorious things to her

tits that could drive a man to distraction. A point he made by sucking one into his mouth.

"You want me to go flashin' the goods to everyone, is that it?"

She pouted, wrapping her hand around his cock and giving him another jolt of just how real this was. How real *she* was. Here and alive and pulling and pumping and spreading precum across the head and letting her pout dissolve into a saucy little grin when he whimpered. "No. Just didn't think you'd care."

"Don't. Know you would, though."

He didn't know what it was—what he'd said or how he'd said it or something else entirely, but he felt the shift when it happened. When her playfulness faded into something deeper, something that brought home again where he was and, more importantly, where he wasn't. Buffy looking at him with a watery smile that seemed to light her up from the inside. Make her glow.

"I love you, Spike," she said, and kissed him.

He trembled anew, feeling the words more than hearing them. Threading his fingers through her hair, trying not to sob but knowing it was a lost cause, and giving her back the only thing he could think that might be more powerful than what she already knew.

"At bloody last."

Buffy laughed and kissed him again. "You're telling me."

And then the time for talking was over. The words triggered something, something that took root and possessed them. In a blink, she had him shoved onto the bed and was over him, naked and hot and wet, so wet, and she didn't tease him long—which was good because he didn't think he could stand it—before sinking onto his cock with a soft sob that he felt down to his bones just like he felt everything else. Buffy with him, loving him, her cunt wrapped around him, squeezing and drenching him as she moved and rode and bounced, reminding him of all the shortcomings of dreams that had tried to capture this but never had a chance.

Later, he told himself. Later he would have the chance to worship her properly. Right now all he could do was bow to sensation, suck her nipples between his teeth and thrust up every time she thrust down, meet her hard strokes with his own to the soundtrack of wet flesh slap-

ping against flesh, of moans and whimpers and words that weren't words but were. Her nails digging into his shoulders, his chest, the feel of her sucking on whatever part of him she could reach, her pussy so hot and tight and *home*. All of her home. Spike on his back, watching transfixed as she rode him, torn between the bounce of her breasts and the sight of his wet cock spearing into her again and again, knowing he wouldn't be able to hold on and desperate to experience her in orgasm, feel her clench and strangle his dick as she came apart. He knew just how to touch her, how to rub her clit, how to position his fingers so she struck him on every plunge, and her eyes went wide and she gasped his name and thrust harder, grinding herself against him on the down-stroke until finally she cried out and spasmed around him and he was helpless but to follow. Shuddering and clutching at her hips as he bucked and emptied inside of her, his senses swimming in her, in Buffy, fully and completely for the first time in what felt like centuries.

She collapsed against his chest, dragging in gulps of air, her sweat-slicked skin burning his own, the salt of her tears on the air again, and he couldn't blame her, for he was crying too.

It had only taken two hundred and sixty-four days for Spike to go from the sort of grief that would have eventually consumed him whole to the happiest he'd been in his whole bloody life. Two hundred and sixty-four days.

But then, today didn't count, did it?

Buffy pressed a kiss against his throat. "I do love you," she whispered into his skin. "I have for... I just have. Sorry it took so long to tell you."

Spike shuddered with his sigh, tightened his arm around her. There was so much he wanted to tell her, months now of things crowding his head, conversations he'd been saving for a moment just like this one. Whole bloody tomes he had composed, poured out in blood and tears in equal measure. But for the world, he couldn't think of a syllable now. Not one. Nothing except a soft, "You were worth the wait," that he meant as fervently as he'd ever meant anything.

The rest could come later. They had time, and that was worth everything.

More than he could ever dream.

