

WHAT DREAMS MAY COME

A Spike & Buffy Romance



HOLLY DENISE



PERCHANCE

“AND YOU’RE SURE this will work?” Buffy wrinkled her nose and brought the stone to eye level. It was kinda unremarkable, all told. A rather plump, onyx-colored marble made of whatever mineral Willow had mentioned. “Not that I doubt your spell-casting abilities, but it seems a bit...rocky.”

Also, she doubted Willow’s spell-casting abilities. And she felt she had good reason to, given the number of instances said spells had gone wonky. But it seemed unsportsmanlike to bring that up when her friend was just trying to help her out.

“Absolutely,” Willow said with a cocksure grin and a nod to match. “I followed all the instructions to the letter. The color comes from the treatment—moonstones are typically all transparent and ethereal. The black is actually how you know the spell worked. Otherwise, it would still be all light and stuff.” She held up a hand and began counting off fingers. “Essence of nightshade, the petals of a Queen of the Night cactus, and somnus spell for good measure. Whatever your sleeping problems are, this little guy will clear them right up.”

Buffy nodded, then lifted her gaze from the stone and tried for a smile of her own. “Thanks, Will. I appreciate it.”

“Anytime! It’s what I’m here for.”

And she was—and that was a good thing. A great thing. Wacky consequences aside, Willow’s spellwork had improved by leaps and bounds over the last year. Ever since the whole merging of the essences spell that had defeated Adam, her magic had yielded increasingly impressive results—no more flying attack pencils or mysterious green swarming bugs and, best of all, fewer unplanned explosions. And when Buffy had mentioned that what she really needed—post-breakup—was a way to fall asleep and stay asleep, Willow had piped up with the idea of the extra spiffed-up moonstone.

Which now lay cradled in her palm, all innocuous-like.

Buffy pressed her lips together. Worst case scenario, the thing exploded and burned down the house. Best case scenario, she got a full eight hours that left her feeling refreshed and rejuvenated, especially now that she wasn’t sharing her bed with anyone.

Yeah. Thinking about her sad bed was enough to push caution aside. Buffy needed her beauty rest. Desperate times called for desperate measures.

In the three days since Riley had made his big dramatic exit, Buffy had cycled through the stages of grief at top-notch speed, then started them over again, volleying most often between anger and denial, with a few crying jags thrown in there for good measure. A few, not many, because every time she thought about what had happened—the ultimatum, the accusations, even Xander’s “go get him” speech—she hit some inner button that left her feeling increasingly foolish. Foolish for having listened to the ultimatum without venting her feelings by means of punching her fist through a wall, or snapping at Xander that maybe her relationship with Riley had just looked different because she wasn’t the person she’d been in high school, and had he even thought of that?

Or hell, maybe Riley *had* been the rebound guy. Maybe that was what she’d needed. The once-in-a-lifetime romance had already happened to her and the impact had been devastating enough to span several lifetimes, thanks. Then she’d feel bad for thinking that, feel that perhaps Xander had had a point and she had been holding Riley at arm’s length, but then start the cycle all over again by analyzing every second of their relationship and wondering where she’d gone wrong,

where she'd treated Riley like he was expendable, where she'd made him feel less-than because he was human and not vampire, because he was Riley and not Angel.

At which point her mind would fill with images of Glory, and dread would shove aside everything Riley-related. She'd think about her mother lying in the hospital bed, about the times she had been given the privilege to feel the weight of all that fear and uncertainty—time that Riley had apparently thought was his and his alone. But he hadn't been there when she'd broken down because he'd been with his vampire whores. Getting his blood and probably more than his blood sucked just so he could feel needed, wanted, feel all the things he wasn't getting from Buffy because Buffy wasn't enough.

That would kick her anger back into overdrive.

She hadn't been sleeping well *before* Riley had decided to fly away from their relationship problems. Now that she had a headful of bitterness and resentment and sadness and downright loneliness to occupy her thoughts, finding and staying asleep was nigh impossible. At least, it had been over these last three days, and Buffy didn't have the luxury of waiting out her insomnia. The next Glory attack could come at any second and she needed to be ready. Rested. She needed to have her head in the game.

Enter Willow with her magical cure-all.

As long as the house remained all not-burned down, Buffy supposed this couldn't hurt.



WILLOW'S SLEEPING INSTRUCTIONS DIDN'T INSPIRE MUCH confidence. Apparently, in order for the stone to work its literal magic, Buffy needed to climb into bed, balance the stone on her brow, and close her eyes. It would do the rest.

That seemed unlikely, but hey, she'd been made to eat her words before.

That night, Buffy went through her normal bedtime ritual, starting with making sure all the doors were locked. Then she peeked in on Dawn, just to double-check her sister hadn't sneaked out of the house,

something she'd taken to doing as of late. And yeah, Buffy felt like the worst kind of hypocrite for finding this annoying, but at least when she'd been the one shimmying down the tree outside, it had been for sacred duty reasons, not whiny teenager reasons.

Also sometimes to make out with her boyfriend, but no one needed to mention that.

After ensuring the house was secure and all its occupants were where they needed to be, Buffy climbed into bed, turned to scowl at the moonstone on her nightstand, then plucked it up. There was absolutely no way it wasn't going to just roll off her forehead and, with her luck, thunk to the floor loud enough to wake up bat-eared Mom. But she needed to be able to tell Willow she'd at least given it a shot, so better to suck it up and get this over with so she could get on with the night's regularly scheduled tossing and turning.

She squared her shoulders, brought the stone to her forehead, and closed her eyes.

And almost immediately threw her head back with a gasp, a ripple of hard pleasure tearing through her without ceremony. The sort that began at the toes and swept its way inside and out until there was nothing to do but shudder and give in. Her legs were over his shoulders, her hands tangled in his hair, and his mouth was there at her center, lips wound around her clit as he pumped his fingers inside her in tempo with the hard gasps racking through her body. The hand not preoccupied with her pussy was under her ass, lifting her to a hungry mouth that ravaged and sucked and pulled and in general did things to her she hadn't known could feel even remotely like this.

"Oh my god." Hell, that voice didn't even sound like hers. It was all raw and panty and desperate. "Oh my god. Oh god, oh god, *oh god.*"

"Mmm." The lips around her clit had suddenly released her—she tried not to sob as she thrust her hips up in a wordless plea for whoever it was to continue the assault. He didn't, though, just chuckled and pressed his fingers up against her from the inside. "Could drink you all night, baby, if you ever give me the chance."

Buffy froze. That voice. Oh shit no, she knew that voice. She squeezed her eyes shut, counted to ten, then forced herself to peer down at the head perched between her legs. A very blond head

attached to a very familiar face that came with very familiar ocean-blue eyes, which were dancing with pure freaking delight.

Oh god. Her ears hadn't been playing the worst trick in the history of tricks on her. It was *Spike*.

"Want some more?" he asked, waggling his eyebrows at her. "Tell me what you want, Slayer. You know I'll give it to you."

Buffy stared at him for a beat. A very long, very confused beat, her mind racing and her chest—which was naked, she noticed, along with the rest of her—heaving along with the thunderous knocks of her heart. Sweat laced her skin, made her hair feel heavy, and there was Spike. Also naked, stretched out over...well, she couldn't exactly see what. It could have been a bed or the floor or something else—it could have been, but she didn't know for certain because apart from the very clear form that was Spike, nothing else was really solid. Maybe they were in a room. Maybe they were in his crypt. Maybe they were on the moon.

And then it hit her, what must be happening, and she could have sobbed her relief.

It was a dream. All of this was a dream. The moonstone had worked and Buffy had floated off to sleep the second her eyes had closed. That the dream had a side-effect of naked vampire with his tongue shoved inside her pussy was a point of contention she would have to take up with Willow, but it was safe here.

Hell, it was more than safe here. It was downright decadent. And...harmless, right? Indulging in a little dream action with the world's most annoying vampire seemed a perfectly fitting exchange for the boyfriend she'd lost, especially considering she never would have confronted Riley about his vampire hussies if Spike hadn't brought her to that damned warehouse.

If her subconscious decided this was the way Spike should make it up to her, who was she to argue?

"Spike," she said on a sigh, lifting her head to meet his eyes. His very blue, very piercing, very true-to-life eyes. Huh. She wouldn't have thought she knew him well enough to get his eyes that close to reality, but apparently she did.

"Ever tell you I love it when you say my name like that?" He

grinned, then dropped a kiss against her pelvis. “Almost as much as I love it when you come on my tongue.”

Buffy released a hard breath, allowing herself to do the thing she never would in the waking hours—take a good look at him. Of course, in the waking hours, Spike didn’t look like this. Probably. Sure, he was lean and compact and had enough wiry strength to hold his own in a fight, but the sculpted chest and defined abs and really toned arm muscles—that was all Buffy fantasy land. Not to say she minded, but it was rather in her face, this leap of Spike-as-enemy to Spike-as-eye-candy. These were thoughts she hadn’t let herself think freely since he’d followed up his praise of her handling a fledgling vampire with the promise that he would kill her soon. And then maybe again a little bit during the spell last year where she’d spent half the night wiggling on his—

“Oh my god,” Buffy gasped, her eyes going wide as Spike shifted and began to crawl over her. Dream Spike was...big. Hard and straining for her, beads of precum slick across the head. Apparently, her subconscious had decided to be very forgiving tonight. Either that or she hadn’t been fooling herself last year after all.

“Always say the sweetest things to me, pet.” Spike preened a bit, wrapping one of his hands around his cock and starting to pump, and Buffy could do nothing but watch. She had never been the type of girl to ogle at a guy’s package—first due to embarrassment, and then because, well, they weren’t all that interesting. But this was the dream world, where the regular rules did not apply, and hot damn if watching Spike work his fist up and down the length of the most impressive cock she’d ever seen didn’t make her, well, interested.

“One of these days,” he said in a low voice, “gonna get your mouth around me.”

That wasn’t one of Buffy’s favorite things to do, but hell, she couldn’t say she hated the thought. At least here, in this place where it would never happen and where he looked like *that*—all thick and curved, the head poking through intact foreskin. Seriously detailed dream. Her subconscious had decided at some point that Spike wasn’t circumcised, which was a little weird, since the only penises she had seen in clear detail had been. “Okay,” she gasped, staring at the way

that extra flesh encircled the head of his cock before rolling back on the downstroke. Pictured herself pushing it back with her tongue, dipping and swirling and finding out just how many yummy sounds he could make when motivated.

“Want me inside you?”

She nodded before she could think about it—then nodded again after thinking about it. It was her dream, dammit. And yeah, she wanted whatever he had to offer.

The next thing she knew, Spike was over her, teasing the head of his cock up and down her soaked flesh, making sure to nudge her clit every few passes just for the pleasure of watching her whimper and melt. Buffy threw her head back, spreading her legs wider before wrapping one around his waist. And again, her dream was all about the details. His skin was cool to the touch, and damn if that wasn't soothing when she felt like she could burn up.

“Fuck, you're hot, Slayer.” Spike pressed his eyes closed, like he was fighting for control, then lowered his head and swirled his tongue around one of her nipples. Buffy gasped and arched, tearing her fingers through his surprisingly soft hair—there, at last, a part of the dream that couldn't be right—and gasping again when he growled at the feel of her nails against his scalp. She had never had a guy growl while teasing her nipples before and found the resulting vibrations were just this side of awesome. As was watching Spike—*Spike*—suck on her flesh like he couldn't get enough.

“You're different tonight,” he murmured once he released her, meeting her gaze as he pressed a series of wet kisses down the slope of her breast then across and up until he was tending to her neglected nipple with his mouth.

“Different?” Buffy asked, not sure why. It wasn't like it mattered.

“Feel different,” he replied, slipping a hand between them to grip himself, tease up and down her drenched flesh. And this time, when he pressed to her opening, she trembled her anticipation. Her pure want.

It was going to be near impossible to meet Spike's eyes the next time she saw him, but hell if it wasn't worth it.

Spike skated his teeth along her chin and waited for her to open her eyes and look at him head-on. Again, Buffy was taken by how well

she apparently knew him, for if she hadn't known it was a dream, she could have believed she was looking at him for real.

"That's it," he said as he began inching inside her. Buffy inhaled sharply, bit down on her lower lip hard enough to draw blood. Watched as those cerulean eyes flared and dropped, then he groaned and covered her mouth with his, sucking at the minute wound and slamming himself all the way home.

The sound that tore from her lips was the sort that would have embarrassed her if anyone heard her make it for real. It was raw and breathy at the same time, and it seemed to go on forever. Or rather turned into a hard hiss through her teeth as Spike lifted his head to favor her with a grin, like he knew what she was thinking. Which, good for him, because she had no idea what she was thinking, except *full* and *wow*. Buffy had had her share of dirty dreams—extremely vivid ones, Technicolor, even, with sensations beyond what she'd come to experience in her sexual encounters, heightened as everything else was in dreamland. But this was different. For one thing, she knew she was dreaming—that didn't happen often. For another, it felt real. And all the better because of it.

"Christ," he whispered against her lips, doing some kind of hip-swirly thing that had him pulling and pushing it seemed at the same time. Buffy made that sound again, the embarrassing one, but *god*, absolutely no one could blame her. "So hot. Gonna burn me up, you are."

She didn't care if he did burn up, so long as he kept moving his hips like that. The first few seconds seemed to last a long time, as though they were truly new lovers, basking in how the other felt, gathering their bearings as they attempted to adjust to sensation. Which was kinda weird, because the few times she'd allowed herself to think about Spike this way—and she would go to her grave denying any such times existed—it had been fast and angry, like they had finally used all the words possible to insult one another and there was nothing left to do but bruise each other with their bodies. Some of their fights, she had to admit, had seemed extra sexually charged. At least the fights of old, before the chip had taken that from them.

And there was a thought she would never admit to having. Thank

god this was a dream and she was likely to forget the whole damn thing.

Granted, if that was the case, there was no reason why she shouldn't have a lot of fun.

Buffy planted her hands on his chest and shoved hard enough that he was forced out of her, which made her make a sound somewhere between a whimper and a growl. Spike landed on his back a few feet away, snarling things that would get him staked in the waking world but in this one, just made her hotter. She was on all fours in an instant, prowling toward him with intent, the space around them still vague and shapeless, but that didn't matter—the only thing that mattered was him. And when he saw her coming toward him, his indignation faded almost instantly, replaced with a hot, desperate look that left her trembling with need.

"Fuck, yes," he rasped as she crawled between his legs. And hell, since she was here and it didn't count, there was no reason to *not* run her tongue from his balls to the tip of his cock. Especially not when it had him making all kinds of fun noises, moaning and lacing his fingers through her hair. Buffy grinned, closed her mouth around the head and sucked—harder than she would have were this real, the kind of hard that had made Riley yelp that one time. Spike just growled again, gasped something that sounded like her name, and fisted her hair hard enough to hurt.

"God, like that." He rolled his hips again, shoving himself deeper into her mouth. "So hot." He heaved out one of those deep breaths that he couldn't seem to keep contained.

"That good?" she asked before dipping her tongue under his foreskin, making him gasp and arch again.

"Light me on fire, you do." He said it with such earnestness her chest tightened.

"I sound all kinds of hazy."

He laughed, and the sound tickled something deep inside her. A good tickle—hell, an amazing tickle. One that, dream or not, kinda wiggled her out. She decided to respond by closing her mouth around him and pulling hard, again the sort of hard that would have ended this part of foreplay with her ex-boyfriend, but just had Spike panting and

thrusting and babbling all sorts of things that made her cheeks go warm and her other parts go... Well, there was a reaction. And that was enough of that. Much as she enjoyed the sounds he made, this was typically the sort of thing she'd only do for a guy she liked, and dream or not, she very much did not like Spike.

While he whimpered when she released him, his eyes flashed with approval as she started to climb over him. He nipped at her mouth once it was within reach, his own quirked in a grin.

"Yeah, that's it, Slayer," he purred. Then he reached between them to tease her wet flesh with his cock again, one stroke, two strokes, before he notched himself at her opening. "Ride me till it hurts."

She braced her hands on his shoulders. "That what you want?"

"All I've ever wanted."

He locked eyes with her again, his voice ringing with more of that naked sincerity, and she didn't know how to respond except to sink onto him. He gasped and seized her hips, digging his fingers into her skin and holding on as she began to move.

Buffy braced her hands on his chest and closed her eyes—a weird thing to do in a dream and be aware of, but she did it all the same—and tried to picture someone else. Anyone else. But Spike had none of it. He was there to bring her back, pushing when she pulled, filling the air with his voice, rumbling all sorts of things that would earn him more than a punch to the nose in the real world. Even in her subconscious, Spike wouldn't shut the hell up.

"Oh, that's it, pet," he said, breathing in that stupid human way of his. "Such a good girl. Look at you, all stuffed full of me. Hurt me, Buffy. Know you want to. Can feel it. And you know I can take it."

That was true for multiple reasons. Buffy's eyes flew open and found his once more, the wild blue, darker than she'd ever seen it, his nostrils flared and a dare on his lips. So she gave him what he wanted—hell, what she wanted. Dug her fingers into the firm flesh at his chest and started riding him in earnest. Aware of him as she never had been before, and it was all right because it wasn't really happening, but it *felt* like it was happening and that was all right too. Spike beneath her, bucking and spearing into her again and again, doing things with his hips that made her doubt she was really in control here. And he

knew it too, the bastard. She saw the smirk flirt with his lips before she clenched her pussy around and chased it right back off again. Spike vamped, the change coming on so rapidly she wondered if she'd made him lose control. He tightened his grip on her, working her at a frantic, desperate pace up and down his cock. Then those demon amber eyes of his were open, staring into her, piercing into her, his tongue sliding down the length of one fang as he watched her and panted and pushed her harder onto him.

"You're amazing," he whispered. She trembled and clenched, earning a snarl, and he flipped her over so quickly she didn't register the world had done a cartwheel until it was too late. He pumped into her once, twice, then pulled out again.

"On your knees," he snarled, and god, she obeyed him. Felt her limbs shaking as she did, as she turned and presented him with her ass and then he was there again, filling her with his cock as his fingers danced through her folds to nudge her clit.

"God, what a picture," Spike grunted between the smack of flesh striking flesh. "Take it, Slayer. Take every fuckin' inch of me."

Buffy tore her teeth into her lower lip to keep from crying out. He pushed her head down so her cheek was flat against the nebulous surface, stroking the pads of his fingers over her at a rhythm that matched his thrusts. It wasn't something that typically worked for her—or maybe that was because no one had—tried, but this was really gonna work. Buffy felt it first in her knees, wobbling under the pressure of his assault, and if that was a strange place to feel an orgasm, then maybe that was the dream's fault too because that was where it started. Her knees, then up her legs, skating her inner thighs before focusing with intent on the place where he was stroking her. Cock, then fingers, then cock again.

Then his arm was around her stomach and he'd hauled her to him, her back to his chest, shifting the angle again, and she squeezed him and he moaned and she started to shudder, then his fangs were in her throat, a sharp stab of pain followed by an explosion of something beyond pleasure. Buffy full on screamed—something she never did during sex—as her pussy started to spasm and clench, and Spike roared into her skin and she tipped over again, and again, the pulls of his

mouth having a direct line to her clit, like he was stroking her from the inside even though that was impossible, but it didn't matter because it was happening. It was happening and there was nothing she could do but surrender.

Buffy collapsed in a sweaty tangle against him, wrecked. And still he was there, licking her where he'd bitten her, and the swipes of his tongue had her trembling all over again.

"Bloody hell," he murmured, stroking a hand down her stomach. "Never been like that before."

She agreed, but there were better things to do with her mouth than waste on words. So Buffy twisted in his arms, pulling away just long enough to shift so they were face-to-face before she started working herself up and down his cock again.

"Fuck, I love you," he whispered against her lips.

If that was an odd thing for Spike to say, she didn't mind. Anything in the dream world was fair game.

Plus, after everything that had gone down with Riley, that she was loved was nice to hear, even if only in her own head.



IT WAS HER BITTER MISFORTUNE TO RUN INTO SPIKE THE NEXT DAY. Even more so that it happened when she was off-guard, focused on something else—namely, a newly risen vampire who hadn't gotten the memo that this was the worst place to wake up without a pulse. Patrol had been slow, too, so Buffy was doing what she could to drag this out, certain that it would be the most action she'd get tonight. At least during the waking hours, and call her crazy, but she was a bit gun-shy about the non-waking.

What was worse, she couldn't avoid talking about it. Willow wanted to know how things had gone, if the moonstone had worked and she'd gotten any sleep. Even knowing to expect the question, Buffy found answering it difficult, at least without her skin going all hot. How could she tell her friend, her very best friend, that the stone had not only given her an express pass to dreamland, but filled her sleeping hours with the

most vivid dream she could remember having? A dream about *Spike*, no less. Naked Spike. Naked Spike doing things with his hands and mouth and other parts that were just wrong—all kinds of wrong. It didn't help that, for a second, Buffy had been certain Willow had known something, impossible as it was. Her questions had been a bit pointed, her brow doing the scrunchy thing it did when she was confused.

"So...that was it? Just passed out?"

"Uh huh!" Buffy had replied brightly, plastering on a smile so fake it hurt. "Put the stone in place and woke up all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. Really, it helped a lot. Thank you so much."

That had seemed to placate her, though the frown hadn't faded. Instead, Willow had offered a smile, told her to keep using the stone—apparently, it became more effective the more it was used—and thankfully dropped the subject.

A subject Buffy's mind had carefully danced around every second since then, only to be ushered away in favor of more important things than her depraved subconscious. Until now.

"You're droppin' your shoulder, Slayer!"

Buffy stumbled, her aim going wild and her fist—which had been ready for some serious face-busting—veering to the right, which had a rather predictable domino effect. The fledgling she'd been fighting whooped in glee, slammed his leg against her back and forced her to the ground on all fours. At which point her oh-so-unhelpful brain decided to bombard her with images of the last time it recalled being on all fours, even if that time hadn't been so much a time as a porn-tastic interlude that it had inflicted upon her in the first place. This meant that she was too distracted to care about the fledgling, who knocked his very pointed shoe into her gut, sending her back to the grassy ground with a hard *thump*.

"Just not your night, is it?" Somehow, she heard the metallic click of Spike's lighter over the other vampire's snarls. "Let me know if you need a hand."

Buffy gritted her teeth and planted her palms against the mossy earth. She wanted to snap out something witty, but the fledge had kicked all of her quips right out of her, so instead, she applied her

focus on getting off the damn ground and getting back to teaching this soon-to-be-dead vampire the ropes.

But she didn't get a chance to do any of that. By the time she had flipped herself back to her feet, the fledge was gone, and Spike was standing there in his place, grinning at her through the dust cloud.

"You're welcome," he said before wrapping his lips around his cigarette. Which put to mind him wrapping his lips around something else, and had all of her too flustered to so much as pop him in the nose for the audacity that was, well, Spike.

"What the hell was that?"

He arched an eyebrow. "Pretty sure that was me savin' your ungrateful arse as usual. That vamp was about to make you bloody kibble."

"I had it under control." And this was perfectly true. She *had* had it under control...right until he'd shown up and started moving that way-too-pretty mouth of his. "No one asked you to interfere, Spike."

Spike snorted, then dropped his gaze with unerring accuracy to the place where a fashion-victim vamp had impaled her with her own stake a few weeks back. The wound had healed—hell, the scar was barely visible—but there were times she would swear she still felt it. Times like now.

"Sorry," he said, making a show about dragging his eyes back up until they were locked on hers again. "Didn't realize you were as keen as I am to see you in the ground. Bit of advice, though. Predators like it when you wiggle. Makes the kill feel earned."

The command she had over her limbs returned with a vengeance. Buffy swung on instinct, her knuckles punching into his nose with a satisfying crack. And before he could do more than stagger back and sputter, she had turned on her heel and marched off, determined to put as much space between them as possible.

The last thing her sick, sick mind needed—the very last thing—was more Spike.



SHE WAS GREETED WITH A PUNCH TO THE FACE WHEN SHE FELL INTO the dream that night.

"Bloody hell, you can be a right bitch, you know that?" Spike took another swing at her without waiting for a response but grinned when she snapped an arm up to block the hit. "Tryin' to do you a favor," he said conversationally, like he hadn't just attempted to clobber her with one of those gaudy rings of his. She knew from experience they could leave a mark. "Tryin' to *look out* for you, and what good does it do?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" Buffy spat back before throwing a punch of her own. A tremor ran up her arm when her fist connected with his nose—a tremor remarkably similar to the one that had accompanied the real thing back in the graveyard. Like the night before, she knew she was dreaming here—could feel it in the slight otherworldliness that defined her every move, but it was close enough to reality to throw her off her game. And make her extraordinarily grateful that she hadn't fallen face-first into a weird sex dream starring her mortal enemy. This, at least, was status quo.

"Gettin' your righteous little arse handed to you tonight, you were," Spike replied, still in that oddly conversational tone, though they were fighting now. Not real fighting—not that it made any difference—but the way she used to fight with Riley when he'd been pumped with enough Initiative drugs to take her at slayer strength. "And we both know you have a death wish."

"Shut up." She aimed another blow to his nose, but he caught it this time. Caught it and leveraged his hold on her to drag her forward until she was flush against his chest.

And suddenly, everything was off-balance again. Buffy was breathing hard—way too hard, dragging in air that smelled and tasted of Spike.

"Mite too predictable, pet," he murmured, dropping his gaze to her mouth. "Makes a fella think things."

"Well, stop."

His lips twitched. "Seems the rabbit likes gettin' cornered by the big bad wolf," he said, and rolled his hips so she could feel him, just as hard and impressive as the night before. "Too much of that and the wolf might think the rabbit's sweet on him."

"You're disgusting."

"Mhmm. So why aren't you pullin' away then?" Spike flicked his eyebrows, ready when she started to tug on her hand. "Ah, ah. Too late to pretend now."

"Who's pretending?" she snapped, though even she had to admit that she wasn't putting as much muscle behind pulling away as she would in the real world, and she blamed that on the last dream she'd had. Plus, he was still grinding his erection against her, and that made it hard to think. Emphasis on hard. Really hard.

Spike lowered his face to hers so that when he spoke, his lips nudged her lips. "You are. Every time I see you, out there makin' like you don't feel it."

"Feel *what*?"

"This." He cupped the back of her head, tangling his fingers through her hair before forming a fist to hold her there, and smashed his mouth to hers.

And that was when it happened—when her brain broke. Her brain, that was all it was. Her tired, exhausted, stressed-to-the-max-and-still-reeling-from-her-breakup brain that had decided regular men sucked beyond the telling of it and since Riley had gone and left the freaking country, the only thing for a girl to do was screw the resident undead senseless in her dreams.

At least the sex here was good. Better than good. Even if it was with Spike.

Fuck it.

"That's it," Spike panted between kisses, as though he'd felt her give in. Maybe he had, being an extension of her in this place. He was grinning now, taking hot drags of her mouth and tugging at her clothes with enough urgency she could almost believe he was worried she'd change her mind. "Give it all to me, Slayer."

"This is wrong." It was only polite, reminding him and herself, even here as she shoved his duster off his shoulders before tugging at his belt.

"Fuck yes, it is." He gave a low growl, fisted the material of her shirt and ripped it down the middle. If that had been an actual shirt, she would've been pissed. Instead, she found she couldn't touch him

enough, insanely turned on by every sound he made, every time he shuddered, the way he rolled his eyes back when she stroked her fingers down his seriously cut abs—her imagination was so incredibly generous where Spike was concerned. Then the moan he fed her when her fingers wandered lower still, over the hard ridge of his cock, stroking him through the denim before finally taking pity on him and dragging down his zipper.

“God, yes.” Spike rolled his head back, thrusting into her hand and gasping. “Like that, Summers. Harder. *Harder*. Don’t be afraid to break me.”

Buffy grinned, skimmed her teeth along his chin. “That a dare?”

“It’s whatever you want it to be.”

That was certainly true. What happened here was whatever she wanted. Nothing else.

“I want,” she said, tightening her grip on his cock, “you to fuck me.”

Spike moaned again, a look of pure bliss flitting across his face.

Then he snarled and spun her around, tearing whatever it was she was wearing down her legs—she hadn’t bothered to check, not really with the caring—with such force and speed he nearly knocked her over.

“As my lady demands,” he whispered against the inside of her knee then nipped at her with his teeth. And before she could do more than squeak, he was on his feet again, bending her over, spreading her legs apart and pushing inside her.

Buffy decided this might be the best dream she’d ever had.



THE ODD REALITY OF GETTING IT ON WITH THE VAMPIRE SHE HATED in her dreams and also having to look that vampire in the eye during waking hours became easy to navigate in no time at all. After the first awful bungle, she knew what not to do, and that was enough to inform her behavior. So when the time came for Spike to cross her path once more, Buffy managed to look him in the eye, snap at him appropriately, and make it oh-so-very clear that he was disgusting and only walking

around because she hadn't yet gotten so bored that staking him was her only option. And she was reasonably certain that she pulled all this off without so much as flushing or thinking about the things he did to her with his hands and mouth and other impressive—at least in the dreamworld—parts.

Granted, the fact that she and Spike hadn't spoken much that time had been on account of the distraction. A good distraction. One that involved a troll and doling out some much-needed pain on a worthy opponent. The reality of her breakup with Riley had settled in by then, and though Buffy was not nearly as heartbroken as a woman who had just been dumped by Mr. Right should have been, there were feelings that needed to be pummeled out. A lot of feelings. And lucky her, a troll could take more than one punch. He could take a week's worth.

But that wasn't enough, she'd discovered. At some point over the last couple of years, Buffy had begrudgingly admitted that Faith had had it right. Slaying did leave her feeling hungry and horny, and not always in that order. The former was something she could address with one of her signature low-fat yogurts; the latter had become increasingly difficult to take care of the longer she and Riley had danced around each other. Especially after he'd lost his Initiative-sponsored super soldier strength, though she had been careful not to let on. If it hadn't been for the fact that her dreams were lately full of sweaty naked fun, she might have been tempted to actually take Anya's advice and go vibrator shopping.

The dreams, though, were managing what should be impossible. Maybe her brain was too overtired trying to rationalize how not-icky Spike was when she was asleep, but instead of leaving her aching and in need of action that wasn't pure subconscious fantasy, she found a smile on her face practically every morning. It was weird. Not at all natural.

Was she going to complain? Hard no.

Hell, by the time she actually hit the sack the night of the epic troll fight, Buffy was practically buzzing. She followed what had become her routine, right down to placing the stone on her forehead and was immediately tossed into the strange, shapeless world where the only thing around that had any definition was the vampire who was as hungry to see her as she was to be seen. This time, he pressed her

against a wall—or whatever passed for a wall in dreamland—told her to bite and scratch and claw all she wanted, he had some things he needed to vent, then pounded into her with a fury that would have definitely left some marks in the real world. And made her kinda sorry that it wasn't the real world—in a totally nothing-to-do-with-Spike-but-damn-that-would-be-better-in-person kind of way.

Still, she was somehow able to compartmentalize letting Dream Spike rock her world on multiple levels and not flinch when it came time to call him disgusting whenever they were unfortunate enough to be face-to-face. Yes, she wished in many ways that her dreams could be a little *less* detail-specific when it came to who it was doing the world-rocking—it was just her luck that everything *except* Spike was vague as all get-out, but if the payoff was waking up relaxed and refreshed, then she'd just have to accept it.

That was until Dawn dropped the biggest of all possible Spike-shaped bombs.

“Spike's totally in love with you.”

At first, Buffy had been determined to write this off as the latest tactic employed by her sister to get out of trouble. No grounding for mystical Keys for hanging around soulless vampires if they managed to completely upend their sister's worldview. And if the allegation just so happened to overlap with some very naughty dreams Buffy had been enjoying the hell out of, that was just a really well-timed coincidence. Nothing more to it.

Only Buffy couldn't quite believe it. She'd been careful every time she'd seen Spike since the dreams started to maintain the status quo. If anything, she might have overcorrected the last time, when he'd flashed her the puppy dog eyes and tried to score some points for not munching on disaster victims and *oh my god*, Spike was in love with her.

That night, Buffy paced around her bedroom, the moonstone curled in her hand as she tried to work up the courage to just toss the thing out her window. Because the moonstone *had* to be responsible, right? She hadn't started having these dreams until Willow had come up with the perfect cure for insomnia. And yeah, that had wiggled her out at first but she'd adjusted because the trade-off had been something just shy of amazing. A well-rested slayer was a happy slayer, and

Buffy had definitely been a happy slayer. Or *happier* than she had a right to be on this side of a breakup, with a hellgod hell*bent* on finding her sister and her mother still recovering from a medical scare. Willow's spells, as advanced as they were now, still sometimes went kablooey. That this one had gone ker-sexy was probably the best possible side-effect she could have asked for.

But was it wrong to keep dreaming these things if Spike had a thing for her?

Buffy didn't know. All she knew was that she definitely did *not* want to throw the stone out the window. For starters, she would never be able to get to sleep with these thoughts running through her head. And...well, she'd miss it.

What Spike didn't know wouldn't hurt him. And hey, maybe while she was having her illicit sexy dreams, she could ask the Spike her mind manifested for some guidance. People had been known to have epiphanies while dreaming, right? It was worth a shot, either way. Her subconscious might be better prepared to deal with things than her conscious.

So Buffy didn't throw the stone out of the window. Part of her had known she never would. And when she climbed into bed, the fact that her heart was hammering extra hard had nothing to do with the fact that she would be seeing Spike in a handful of seconds. That would be silly. It wasn't like that was even really him.

Though when she was there the next instant, standing in the shapeless space that had somehow become theirs, looking into eyes that she hadn't known she knew as well as she did, it was hard to convince her brain that this was anything other than very real.

But it wasn't. Spike wouldn't be so at ease in front of her in the nude. And if he ever gave her *that* look while stroking himself, it would be the last thing he ever did. Probably.

"Thought I'd get started without you," he said by way of greeting, and no, she didn't miss the way his lips pulled into a smirk when her eyes immediately dropped, following the pumps of his hand up and down his shaft. Nothing about him ever changed, she realized, from dream to dream. Each time she saw him like this, his skin had the same contours, the same dips and texture, same scars, same small pattern of

freckles on his left hip, which was weird, right? Even by hellmouth standards. If there was one thing she could count on dreams to be, it was inconsistent. But not here. Not with Spike.

"All right, Slayer?" Spike asked, tilting his head, stilling the motions of his hand. "Lookin' a bit spooked."

"Dawn," Buffy blurted. "She said... She said you're in love with me."

He arched an eyebrow. "Yeah? And what do you think?"

"I don't know." Buffy's breaths were coming harder, faster, and she was aware of them too. She was aware of everything here in ways she never had been in dreams. "Though you said you were."

"When?"

"That night. The first night." She remembered thinking it was weird, but then, dreams were weird. Some of them had crazy cheese men, others had naked vampires professing their love. It didn't mean anything. Except maybe that she needed to cut back on dairy.

"It's crazy," Buffy muttered to herself before meeting his eyes again. "You'd be crazy to be in love with me."

"Off my bloody rocker," he agreed before prowling a step forward, eyeing her up and down with that lusty gleam in his eyes once more. "Thought as much myself."

"You did?"

"Still do."

"So you're not. You don't love me."

"Didn't say that, did I?"

Oh god, he couldn't be in love with her. He just couldn't.

"Spike, you're a vampire."

"Angel was a vampire."

"Angel was good." The excuse sounded lame even to her.

"I can be, too," Spike said, drawing nearer. "I've changed, Buffy."

"A chip isn't a soul." God, she'd *just* had this argument in real-world time. She should not be wasting dream-world time convincing herself of something she already knew.

He nodded, drawing nearer still. "Bloody right it's not. Somethin' better, yeah? Know if I ever do manage to get it out, I'm already just as bad as I wanna be. Not gonna go after your chums, off anyone's fish, or

snap any necks. Gonna be just the way I am right now, only with a bit more bite.”

“More bite’ meaning killing people. That’s the reason you can’t be in love with me.”

“That right?” He studied her in that inscrutable way of his, where she felt seen as she never had been, and by the last person in the world she wanted to let close. “Thought as much myself, gotta admit,” he continued a second later, taking a slow, sauntering step forward. “Course I did. You were in my head. Couldn’t get you out. Not all that unusual, mind. Had plenty of dreams about you before and I’d *done* plenty to you in those dreams. Sometimes I’d shag you until you couldn’t walk—other times I’d go for the throat. The best ones were a bit of both. I’d kill you, then you’d ride me blind. Squeeze me until I pop.”

Buffy’s legs started to tremble. “Isn’t that backwards? Killing then sex?”

“Doesn’t have to make sense if it’s a dream, does it?” He stopped when he was close enough to breathe in, which she did. Olfactory senses here were as acute as ever. There was the smoke and leather combined with the coppery hint of blood, and whatever soap he used to top off the Spike smell. Not that Buffy had ever thought about Spike using soap or cologne or whatever it was guys did to make themselves good-smelling for the opposite sex, but he did seem to rock it and that couldn’t be eau du vampire. She’d staked too many creatures that smelled very much like untended corpses.

Spike did not. He always smelled good. Here and out there. Both versions of him.

There *were* two versions, right?

“Though now that you ask,” he said, lifting a hand to drag her hair over her shoulder before skimming his fingers down her side, “it is a mite strange. Just another thing I managed to not see until it was obvious. Never stayed dead in my dreams. Wasn’t the way I wanted you.”

“It can’t be true,” she said, though the idea didn’t sound as absurd as it had when Dawn had first mentioned it, and she didn’t like that. “You can’t be in love with me.”

Spike chuckled and tugged her top over her head before she could

register what was happening. Then he lowered his mouth to her throat, and she felt a rush that shouldn't be there—one of evolutionary awareness, that a dangerous predator was near a place she was most vulnerable. He must have felt it too, for he chuckled again and clamped his mouth down hard around her skin and sucked. And Buffy sagged, her knees giving in and all of her collapsing forward, only not because he was there, holding her up, pulling her against him, tearing her pajama bottoms off her legs so that she was as naked as he was.

"Tried tellin' myself that," he said as he hiked her into his arms, rubbing his cock along her slick flesh in a way that was becoming familiar. Maybe too familiar—maybe she had been fooling herself from the start where all of this was concerned. The Spike in her head, the one who was technically *her*, wouldn't be trying to convince her that he could be good, that being in love with her was something other than ookie, would it? The thought that this was real—that *any* of it was real—had her more than a little freaked.

But god, she didn't want him to stop. She didn't want any of this to stop.

"Tried," he said again, holding her gaze as he thrust his cock deep inside of her. "Turns out it's too late. Bloody lost for you, Summers."

He kissed her before she could object or argue or think much at all. About what he'd said or what it meant, or the new, terrifying thought that maybe all of this wasn't just a dream after all. Impossible as it sounded. As it *had* to be.

But when he started pumping his hips, she decided those thoughts could wait for morning.



THERE WAS NO WAY WILLOW WOULD HAVE GIVEN BUFFY A STONE that took her to a magical, pocket reality where the sole purpose seemed to be getting naked with a vampire. That knowledge was pretty much the only thing keeping Buffy sane when she awoke the next morning.

First order of business: finding out how the damn moonstone worked.

Second order of business, as she discovered over breakfast: investigating what had almost assuredly been the work of a vampire at the train yard.

Third order of business: figure out how to get a good night's rest without any magical aids. Much as she loved how she spent her evenings, the entire Spike-love-scare had her too wigged to consider using it again.

So, after seeing Dawn off to school, Buffy booked it to Willow's dorm at the UC Sunnydale campus, hoping with everything she had in her that her friend didn't have an early morning class and wouldn't be too offended if she started off the day with a good old-fashioned interrogation.

"Buffy," Willow said when she opened the door, not bothering to hide her surprise—or her confusion as Buffy strong-armed her way inside. "Uhh, hi?"

"Sorry," Buffy replied, whirling around, twisting her fingers together to give her hands something to do. "I know it's early and you have class and I should have called but this is of the dire and it couldn't wait."

"Uh oh." Willow frowned and closed the door. "What's up? Is it Dawn? Something happen with—"

"It's the moonstone you gave me. I need to know..." She pressed her lips together, not sure that she could say all of it aloud. Confessing about sexy dreams was one thing—girl talk, and all, and it wasn't like Willow hadn't taken advantage of the girl code in the past. In fact, Willow had at one time regaled Buffy with graphic descriptions of naughty dreams in which Giles played a leading role. Which she so didn't need to remember now but did anyway.

Still, there was a big difference between dream-crushing on a very old but still very human man and enthusiastically getting naked with the undead every night.

"What is it?" Willow asked again, her already round eyes going even rounder. "Something go wrong?"

"Dreams," Buffy blurted before she could lose her nerve. "I've been having, uhh, dreams. Really vivid dreams. Ever since I started using the moonstone. Is that normal?"

A slow smile spread across Willow's face. "So it *did* work!"

God, this was so not good. It was the opposite of good. "What worked?"

"The spell I put on the stone!" Now Willow squealed—like an actual squeal—and clasped her hands together, bouncing slightly as though suddenly suffering from energy overload. "You didn't say anything so I thought maybe it was a dud, but *Buffy*, this is wonderful!"

Well, that was something. Apparently, her best friend in the whole world thought that she and Spike should be screwing like bunnies. "But why?" she blurted before she could help herself. "Did you know? Did he tell you? Did he put you up to it?"

"No," Willow said, furrowing her brow as her smile faded. "Of course not. I-I just thought that you two could stand to talk things out. You know."

"No, I really don't. What on *earth* would we have to talk out?"

"Uhh, the whole vampire thing?"

"Are you out of your mind? That's not something we can just..." Flustered, Buffy made some sort of spastic gesture with her hand. "I can't believe you would do that without telling me. It's been going on for *weeks* and now he says he's in love with me!"

Willow frowned harder. "Well, of course he's in love with you! You just needed to talk!"

Okay, she was starting to think they were having two different conversations. Like in the movies when one character thought they were hashing something out with a friend only to discover their friend had been on the phone the entire time, and all their responses had been for someone else. Or something. Buffy gave her head a shake, hoping that would help clear up the situation. It did not. "Willow," she said slowly, "please tell me why you think I need to just *talk things out* with Spike?"

That did it. Willow screwed up her face. "Huh? Spike? What about Spike?"

"I was hoping you could tell me," Buffy said through her teeth. "Maybe start from the beginning? What did you do to the moonstone and why?"

There was a long pause in which Willow's expression went from confusion to realization before finally landing on horror. She turned

bright red, sputtered a bunch of nonsense words before seeming to find her footing. “Oh god. *Spike*? You’ve been seeing *Spike* this whole time? Oh. Oh, Buffy. Why didn’t you say something?”

That hardly seemed like the point and she was so not going to give Willow the satisfaction or the blackmail fodder that was knowing that she’d been screwing Spike sideways in her dreams for weeks now. “Just tell me.”

So she did. From the top—how it had started innocently enough. A magical sleep-aid since she knew Buffy could use the assist. How it had spiraled after a conversation with Tara in which they mutually bemoaned that Buffy and Riley hadn’t had a chance to really work through their issues. How Willow had gone to bed that night, her brain abuzz with thoughts of elements to use to inspire a good night’s sleep and fix Buffy’s relationship problems. How brilliance had struck.

“The idea was to let you guys talk when you slept,” Willow said miserably. “You know...foster communication, work through your issues.”

Buffy was in full pace mode by this point in the story, her mind running through a highlight reel of every single encounter she’d had with Spike. How it had started with her popping into some serious oral sex, Spike completely unruffled by her appearance. Enjoying it, even. Reveling in it. Telling her he *loved her*. He’d said that in the dream—he’d said it and she’d brushed it off because it was a dream and dreams were weird only this wasn’t just a dream and every night with Spike had been real.

“Oh my god.” She was going to be sick. Or sad. She felt much closer to sobbing than throwing up, and she didn’t care to explore the reasons why.

“Buffy?” Willow had on her patented worried-slash-forgive-me look. “I’m so sorry.”

Sorry. Great. Her best friend was sorry.

Only she didn’t know the half of it. Not even close.



TURNED OUT THE TRAINFUL OF DEAD ARRIVALS WAS DRUSILLA'S handiwork. Of course it was. In a world where Buffy was sharing dreams with Spike—and that was the tamest way to describe what they were doing—the only thing that could make all this more of a soap opera was the dramatic return of the mad vampire her would-be lover had been absolutely gaga over ever since he'd first blown into her life.

Buffy didn't like the way her stomach twisted when she learned that Drusilla was the baddie needing to be staked. Didn't like that her first thought, after she'd run into a furious Harmony who had been fuming about being kicked out because her boyfriend's ex had blown into town, was that Spike's apparent love for her was extremely conditional. Fine enough for him to whisper it where it didn't really count, in dreams he probably didn't realize were real, but the second Drusilla waltzed back into town, he was ready to dump his sure-thing—another thing Buffy didn't want to consider, that Spike had been fucking her after fucking Harmony—and get his monster back on. So much for the “already as evil as I'm going to get” nonsense. The original power couple was back together and wasn't that just swell?

At the very least, it simplified things up as little else could. Spike was back with Drusilla, which meant he was most certainly not pining after Buffy, which meant she could use the moonstone at least one more time to make sure he knew how very over this weird, creepy thing between them was. That was, if he bothered to show up. He might be too busy reuniting with the woman who had cheated on him with virtually every type of demon there was out there, if the stories were to be believed.

Not that Buffy cared, of course. She didn't. Not at all. Next question, please.

That night, she took an extra long patrol, half-hoping she'd run into the source of her problems and be able to deal with it with a stake—no dice—then busied herself with things around the house upon arriving home, before finally giving in and climbing into bed with the moonstone ready. Then she lay there for a long time, staring at her ceiling, hoping sleep would come without the need to get magical rocks involved. Not wanting to admit to anyone, least of all herself, that she was worried she would find herself alone in their strange

meeting place. Not knowing why she cared but knowing she did, and hating that she did, and hating him for making her worry, hating all of this so much she could choke with it.

Eventually, though, it became clear that sleep wouldn't come without a boost. So Buffy released a deep sigh, closed her eyes, and put the moonstone where it wanted to be.

He was there, waiting as always, only he didn't look like he normally did. Maybe that was her imagination, but she didn't think so. There was no fire in his eyes, no ready smirk, no rush toward her to divest her of her clothing so they could get to the good part. Like he knew that she knew and all pretending was over.

She released a deep breath—apparently, breath-holding was possible in the dreamworld—and stepped forward.

"Where's Drusilla?" she asked bluntly. No sense dancing around anything, right?

Spike arched an eyebrow. "Heard she was in town, did you?"

"Harmony caught you two fooling around."

He snorted. "Bully for Harm."

"So you were. Fooling around. With Drusilla."

"Would it matter to you if I was?"

Buffy pressed her lips together, shaking suddenly, trying to find the right combination of words to throw at him. There was what she knew she needed to say and what she wanted to say, and until this moment, she would have sworn the two speeches were identical. Spike was gross, Spike was evil, Spike was counting down the days until he ran out of free passes and she had to dust him for real. It was all there, memorized and ready for recitation. But something about seeing him here, about the way he was looking at her, about knowing it was all real, screwed with her head and changed her *shoulds* into question marks.

The fact remained that the dreams, screwed up as they were, had somehow become important to her. A place where she could well and truly let go of her worries and responsibilities, embrace the things she wanted and just, well, be free. No pressure from her friends or her watcher or her sister or, most importantly, herself. She liked who she was when she was here, liked how Spike saw her, how

he made her feel, and how she carried that energy with her the following day.

"Yeah," Buffy said at last. "It would matter to me."

"Mhmm." He took a step forward. "Why is that?"

"Well...you said you love me, for starters."

"Bloody curse is what it is, loving you."

The words themselves didn't hurt, but that he spoke them so plainly did. Like it was obvious.

But Buffy was nothing if not a glutton for punishment, so she had to ask. "What makes it a curse?"

"You mean besides the fact that it's wrong? Not enough that I got myself defanged with this bloody chip, had to go and fall in love with the sodding Slayer. At least I have an excuse with the chip, yeah? Was somethin' done to me." He shook his head, pressed the heel of his palm against his brow. "Turns out loving you is the reason, though. Reason I came back here in the first place. Thought it was to kill you proper, do it for her, prove to her that you were nothin' to me. Took me too bloody long to suss out why I needed to prove it at all. She knew, though. Always does. Then this started."

"What's *this*?"

"Dreams of you. Like this, like you are now."

She didn't know what to say to that, having not given much consideration as to how all had unfolded on Spike's end. "You know you're dreaming."

He snorted. "Of course I'm bloody dreaming. Not like you'd touch me out there, is it? Fuck, Slayer, I've been dreamin' about you for years, and was always the same. Fighting or fucking or both. But somethin' happened. Some switch in my head and suddenly it didn't feel like a dream anymore. Suddenly you started showin' up and actin' like you're really her. Makes a man..." But he didn't finish the thought, rather looked away, his jaw tightening. "Makes a man go a bit loopy upstairs. Enough to tell the woman who was once his salvation to bugger off when she came by to save him from himself."

Buffy's heart somersaulted. "You...told her to leave?"

"Did at that. Stern warning and all, that she better not come back, else my lady'll have words."

"But Harmony caught you making out."

Spike lifted a shoulder, not meeting her gaze. "Had to see, didn't I? Dru was my last chance. If anyone could knock the Slayer outta me, it's her. Didn't work for rot, though. Second I touched her I knew I was a bloody goner. More interested in chattin' up a dream than I was her."

"And..." Buffy swallowed, inching forward. "And what about being evil? The chip? You said before that if you get it out—"

"I get it out and it'll become right clear to everyone that I am the Slayer's lapdog." He laughed again, the sound fractured. "She's broken me. Bitch'll probably never know, wouldn't give a toss if she did figure it out, and there's nothin' I'd like more than to rip out these feelings and go back to the way things are supposed to be. Just my rotten luck to love her like I do."

"Spike."

"Sorry, pet. Apparently not very good company tonight. Didn't ever feature myself turnin' Dru away if she ever came to her senses and crawled back to me. Just drove home how bloody lost I am for the Slayer." He paused, snorted. "And how buggered I am because of it."

"Spike." Buffy stepped forward again, her heart hammering. All the things she'd told herself she'd say to him, the horror of discovering how real these dreams were, what and how she felt. It didn't make sense, her and Spike. At all. But it also kinda did in a weird *maybe-this-is-why-I-can-never-have-normal* sort of way. Her world was always in crisis, no clear path to victory, no certainty to speak of. The only constant the past few years had given her, aside from her friends, was the one vampire she could never shake off.

It was crazy. God, she knew how crazy it was. How crazy *she* was for even considering the things she was suddenly considering. The fact remained, though, that she knew Spike. Knew how he was when he loved, when he believed in something, when he went after what he wanted. All that power and cunning—and yeah, penchant for making bad choices, sure—suddenly hers. He would fight for her, protect for her, love for her. He would give himself over entirely because that was the person he was. Had always been.

The only thing was she wouldn't be able to move forward, see if

this went somewhere, without first asking herself if she thought it possible that she could love Spike back. If she were to try this with him, it had to be for the right reasons. It had to be because she wanted him, too.

Buffy bit her lip, and when he met her eyes again, something inside of her locked into place.

They would be chaotic and messy and passionate and probably a complete disaster. But they would also be fun. Perhaps the most fun she'd ever had.

"Spike, you need to know something," she said, again strangely aware of how hard her heart was hammering. "Willow did a spell."

He studied her for a moment, arched an eyebrow. "Yeah, and?"

"She gave me something called a moonstone. I haven't been sleeping well and she... Well, she thought she could help." Buffy wetted her lips. "She also thought she might be able to put me in contact with Riley. Through dreams. So we could talk things out. Suffice to say, in the great tradition of Willow's spells, something went wrong."

Spike was still staring at her, though a bit of understanding had leaked into his eyes. After a long beat, he huffed a little laugh and stepped forward. "Tryin' to tell me you're really here, is that it? Not so soft in the head that I'll believe anything."

"Well, believe it. This is really me."

"Mmhmm. Prove it."

She rolled her eyes. "How am I supposed to do that? Hello, still sleeping."

"How long's this been goin' on?"

"A few weeks. R-really ever since Riley left."

Spike nodded, eyed her up and down in a way that had become intimately familiar over that stretch of time. "So when I've had you here," he said, edging closer still, "under me, around me..." Suddenly he was close enough to touch, and demonstrated this by cupping her chin and running his thumb over her mouth. "Suckin' on me, it's really been you?"

Buffy shoved him back—more instinct than anything else—and felt the normal rush of excitement along with the *gross*. Normal enough that when she recognized that was what it was, she was more surprised

to realize that it had always been there, tagging along after her indignation. Every nasty thing he'd said or lobbed at her, part of her had been excited.

"I thought it was a dream, too," she said. "Just a dream. So it didn't matter what I did here. Even if it was you."

Spike breathed out, tilted his head, the gleam in his eyes softening a smidge and allowing in a glimpse of what she knew was belief. "Bloody hell," he said, stepping back now. "Slayer..."

"Yeah."

He dropped his arms to his sides, worked his throat. "Since he left?"

"Yeah. I put this stone on my head and I'm here."

"And you kept doin' it. Kept comin' here."

She shrugged, looking away now. "Like I said, I didn't know it was real. I didn't think it hurt. Dreams being, you know, dreams. Always woke up with extra perk to spare, which was a big plus. And..." Buffy inhaled, steeling herself. Once she admitted this, she knew there was no going back. "I liked it."

Spike made a soft sound that might have been a growl or a moan. Maybe both. Then he was against her, his hands on her face, tilting her head back so that she had no choice but to look at him. He searched her eyes for what felt like forever, flicked his gaze to her lips, then up again. "Liked it, did you?"

"Please don't make me regret telling you that."

The corner of his mouth ticked up. "Like it enough to get the real treatment, love?"

"I... I think I want to. As long as you're not obnoxious."

"That so?"

"You know what I mean."

He nodded, grinning still, and nipped at her lips. "I know what you mean," he whispered. "Think it's time we have this out in person."

"In person?"

"You say you're real. This is real?" Spike cupped her cheek, his face growing serious. "I want you to tell me when we're awake. Come and look me in the eye and tell me this hasn't been all in my head."

"A-and then what happens?"

But she knew, of course. She knew and he knew, and now things were real. The ball was in her court. This was the last time they would see each other in dreams. It was on her to decide what that meant.

“Guess we’ll see,” Spike said, and kissed her.



THE FACT THAT HE PROBABLY KNEW SHE WAS HERE MADE IT WORSE, she thought. Standing outside his crypt, trying to work up the nerve to do what she’d come here to do. It wasn’t a matter of want—she had already had that conversation with herself a time or twelve hundred since she’d come out of the last dream. Sometimes sleep revelations remained in sleep-land, leaving the conscious mind perplexed but otherwise unchanged. But Buffy had known as she was having it that her sleep revelation was a mold-breaker, as real as everything else had been inside those dreams. The second she’d opened her eyes and seen that it was still dark out, she’d leaped to her feet and started tugging on clothes, determined to prove to him that everything she’d said was true. Him and herself.

Still, it was a big step, opening the door. Big. Huge. Terrifying. Her head was full of cautionary tales she’d already lived through once. All the ways this could and probably would go wrong with him—with *them*—because they made the kind of sense that didn’t.

But still, those other persistent thoughts remained—what if it *didn’t* go wrong? What if they actually *did* make sense? What if, despite all odds, this was where her path had been leading her all along?

That last thought seemed a bit too wishful to be real, but the fact that she did *wish* it meant something.

The scrape of metal against stone tore through the air before her brain could drag her down another rabbit hole. Apparently, Spike had gotten tired of her one-woman production of *Hamletta*, for he was there the next second, standing in the doorway wearing jeans and an open long-sleeved shirt, nothing underneath. Nothing but miles of skin she had explored at length in a place that wasn’t real, even if the experience had been.

"Slayer," Spike said in an oddly formal tone. "Bit late for you, innit? Thought you'd be tucked up in your beddy-bye, all safe and sound. Or did you need something?"

It was in his voice as well as his eyes—the question. Eyes she had looked into so many times now, like this but also never like this.

"I need something," she said.

He arched an eyebrow. "Night's not gettin' any younger."

No, it wasn't. Especially for someone who had already made the choice that mattered.

"I need you to kiss me," Buffy replied in a hurry, the words almost tripping over themselves in her rush to get them out.

This was the part she hated. The vulnerable part. The part where the ball left her court and took up space in someone else's. That he didn't move at once—didn't swoop in and claim her mouth as he had so often in the dreams—gave Buffy license to panic for a few really long seconds that perhaps she had completely lost her mind after all. It would be some sort of hellmouth justice, wouldn't it, if she decided to go for it with Spike based on a version of him that didn't exist.

But then his expression softened and he stepped forward so she could see his eyes clearly. And again, she thought of how well she knew those eyes, and all doubt flashed away.

"Be certain, Slayer," Spike said thickly. "I kiss you and it all changes."

She inhaled and edged a step closer. "I know. I thought about it."

"Mmhmm. And what'd you think?"

Did he really want to have a conversation and not make with the smoochies? Here she had been preparing herself to be seized and perhaps thrown against a wall or something as he ripped off her clothes and turned her dreams into reality—only literally and not just a cheesy line she heard in bad infomercials. Spike stopping to philosophize over what this meant for them hadn't been in the brochure. The guy couldn't do anything the easy way.

"I'm standing here, aren't I?"

The corner of Spike's mouth kicked up like he was fighting a grin. Which he likely was, the ass. "You are," he agreed, closing another space between them. "Just wanna make sure you knew that. All real

here. No dreams. I kiss you, touch you, it doesn't go away when you wake up."

"What do you want, Spike?"

"Believe you know what's at stake for me here."

She didn't—and then she did. Of course she did.

"I don't love you," she said, hating the way her voice shook with the words. "Not—not today. Not right now. I have no idea if this will work or last. It makes no sense."

"You know just what to say to get a bloke hot, you know?"

"But I wouldn't be here if I didn't think it was possible." The words came out in a rush, like she was afraid her brain would realize what it was she was saying and try to stop her before it could get out. Truth of the matter was, it took saying those words to realize just how much she meant them. That she had to have thought it, believed it on some gut level, to gather the strength and desire to see this through. Come here and ask for a chance outside of dreams.

Spike's eyes softened. "Yeah?"

"I-I have a bit of catch-up to do," she said. "If you can wait."

A beat. "For you, Slayer, I can wait until the end of the bloody world."

"For the love," she blurted. "Just for the love, right? We don't have to wait to—"

"Fuck no."

Then he was in her space, around her, one hand on her ass and the other twining through her hair, and his mouth was on hers. Fierce and passionate, damn near fiery, everything it had been in the dreams and more than that. It was the sort of kiss she associated with a version of herself she'd thought no longer in reach, but nope, had been right here the whole time. Buffy was wrapped around him in a blink, chasing his tongue with hers, moaning when he moaned, stumbling after him when he tugged her back, back, before deciding it would be easier to do this if he could do the walking for the both of them.

He must have read her mind, for he hauled her against his chest, growled his approval when her legs curled around his hips, and then they were moving. Through the dark of the crypt—stopping a few times to admire the stone walls, which she admitted was kinda hard to

do with her back pressed against them—and deeper still. Somehow, they had managed to make their way down—this place had a whole other level, who knew?—and Spike had a bed there. Only her vampire would think about hauling a mattress into a cemetery.

“Got lots I want to do to you, pet,” he said against her lips, shoving her jacket down her arms. “Any requests before we get started?”

Buffy worked her throat. “Define *lots*.”

“Enough to keep till the end of the world in the hopes you’ll love me by the time we get there.” He grinned when he said it, as though to pass it off as a joke. But he wasn’t joking, and something in her chest wrenched.

Maybe it won’t take until the end of the world.

The thought was heady, almost too large for her, but the sort she knew better than to try to fight. She knew herself, knew what it felt like when she started to fall. Knew how futile it was to stand in the way, even when it didn’t make sense. Perhaps especially when it didn’t make sense.

She and Spike didn’t make sense, but the fall would come. Buffy realized she was fine with that.

“I’m okay with lots,” she said, trailing her fingers along his chest. “I just want you.”

Spike stared at her long enough she worried she might have broken him, then growled and took her mouth again.

And she was fine with that, too.



OVER THE NEXT FEW WEEKS, THERE WERE A LOT OF LITTLE moments. Plenty of big ones, too, but the little ones were what stuck with her.

The first came when she told him she wanted to keep what was happening between them, well, between *them*. She didn’t really have a good reason, except that going twelve rounds of Litigating Buffy’s Love Life was the last thing she needed at the moment. *After* became her mantra. After Glory was gone, after they knew Dawn was safe and the world secure, that was when they would tell the others. Right now,

Buffy didn't have the emotional mileage to put behind defending a relationship no one would understand. Not even to her mom, who liked Spike just fine as a cocoa buddy, probably not as a vampire boyfriend.

"But more than she liked Angel, right?" Spike had asked, earning a well-deserved thwack with his pillow. They spent a lot of time post-patrol at his place. It was nice, discreet, and she could make all kinds of sounds without worrying about disturbing the neighbors. Or, in her case, her family. And Spike definitely liked putting that to the test—just how loud he could make her scream. Or moan. Or, well, any sound she made, he was generally a fan of.

Though he had been disappointed about keeping their relationship private for the time being, he'd said he understood. Big adjustment, from enemies to mad about each other, after all. No sense making things hard for her. All he cared about was he got to love her. And that they came up with a good enough reason to include him in the Scooby meetings, as this fight was as much his as it was hers.

The second moment came the day she found her mom on the couch. The day her world changed forever.

In truth, Buffy didn't remember a whole lot of what had followed then. The time between arriving home and going to pick Dawn up felt detached from her somehow—she knew she'd lived it, had conversations, made phone calls, and had all kinds of thoughts that should have scared her but hadn't. The entire business of death had never hit her before then, how awful it was. Clinical, detached. Things the EMTs said that made it sound like her mom wasn't a person at all, just a thing that had broken at the house. She hadn't cried until after slaying the vampire in the morgue, and even then only a little. Losing her shit hadn't been an option.

Spike had shown up that night. She'd been on the back porch, trying to think—or not think—and there he'd been. To share her silence as he had on another night like this. She'd missed patrol and he'd been worried, but then he'd seen her eyes and known. And like that night not too far back, he had settled beside her. Unlike that night, he'd put an arm around her and tugged her into him, and she'd cried for real. A hard cry, all snot and tears and an awful, chest-crushing

sound she hadn't realized she could make. And time had whirled on by, unforgiving in that way it had, and somehow she'd ended up in her bedroom. When she'd awakened, it had been to an empty bed, but a lived-in sort of empty that made her think Spike had stayed until sunrise. The note he'd left on her nightstand, along with a glass of water and some aspirin, told her she was right.

The third moment had been not long after that one. The funeral, which had been the requisite necessary and terrible, full of pretty words spoken by a preacher who hadn't known her mother, and overflowing with people lining up to give Buffy their sorrys and platitudes and meaning well, she knew, but somehow more intolerable because of it. Once the crowd had thinned, she'd stood at the graveside for hours, wondering what to do next. How a *next* could even exist. Eventually, night had fallen and Angel had shown up. He'd said some things, the usual things. He'd touched her, hugged her, and for a second she'd wanted to go back to the girl she'd been when a hug from Angel had been all she needed to feel whole and right. She'd even thought about kissing him, see if that could set the world back the way it needed to be. Then she'd felt awful for having the thought, more so when she realized she sensed Spike nearby. Something inside of her had switched, and she'd realized before Angel left that she'd buried part of herself in that grave, too.

She'd gone to see Spike afterward, prepared for his jealousy—jealousy she couldn't say was entirely unearned. And yeah, he'd been a bit distant. Smiles a bit strained, answers shorter than she'd grown accustomed to. But when she'd decided the best way to get past the Angel thing was to face it head-on, he'd folded and buried his face in his hands.

"I'm a wanker," he'd said. "I'm sorry, love. Whatever you need now. Even if it's him, no matter how much I hate it. Can't promise I'll be a good boy about it—will probably get nice and sloshed, might say some things I'll regret—but I won't love you any less."

Buffy's heart, which had taken far too many blows, had cracked even further, though she hadn't told him that. Just kissed him, assured him that she was with the person she wanted to be with, and that

Angel was gone. There had been more she'd wanted to articulate, but the words hadn't come. Maybe they would someday.

The fourth moment had been Glory—after Spike had been nabbed under suspicion of being the Key, given the amount of time he and Buffy had been spending together. It had culminated in seeing the hell-god's handiwork, the amount of physical abuse Spike had endured to protect Dawn. That Buffy hadn't been surprised *had* surprised her. That she'd known, without needing reassurances from him or anyone else, that her sister's secret was safe with him. That when she'd mounted up to go get her vampire back, it had been for that purpose and that purpose alone. She hadn't had an explanation for the others as to why rescuing Spike was so important, aside from the obvious reasons, nor had she had an explanation ready for the state he was in. Too banged up for anyone to believe he'd given Glory anything of value. And the others hadn't known why. It wasn't like Spike had any reason not to blab.

The final moment was this one.

"Till the end of the world," Spike was saying, looking at her with such love and devotion it was almost a physical ache. "Even if that happens to be tonight."

He would. He really would. He would give all of himself and more to protect Dawn, to fight this fight, to spare her the pain of losing someone else she loved.

And that was when it hit—a lightning bolt of perfect clarity, the things she knew and the things she thought and the things she felt becoming one. The future she hoped to live in past tonight was one she needed Spike to be a part of.

"Spike," she said in a hurry, seizing his arm as he made his way toward the door. "I need to tell you something."

He turned to her, his eyes soft and warm. And she saw he knew.

"After," he said. "Tell me after."

Buffy swallowed, fighting back the burn of tears, the rush of sudden terrible dread of what came next. "There might not be an after, you know. This might be it."

He nodded. "Might be, yeah. Still, gotta give you incentive to give me one, don't I?"

"I'll try."

"No *try* about it, Slayer. I'm holding you to it. Not gettin' away from me that easy." Spike grinned, drew close and brushed a kiss across her lips. "I love you."

"Now you're not being fair."

"Not my fault you waited till now to say it, sweets."

"Still with the unfair."

"I am evil, you remember. Fair's not exactly in my nature."

"Well, you know that thing I said about not all of us making it? You're officially not allowed to dust on me. You die tonight and I'm kicking your ass."

"No intention of dyin' tonight. Got too much to live for." He kissed her again, pressed his brow to hers and inhaled deeply. "So let's get us to the other side of this, yeah?"

Buffy nodded, trembling, and reached for his free hand to lace her fingers through his. "Deal."

And together, they set off to face the apocalypse. Her friends might give them some weird looks when they showed up hand-in-hand, but she found she couldn't be too bothered to care right now. Assuming they made it to tomorrow, the questions would come, as would the judgments and predictions of doom, but she had what she needed now. And who knew? Maybe she was selling them short and they would understand.

She could dream.

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 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.

