



For Allison, who knows why.

Superficially inspired after seeing "The Lake House", but Buffy and Spike don't share a mailbox, so I had to come up with something different.



PART I

CHAPTER ONE

It was raining again. Combing out her wet hair in front of the window overlooking the Slayer school's rose garden, Buffy thought that, after six months living in Bath, she should have been used to English rain in all its misty, foggy forms. California girl that she was, she had yet to get used to not seeing the sun all that often.

Sunnydale and everything she'd known lay buried beneath the water that had flooded the hellmouth crater to form a nice, big lake that was starting to be ringed by resorts and developments that only the most wealthy could afford. It wasn't called Sunnydale any more, and Buffy couldn't be bothered to remember what they'd re-christened it. It didn't matter, she'd never go back.

Laying down the comb, she pulled her bathrobe tighter and sank cross legged on the couch. It wasn't hers, not really, any more than any piece of furniture in the small flat belonged to her.

"I'm sure you'll want to decorate your own flat," Giles had said, smiling more easily once Buffy had agreed to come with him and the other Scoobies to Bath and assist with the rapid rebuilding of the Watcher's Council and the establishment of a new Slayer school to train the initiates they'd already found.

"Not really," she'd responded. "Willow knows what I like. Let her do it."

Buffy had chosen none of the furniture and none of the artwork on the walls or the knick knacks on the shelves. The clock-radio beside her bed, the china in her kitchen, and every article of clothing in Buffy's closet was something her friend had chosen for her--with the exception of her shoes because, as Willow herself had tentatively pointed out, "I can't do that for you because, obviously, the shoes wouldn't fit

right and then your feet would hurt."

So the first thing she'd done upon her arrival at Heathrow was to go and buy shoes. It was something that had thrilled her in Sunnydale, but something that exhausted her when she tried it in London because it required that she get up and stop staring at the walls. *Get up and do something* that resembled living. She'd gotten the shoes--one pair of sneakers and another pair of sensible walkers--that had made Dawn arch an eyebrow when she had seen them.

"What happened to the stylish stilettos and little black boots?"

"Not really in the mood for those," Buffy had muttered. Curling up on the couch, she'd gone back to staring at the wall.

"What's wrong with you?" Dawn had demanded.

"I miss Spike."

She'd only had to say it once, because Dawn tripped out to inform everyone that her sister was moody and in mourning. They all tiptoed after that--knocking politely on her door rather than bursting through as they used to do back in Sunnydale, and speaking in low tones whenever they addressed her, as if breaking her funereal silence could break her even more than she already was inside. If they were glad Spike was gone--and Buffy had no doubt that they were--they didn't say so around her.

"She's fragile," Buffy overheard her erstwhile Watcher tell Xander.

I am, she had no trouble admitting to herself. *I miss Spike. I need him. And I regret so much what I did to him.*

She cried when they weren't looking because, well, she was strong and never cried about anything when they were looking. Not about Angel turning into Angelus. Not when her mother died or when Glory took Dawn. Certainly not when an annoying, newly ensouled vampire turned to ashes while saving the world when he should have dusted long ago. He was gone, lost in the hellmouth after he'd made her world safe and supposedly easier to live in. Buffy wasn't the only Chosen One anymore for new Slayers were now legion. She could have that happy, normal life now because Spike had loved her enough to let go of not only her, but her world. That her world was empty without him, Buffy sensed that no one else, not even Spike, would have understood.

None of her surviving friends could understand or help, so she stared at the wall and got up to put one foot in front of the other whenever someone wanted her to. She lectured and taught, she shared her training as she shared her duties with the new Slayers. If she resembled the Buffybot more than the strong, formidable Slayer whom Giles and the others had known in Sunnydale, no one bothered her about it. She was, after all, *fragile*.

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Stepping back to allow a giggling set of Slayerettes to exit from the lift, Buffy held the door for Giles who was entering with a beautifully ornate wooden box.

"What floor?" she asked.

"Yours." He shifted the box. "This is for you."

"But it's not my birthday."

"It's more of an...unbirthday gift." The corner of her Watcher's mouth lifted slightly--more in a quirk than the beginnings of a smile.

She led the way from the lift and keyed open her door, then turned to take the box from him. Setting it on the kitchen table, she looked up at Giles who was rearranging his suit coat and pulling down his cuffs.

"This is a writing box, Buffy. From the end of the eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century, these boxes were part of Victorian expeditions and travel, libraries and drawing rooms. This one appears to be about 150 years old. It's made of rosewood, and it belonged to Spike."

She flinched to hear the name. Reaching out, she ran her fingers over the warm wood. "How did he... How did you...."



"It's my understanding that Spike left it with Clem before going to Africa. Spike brought it to me the night before our final battle."

That's the night I killed Caleb, she remembered. The night Spike saw me talking to Angel and said I had Angel breath.

"He hotwired the school bus for me, brought it home, and we stored the box beneath the back seat," Giles continued. "Spike asked if I'd look after it and make sure you got it, should he not make it through."

Blinking back tears, Buffy bit her lip and traced patterns on the old wood.

"Here is the key." Her Watcher handed over the delicate thing on a silver chain. "I've not opened it."

"I thought you would, if only to add to what the Council knows about William the Bloody."

"No. Unlike a writing desk or table, these boxes were not a household possession, Buffy. They were

intensely personal, and whatever is inside, Spike meant it for you. If you decide to share your contents with me later...."

She closed her fingers around the key. "Thank you, Giles."

"I'll leave you to it, then." Stepping closer, he laid a hand on her shoulder. "If you need me--"

"I know."

The Watcher let himself out. Placing the small key on the table, Buffy swirled the chain in circles around it and listened to its metallic whisper over the soft ticking of the mantel clock. Pulling up a chair, she sat down and stared at the box for a moment.

I remember you, she thought. You lived in his crypt on that beat-up pine bookcase that was lopsided and wobbly, and you were always locked. I should know, I checked.

Taking up the key, she placed it in the lock. The tumblers clicked over easily--something she hadn't expected--with the warped lid springing up slightly.

"This feels so wrong," she whispered to the box. "Like I'm intruding. But Spike meant for me to have you. Meant for me to open you. I guess."

Lifting the squeaking lid, Buffy was greeted by compartments holding two screw-top inkwells full of ink, a pen tray full of dip pens and clean nibs, and a writing surface. The writing surface unfolded to double its depth and was covered in velvet.



Oh, my God, I think this belonged to William. But velvet can't last 150 years, can it? Spike must have replaced it at least once. Her fingers were shaking as she ran her fingers over the soft fabric, and then folded the writing surface back onto itself.

Exploring further, Buffy found what looked like the seams to three drawers inserted beneath the writing

surface, but she couldn't find any obvious way to open them. Eyeing the inkwells, she noticed a raised tab next to the one on the right. She pushed on the tab and was rewarded with three drawers springing open.



Reaching inside the first drawer, Buffy retrieved a small envelope. Turning it over, she saw that someone had decorated it using colored inks.



They're still so bright, it could have been done yesterday, she thought.

'My Sarah's Hair ... Obit Feb XX 1864'
'She is not dead but sleepeth.'
'Rest in peace.'

A black cross adorned each corner while twin funeral wreaths were joined by a garland beneath the words. Centered in each wreath was an initial: W and S. Turning over the envelope, Buffy saw that the wax seal with its stylized 'W' had long been broken. Peering inside, Buffy found a thin braid made of brown hair, and a card-mounted photograph of a boy in spectacles. Dressed in a solemn black suit, he held the hand of a blurry toddler in a lace dress that was far too long and adult for her.

If William was turned in 1880 when he was about twenty-five, then in 1864 he would have been nine or ten. Just like the boy in the photo. Turning it over, Buffy saw that someone had spider-sprawled, Wills and Sary, Xmas 1863.

"Hello, William," she whispered to the boy. Was Sarah his little sister? She died only two months later, how sad.

A crayon drawing was next. It may have been undated and unsigned, but Buffy knew the style all too well after seeing pencil sketches of her own family and Jenny in Sunnydale that had been drawn by the same vampire artist.

Angelus did this.

Highly detailed to the point of being eerily lifelike, the drawing featured an impossibly good-looking, grinning young man whose too-long hair fell into his eyes. Caught between game-face and human-face, the fledgling vamp's sharp incisors were all too evident, as was the wicked tongue behind the fangs and the smear of blood at the corner of his mouth.

You know you wanna dance, Buffy heard as clear as yesterday in her mind.

"You never stopped dancing, did you?" Buffy whispered as she set the things aside on the table beside her and returned to exploring the drawers. What looked like an old house key on a tattered black ribbon came up next.

"What door did you fit?" Buffy wondered before setting it aside as well.

A stack of photos had been stuffed into a manila envelope, and Buffy had to remove a handful before the envelope would slide free of the drawer. Separating them, Buffy found multiple sets of silly photo-booth photos of Dawn and Spike, which Buffy knew had to have been taken at the booth in Sunnydale Mall during the summer she was gone.

One featured Spike in game-face mock-biting Dawn, while the teenager laughed and shoved him away. A cross-eyed vampire wasn't something Buffy was used to seeing, and she could practically hear her sister's giggles and Spike's growling to encourage the giggling to continue. The Scoobies had told her Spike had been the only one Dawn had been able to stand being near for any amount of time that summer.

"Good on you," she told the vampire in the photo. He was the only one I could stand to be near after I came back, too. I'm so sorry that I never told him that. Maybe one day I can tell Dawn.

Spike and Dawn had their arms wrapped around each other in the next photo. Leaning their foreheads together, both the vampire and the teenager seemed to have forgotten the flashing camera. Spike was looking at the girl as though whatever she had been saying at the moment was the most important thing in his world, while Dawn was obviously babbling as only Dawn could. Another photo-booth series was of Spike in game-face, staring in profile at Dawn while she cradled his ridges and kissed his nose. His mouth was open slightly with the tip of one fang showing.

"You really did love her, didn't you?" Buffy whispered. "And she loved you."

There were more photos behind these, and Buffy remembered Spike explaining how addictive the late Victorians had found the new photographic processes.

"You went into a studio and stood very still until your hands and your face went numb. Afterward, you were rewarded with a dark, fuzzy image of yourself to pass around in the drawing room during at-homes and supper parties. Yeah, it was like magic."

Spike stole this one! Buffy thought accusingly, grabbing a photo Giles must have taken of her at their ill-fated Thanksgiving dinner. She'd been caught stabbing Spike's arm with a dinner knife after he'd stolen her forkful of turkey. He was smirking, she was in full rant, and he had to have stolen the photo from Giles later. *What else did you steal, you... you vampire-thief you!*

The next one had been stolen as well, but not in any light-fingered way. A yellow stickie note was stuck to the front of the Polaroid print, onto which Dawn had scribbled, 'If she ever sees this, I'm DEAD.' That note told Buffy exactly who she had to blame for the photo of her leaning against Spike on the couch in the old house on Revello, sound asleep and clinging to the vampire for dear life. For once, Spike wasn't smirking.

I'd been ripped out of heaven only that week, Buffy remembered, noting the scabs that still marred her knuckles where she clutched Spike's black t-shirt. *He told me to rest my eyes for a few minutes, that he'd warn me when the Scoobies came back. I was so tired, and he felt so good to be near. He breathed constantly that night, I guess so he'd feel more alive as he held me.*

Spike's arms were tight around her, his cheek against the top of her head, and his blue eyes were fiercely protective as they met the camera.

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CHAPTER TWO

Buffy took a break from exploring the writing box, to let the tears come without any fear of damaging the box and whatever else lay within. She took the time to heat some soup as well, regardless she didn't feel like eating, in an attempt to ease the headache starting behind her eyes. Returning to the box later in the afternoon, she began exploring the largest and deepest drawer and found an April 1880 program from the opening production of Gilbert & Sullivan's "The Pirates of Penzance."

Was that the last show William saw before he was turned? Buffy wondered.

Beneath it was a theatre program from Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

This is autographed? Buffy marveled.

She peered at the inscription. "My dear William, it's good to have seen you again after so many years. ~O. Wilde."

Spike knew Oscar Wilde? Wait until Giles hears about this.

She was blind sided by a thank-you note in Joyce's handwriting that was buried beneath the programs, along with two ticket stubs from one of the Sun's matinee showings of 'Chicken Run.'

"I had a wonderful time at the movies with you," her mother had written. "We'll have to sneak off again sometime."

"Mom snuck away from her gallery with Spike while I was in school?" Buffy squeaked. "They didn't say anything to me."

What was worse was that Buffy discovered more ticket stubs in a Zingos Extra Strength Cinnamon Breath Mints tin that had been tucked away in one of the smaller drawers.

"They went to *Evita* and *Jerry Maguire* together and didn't take me?" She shook the tin. "I don't *believe* this!"

Buffy next found a small box pushed far back in the drawer. A beautiful knotwork ring lay nestled inside, along with a receipt. Unfolding the receipt, Buffy found a pencil design of two rings stapled to it. The receipt itself read:

(1)Special order gimmel wedding ring Size 5--Silver. \$150

~~(1)Special order gimmel wedding ring Size 9--Silver \$200~~

Buffy ran her finger over the shining silver. *Spike designed this for me?*

Lifting it from the box, she peered at the inscription inside,

Buffy Anne & William · 24 June 2000

The wedding date was the one she and the vampire had set years before while under the influence of Willow's "My will be done" spell. Closing her fingers around the ring, Buffy thought, *When did he look at rings for us? He obviously canceled the order for his after the spell ended. Why didn't he cancel mine too?*

Maybe he didn't want to, her heart answered the question. *Or maybe it was too late, and he had to pay for a ring he knew he'd never see on my finger.* She slipped the ring onto her wedding finger, and it fit.

Of course it fits. Obsessed Spike ordered it. She left the ring on.

Peering into the box, Buffy saw that only a few items remained. A plain, tarnished-silver Zippo lighter lay forlornly in the third small drawer. She knew that the one Spike had carried had gone into the hellmouth with him, this one had to be a spare. Flicking it open, she heard the familiar snick and smiled. This lighter was missing its flint and the fluid was long gone. The sound was still comforting.

Beneath the theatre programs was a stack of parchment writing paper and what looked like hand-made envelopes. Closer inspection informed Buffy that the flaps were unglued. Digging beneath the paper, she found a forgotten calling card and gasped as she turned it over.



"Oh, my god." Her fingers trembled as they traced the antique lettering on the brittle card. She blinked hard as tears made the words smear. "Your last name was Ward."

She knew she would never tell Giles.

"You were real," Buffy whispered, blinking back tears again. "More real and more alive than I think I am now."

Setting aside the card and knowing she'd stare at it some more later, Buffy discovered the only things left in the writing box were a brass letter-seal with a stylized 'W' and a few sticks of brown sealing wax--the same sort, she noticed, as had been used to seal closed the envelope containing his Sarah's hair.

And thus endeth the lessons of Spike's writing box, thought Buffy. *I'm sorry, Giles, but William the Bloody kept no psychotic trophies in his writing box, and there's no journal telling about his decades of death and destruction. All he kept were a few simple mementoes over the years that are more human than vampire, just like Spike himself was.*

Giles will be disappointed. Maybe I can show him the Oscar Wilde theatre program?

Taking up one of the dip pens, she examined it. *Spike actually wrote with this? When did they start making*

fountain pens?

She opened one of the ink wells to discover it held black ink. The other held brown.

Did Spike still write like this when he lived in Sunnydale? He had to, if the ink in these isn't all dried up. I remember seeing his handwriting on Dawn's homework. What did he write with this?

Placing a sheet of Spike's parchment before her, she lifted one of the inkwells free and pushed Spike's things safely out of the way. Taking up the dip pen, Buffy thought, *I don't have the slightest idea what I'm doing. Not only that, Spike was left-handed and I'm not. Is that going to make a difference?*

She dipped the pen carefully into the ink and ventured to see how well she could write with the primitive setup. The nib scraped across the paper and the ink bled. Frustrated, Buffy rinsed the first nib and tried others until she found a nib she could sort-of use and sort-of got the hang of how much ink was required, how light a touch was necessary. Having ruined the first piece of paper, she took up a fresh one and began in earnest.

Dear Spike,

I've never used a dip pen before. I'm sorry for the blotches and the mistakes. This kind of writing is really a lost art, isn't it? I remember your saying that they beat you as a child when you messed up your copybook. I'll beat myself up when I mess this up.

It's all so different--the sound of the pen scratching against the paper, and the skittering and staining if I push too hard. If I get too much ink, it blotches. If I get too little, the ink fades after only a couple of words. Having to stop and get more ink all of the time really forces you to slow down, doesn't it, so why were you in a hurry all of the time?

I'm sure, if you were here, you'd tell me anything that slows me down is a good thing. Even if you never really slowed down unless you were forced by Glory or the First Evil or--something eviler than you were, anyway.

I guess it's not such a bad thing to slow down and think of what I would say to you now that you're gone. We never really talked, you and me, even if you were always saying, "We need to talk."

I promised that we would once the whole First Evil/hellmouth thing was over. But you died and--oh God, Spike, I miss you so much. You died and I'll never hear your voice again. I can write all these words to you, but you'll never see them or know anything about how I feel about you. It's all my fault, and I left it too late, didn't I?

I'm sorry, but I need to take a break now. I'm crying and see, it's splotching your good paper. I'm sorry, I'll be back later.



Okay, it's later and I'm back.

Dawn misses you badly, but she's doing well in a prep school in Rome. They're pushing her so hard that she should graduate on time. After that, I don't know what happens. She wants to go to college and Giles said the Council will pay, but if they're going to try and tie her to them I don't think it's a good idea. So that needs to be negotiated, and you know how much I'm not negotiation girl. I hate that we have to beg for money from Giles and the new Council too. You'd have things to say about that I know.

I guess you can tell that Giles gave me your writing box. The things you left inside make me feel closer to you and, at the same time, they make me miss you even more.

I'll probably make copies of the pictures of you and Dawn in the photo booth and give the originals to her. I wish you two had shared them with me. I knew you two were close, but--you really did love Dawn like she was your little sister, didn't you?

I was in Rome for awhile but am in Bath now to help Giles start his new

Slayer school. I didn't want to, but Faith went to Cleveland and the Slayerettes can't teach anybody anything yet. They're scattered all over the world, trying to apply what you and I taught them. So I'm "the one" again and am teaching newbies whether I want to or not.

I miss having you at my side so much. I never thought you'd be the one who left. You were immortal, like a cat with nine lives, like the cat out of that song I learned as a kid--"The cat came back, he just couldn't stay away...."

If I keep talking about this, I'll cry again and mess up the paper some more, so let's talk about something else, okay?

Your card was in the box, and it has what I guess is your old address. I wish what I sent to you could really reach you at Queen's Gate Terrace. But if it did, I guess William would be the one to get this letter back in 1880, and it wouldn't make any sense to him. I wish you could get this and write back to me, because that would mean you were still alive and we could talk about...what I never would talk about before.

If I were writing William, what would I say? Don't walk down any dark alleys? Don't go near any weird woman who talks about burning baby fishes swimming around your head?

But if I did that you wouldn't be turned and we wouldn't have met and...That's just too terrible to think about, at least from my selfish point of view. You'd probably have had a really happy life if Dru hadn't turned you, right?

I know you didn't believe me down in the hellmouth when I told you that I love you. I can't blame you for that because of the way I treated you, but I still miss you so much. It hurts. Every minute and every time I breathe, it hurts so much that you're gone. I miss you like I miss Mom, only worse.

How is that even possible? Maybe it's because I sort of had time to prepare for

her leaving, but you left so abruptly, we didn't even get the chance to say good-bye. Mom left abruptly too, but we'd talked about her going after she came home from the hospital, before she went back for the operation. So I was sort of ready.

I wish you could know how I feel now. How much I love you, and how much I miss you. You didn't believe me when I told you I love you. Stupid vampire.
Love, Buffy

Swiping at her tears, she blew on the ink to dry it, then folded the paper and stuck it inside one of the envelopes. On impulse and as if it were a real letter, she address it to W. Ward at 16 Queen's Gate Terrace, Kensington, and then stared dubiously at the sealing wax and its accompanying brass seal.

"Oh, why not?" Buffy muttered.

Retrieving a box of matches from the kitchen, she set about learning how to drip wax onto an envelope and pressed the seal into it.

"What do I do with you now?" she asked the envelope. "It's not as if I can send you off Royal Mail."

Sighing, Buffy cleaned the pen and put all of Spike's things back into the writing box. The last thing she did was put her letter to Spike on top of the writing surface. Closing the box, she locked and carried it into her bedroom for safekeeping. Setting it on the table next to her bed, she caressed the rosewood, took a deep breath, and went on with her day.

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She couldn't resist opening Spike's box again after getting ready for bed that night.

I need to see his calling card again, she told herself. I want to see him happy and goofy with Dawn again in that photo booth.

Unlocking the box, she triggered the hidden drawer mechanism to pop them open. It was then that she noticed her letter from earlier in the day wasn't where she'd put it, atop the writing surface.

"Where did it go?"

Frowning, she unfolded the surface to check beneath it. She next checked the drawers, even going so far as to tip out the contents and sort through them. The blank parchment and envelopes were there. Her letter was not.

"Are you a magic writing box? Is any letter I put in here going to be transported magically to Spike?" She stared at the box, which didn't answer. "This is too weird."

She closed the drawers. She closed the top and was all set to lock it when her Slayer instincts started twitching. *You need to look at this*, it was saying, making the hair on the back of her neck stand up. Shivering, she scratched her neck.

"This is silly."

It was silly enough for her to get another sheet of paper, open the writing surface, and ready herself to do battle with Spike's nibbed pen once more.

Spike. Or William. Um...Whoever?

Something weird has happened. The letter I wrote to you earlier has disappeared out of your writing box. It could just be me being empty-headed and distracted--so maybe the explanation is as mundane as my leaving the letter in the kitchen--but it could also be that something mystical is at work. If you've somehow gotten my letter, that is?

The way I see it, I have nothing to lose by writing you again. If this letter disappears, I'll know that something's up. Maybe you are able to read what I write, even if you can't write back. I mean, if these are reaching you in hell--but you saved the world, so I hope you're not in hell. If you're reading these in hell, let me know somehow and I'll find some way to get you out.

So send me word if you can when you get this? Let me know if you're okay or hurting or--anything. If you can. If this reaches you.

God, I feel like an idiot. But I still love you and always will.

Love, Buffy

PS. If you're William, write back anyway, and I'll try to explain what's going on, okay? Thanks.

She managed to not spill wax on the coverlet while sealing the second letter. Placing the letter inside the box, she closed and locked it. She managed to wait two minutes.

"Please, oh please..." she whispered, not sure if she was praying and, if she was, to which deity, as she turned the lock once more and lifted the top enough peer within.

Her second letter was gone.

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CHAPTER THREE

The moon hung heavy and cold over London the night Spike returned to the house at 16 Queen's Gate Terrace. Settling the satchel containing his clothes, blood, and other sundry supplies against the iron railing, the vampire glanced at the stately Georgian townhouses proclaiming their numbers as 15 and 17. They shared a wall, but shadows shimmered over it--nothing a mortal or a demon would notice unless they knew it was already there, not to mention what it meant.



A woman named J.K. Rowling had informed the human world a few years ago of a little thing called a concealment spell, but not many knew how to do one. No vampire ever bothered with it, certainly, except for the vampire striding across the battered pavement.

Muttering a few words, Spike gestured at the shadows. They responded instantly, shoving apart numbers 15 and 17 Queen's Gate Terrace to make room for number 16. The shimmering became a tall, broad black hole until Spike muttered a few more words. His own personal townhouse then solidified, its windows shuttered and dark as they'd been over 150 years ago when he'd dusted his mum, after which he'd found a witch to set the spell.

Spike had come back once to check on the house after the war, to make sure it was still concealed and had suffered no damage in the years he'd been gone. It was the only place he had left to go, the only place to run now that Sunnydale was nothing but a huge, wet sinkhole, and Angel had taken on the senior partners in Los Angeles, but hadn't lived to tell the tale.

Drusilla was probably out there somewhere as Spike had never felt her dust, so there were two left of the line of Aurelius and perhaps more if Dru had decided to replace her defective black prince. Still, even as alone and lonely as Spike sometimes felt while trying to put some sort of unlife together in the aftermath of Sunnydale and Los Angeles, he had no desire to look up his sire. They'd been quit of each other a few years ago: better to let biting vampires lie, and non-bitey ones try to find out where--if--they fit in the world.



The door into the house opened easily enough, but Spike tripped over what appeared to be a mountain of mail on the other side. It stopped the door on its hinges, shoving itself beneath the doorstep and bunching up the entrance rug.

"Who the bloody hell is sending junk mail to an address that doesn't exist?" Spike snarled, kicking at the envelopes with his foot but making little progress to remove the mound of correspondence. Scowling at the mountain, he was puzzled to see that every envelope seemed to have the same handwriting.

"Buffy?" he breathed, recognizing the round scrawl.

Setting aside his satchel, he snatched up a handful of envelopes only to confirm they were indeed all from Buffy. Not only that, they seemed to be postmarked with the old Bath postmark--used before Spike had been turned--and this despite a lack of postage.

"What, did Red do another spell?" he grumbled. "Whatever, pet. You've got beautiful timing as always, I've got an electrician coming in less than ten minutes. Don't even know if the place is presentable."

Grabbing a wastebasket from the drawing room, Spike scooped up an armful of envelopes and dumped them inside. The basket soon filled, so he growled and had to grab the coal skuttle off of the hearth. After that had filled, Spike retrieved another wastebasket from the drawing room.

Setting aside everything, he finally managed to clear the front door. The electrician--a dour man in his fifties--arrived just as Spike finished.

"You the bloke wanting an estimate to update your gaslights?" he asked, without introduction.

"Yeah," said Spike. "They went in last century, but the house has been closed since 1880. Needs an all-electric conversion without damaging the paneling or the structure, basement to attic."

"Don't see too many of those nowadays."

"I'd imagine not."

Buffy's letters burned a hole in Spike's mind, and he would have liked nothing better than to tell the man to come back another day, but the vampire was planning on reclaiming his London home.

The gaslights had only been installed in the mid-50s, which meant they had less than thirty years of use before the stasis spell had been cast. It was a pity to rip out something so new, but the expense of natural gas alone was prohibitive of Spike keeping it, never mind the attention it would bring.

Thirty minutes later, Spike discovered the estimate wasn't quite as bad as he thought it would be. Still, he wanted two more opinions and told the man so.

"Ring me if you want me," was the electrician's benediction.

Spike made a beeline for Buffy's letters the minute the front door closed after the workman. Dumping the letters onto the drawing room rug where William had spent many a night curled up at his mother's feet, Spike then retrieved a bag of blood from the satchel still sitting in the front hall.

Need to see about getting the water turned on tomorrow, he decided. Plumbing's so new, I doubt it needs replacing.

He lit the candles in his mother's beloved candelabra with the new Zippo he'd purchased before leaving Los Angeles. A fire started on the hearth tried hard to banish any bad memories, but cold blood poured straight into a heavy tumbler from the china cabinet in the dining room did little to cheer the vampire. Draining the mug, he finally settled cross-legged on the floor before the mound of Buffy letters.

He took the time to sort them by postmark date and wondered at his patience. *Must be the bloody awful poet in me.*

By the time he'd gotten through the pile, Spike had worked out that Buffy had started writing a few months after he'd come back as a ghost to haunt the halls and basement of Wolfram & Hart. It looked like she'd been writing almost every day.

"You never talked this much when we were together," he muttered. "How much can you have to say to an evil, undead thing like me? Maybe you've just written the same thing over and over again, trying to get things out of your system?" He took a deep breath. "Right. I think I need some liquid courage before tackling this."

Spike took his time opening the bottle of whisky he'd bought on the way from the airport. Leaning against the drawing room's doorframe, he took a neat swallow and scowled at Buffy's letters.

"A few ground rules before we begin, pet." He gestured with the bottle. "First of all, I'm not writing you back. There'll be no contact between us, no matter what these missives of yours say. Got that? Good. Because you'll notice that I don't have a pen to scribble anything back at you. Don't have any stationery or envelopes on me. Reading what you've written is all I'm doing. Hope you understand, sure that you will because I had a great exit. Gave you the world, I did. Made it safe for the Immortal and your sis and you. I'm done making myself miserable by wanting what we both know I can never have. So there you are, a few ground rules."

It was only one rule, but it seemed to Spike that it mattered the most.

Slouching down on the floor once more, the vampire picked up the first letter and leaned back against the couch. He could remember playing soldiers on this floor. The rug had been different then, but the view was the same. The house was as quiet now as it had been then. He'd been seven and happy with his toy soldiers, winning all of his battles and worrying about nothing but that he not get too close to the fire.

Didn't heed that warning, did I? Got close to the Slayer, went up in flames, and look where it's gotten me. Back in my childhood home, a hundred-fifty years on. Little to show for it but a soddin' soul and a love that won't die. Hell, I can't even seem to die myself. Survived Sunnydale. Survived Angel's little self-centered apocalypse. Everyone else died, but not me. Gunn, Fred, Illyria, Wesley and Angel...all gone.

He fingered the envelope he held. "Awww, bleedin hell, stop brooding like the great poof, and just *open the thing!*"

Wait! said the William-git voice in his head. *Don't tear it! Find the letter opener.*

He grumbled, but went to his mother's desk and found what William wanted. Truth be told, Spike didn't want the seal broken or the parchment marred either. Removing the letter, he unfolded it carefully and braced himself for whatever might be inside.

"Dear Spike," she'd written. "I've never used a dip pen before...."

She prattled on about ink and blotches and the ills of Victorian penmanship so that the first thing Spike felt was acute disappointment. His disappointment turned to rage as he read, "I'm sure if you were here, you'd tell me anything that slows me down is a good thing."

"Pen and ink and...and *PATIENCE?*" the demon roared, shaking the paper. "That's what you've sent parchment and wax to me to talk about? What the *fuck!*"

His shouting was so loud, he was certain the people in the flat next door could hear it. Crinkling the letter in his fist, Spike took the stairs two at a time to burst into his old bedroom and light the gaslights with irritated haste. Stalking to William's rolltop desk, he yanked out a stack of blank paper.

"Where's the bloody pen and ink? I'll answer the stupid bint and tell her what she should have written. Talk to me about trivialities, will she? No surprise that the Slayer sends me a letter through bleeding time and space--a fucking miracle--and then she fucking *wastes* it!"

His temper had not cooled by the time he located a bottle of ink and filled his inkwell. He knew that couldn't write in a mood like this, he'd break the nib. Not that breaking a nib was the end of the world, but he wasn't certain where he could buy a new one.

"What am I thinking?" he said to the room at large. "It's the bleeding twenty-first century, don't need a nib pen anymore."

Tonight, however, he needed one, if for no other reason than they were the only writing instruments

available in the house, and all of the shops were closed. *Vampires don't normally need pens, is that my fault?*

Sitting down at William's old desk, Spike shoved back the discordant familiarity he felt when he dipped the pen into the inkwell, for his hand remembered all too well to tame ink on paper. He wrote furiously for some minutes before shoving the letter into an envelope and addressing it back to the address Buffy had put on her letter.

"I'll send you off tomorrow," he told the envelope. "In the meantime tonight, I'll burn the entire lot of letter. Never read another one. Be better off, the both of us, after that."

Spike leaned the envelope up against a pigeonhole crowded with ancient bills. He tapped Buffy's name, careful not to smudge the still-wet ink. "Can't seal this thing, have to get the post office to tape it shut for me. Now, for the burning time."

Spike cleared all of the old ashes from the fireplace opposite the bed and lit a new fire, only to halt with Buffy's letter in his hand as the flames licked hungrily at the dry wood.

You really should read the entire letter before destroying it, the voice of the poet within urged.

"Sod off. Last thing I need to read is more of her--"

You'll always wonder what she wrote if you don't.

"Fine," Spike growled, knowing that the problem with the inner poet was that the sensitive wanker was usually right. "But don't blame me if she hurts you so much that you get sniffly and start crying. Won't get you anywhere if that happens. I'm still burning the lot."

Swinging back around to the desk, Spike sprawled in its chair to finish reading the Slayer's letter.

"...you died and--oh God, Spike, I miss you so much. You died and I'll never hear your voice again. I can write all these words to you, but you'll never see them or know anything about how I feel about you...."

"...I know you didn't believe me down in the hellmouth when I told you that I love you. I can't blame you for that because of the way I treated you, but I still miss you so much, it hurts. Every minute and every time I breathe, it hurts so much that you're gone. I miss you like I miss Mom, only worse. How is that even possible?"

"...I wish you could know how I feel now. How much I love you, and how

much I miss you. You didn't believe me when I told you I love you. Stupid vampire."

"She hurts because I left her?"

There. You see? The poet smirked. It's not all triviality, she is actually talking to us. Since she never knew we'd see her letter, we can be assured that what she has written is what is truly in her heart. Satisfied, the poet receded.

Spike read the letter again to make sure her words didn't change. Smoothing the parchment on the desk, he felt sorry he had crinkled it so badly.

"That thing I wrote to her earlier," he muttered. "That's the thing should be burned."

He reached for the envelope, only to discover it was no longer propped up where he'd left it. A quick search yielded nothing. Gathering up Buffy's letter, he read again, 'I wish you could get this and write back to me, because that would mean you were still alive and we could talk about...what I never would talk about before.'

"I wish..." he echoed. *She wished and it's bloody well come true, hasn't it? Her letters are all here. But I didn't wait and read this thing through, did I?* Spike shook the pages. "Shot off my mouth is what I did, and now--" He stared at the empty pigeonhole. "Oh, God. What have I done?"

~

CHAPTER FOUR

Writing to Spike had become an addiction for Buffy over the past year. She would finish her day training the Slayerettes, have supper with them in the huge common room or privately with Giles, and then withdraw to her flat alone to share time with Spike.

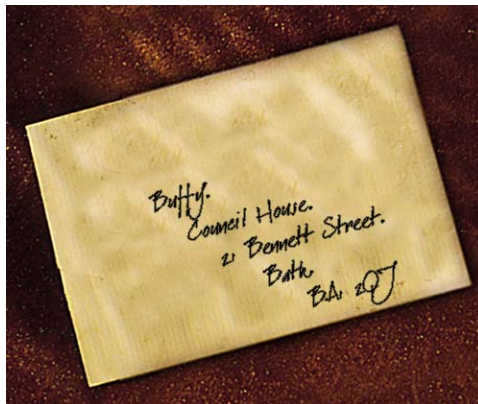
So what if it wasn't exactly sharing time with Spike because he was, after all, dead? She spent hours with his memory and wrote him a letter every night because she wanted to share her innermost thoughts and outermost frustrations, and whatever else was going on in her life. It helped to clear her mind before going to bed. It might even have helped keep the continued missing him and mourning him at bay, if only a little.

She'd grown used to hearing the soft, sliding sound of her latest letter disappearing for realms unknown, only a few seconds after she'd closed it up in Spike's writing box.

He must be getting my letters wherever he is, she thought. If he's in hell, I hope they bring him some comfort.

She had long stopped hoping he'd find a way to write her back. Half of a miracle was nothing to sneeze at, so Buffy tried to content herself with the fact that her letters were going...somewhere. This night, though, with Spike's box settled on the occasional table in front of her couch and her seated on the floor with the latest piece of parchment before her, Buffy heard what sounded like the soft, sliding sound of a letter arriving inside the box. *Because I know there's nothing in there to send him.*

Her heart skipped a beat and she froze with her fingers on the lid, ready to raise it. Experience and Spike's first lesson in the alley behind the Bronze were screaming at her to be careful, so Buffy went to her weapons chest and pulled out a shiny, sharp dagger before turning back to the writing box. Standing over it, she held the weapon at the ready before flinging back the box lid and bracing for attack.



Oh, my God, she thought. He wrote back.

The dagger fell from her fingers. She fell to her knees and had to blink back tears.

No more tears--Spike wrote back.

There was no question in her mind, she simply knew that it was his handwriting--regardless she'd never seen it before--and how strange was that, to have spent years with someone in your life and to never know what their handwriting looked like? He'd given her birthday and Christmas presents, but had never presumed to write so much as a birthday greeting on a card to her, and how had that happened? But oh, look, he had written her now and yes, his handwriting was lovely. It wasn't the easiest to read, but it was still lovely.

Buffy wiped her face and blew her nose before daring to lift the envelope and close the box after it. For long minutes, she just sat on the couch with the envelope between her fingers. It wasn't sealed--she had Spike's seal--or rather William's--after all, it was probably the only one he'd ever had--and it would be the work of mere seconds to lift the flap and unfold the letter waiting inside. It didn't look like it had come from hell, it just looked old.

Is this from Spike or William? she wondered. It must be Spike, because William would address it to Miss Buffy Summers, but he wouldn't know my last name, would he? So maybe it is from William?

Lifting the flap, she pulled out the sheets and unfolded them.

Slayer,

Sod the pen, it doesn't matter.

I got your letter. Wish I hadn't, because it wasn't supposed to be like this.

I didn't read it through--your opening said pretty much everything that needed to be said, right? Trivialities of life--even Victorian life. Uncooperative, primitive pens. Thanks for making the effort to write me like that but really, like I said, not necessary, pet. You've got your own pens to worry after.

I won't be writing again, all right? Reason being, I can't be part of a

world where I have to see or hear or even read how happy you are with someone else. I know that's coming here in your letters, and it's too hard, it's asking too much of me.

You'll be writing to tell me how bleeding ecstatic the Immortal or some other bloke makes you. While I want you to be happy, I can't be on the outside looking in on your life.

Hope you'll understand how much it hurts to be good enough to fight alongside you, but never good enough to lie down with you every night. I'm not the one who gets to take care of you anymore, to touch and love you. I get that. I get that I was never worthy of it. What you gave me before the hellmouth blew up was more than I ever deserved, and I love you for it. But I know what I am now--you always knew what I am--and the soul tells me every second how beneath you I am and always will be, no matter what.

I was able to finally save you, to maybe make up for the tower when I failed you and the Niblet. That's what matters, that's what I hold on to. That once, I got it right.

I don't know how you found me, pet, but I need to ask that you lose me again. Don't write any more letters, please, Slayer. I read your first one, and here's your answer. You put the scratchy pens away and live the life you're supposed to live--be happy and all with pens that behave.

Writing an evil, undead thing can't be right. Can't mean anything good. You need to leave the undead things behind and get on with living. Yeah. Be good, and don't forget your weapon.

Love always,

Spike

"What did I say? What did I write?" she choked out, unable to do anything but try breathing through the pain. "I don't think you're unworthy, I thought you knew that. How do you even know about the Immortal? And anyway, Spike, he's *gone*, and I've lost you all over again."

Wrapping her arms around herself, Buffy rocked gently and let the tears come when she thought she had no more tears to cry.

The writing box whispered at her again, and Buffy stared at it a moment before flinging back the lid. There was no envelope this time, only a single sheet of paper folded in on itself, with her address scribbled on the bottom flap as if in great haste.

Buffy.

Please forgive me.

I've gone and hurt you yet again because I was too stupid to realise you were writing streams of consciousness in your first letter. Trying to get the hang of pens & things. Forgive me, pet. You know all too well what a bad, rude vampire I am.

I only just finished reading your letter through properly. When I went to pull back mine, it had gone--just disappeared.

Another letter will follow. I promise a proper answer for you, without hitting this time. I'll start it now.

Forgive me, Buffy. Please. I did not understand.

Love, Spike.

She read the letter through three times before reaching for her pen.

~ ~ ~

Spike had actually seen his apology fade into the ether on its way to the Slayer. True to his word, he began another letter, shaking out his hand and biting his lip as he applied the recalcitrant pen to the old parchment. He kept half an eye on the pigeonhole, waiting to see if Buffy would write back and not even knowing if she were on the other side of the mystical mailbox to get both insult and apology at the same time.

He kept writing, and it took longer than expected. Five minutes later, he took a short break to run downstairs and retrieve more Buffy letters. When he returned, an envelope was waiting for him.

So much for all of them coming through the letter slot, he thought. Guess whatever's sending these knows where to find me. And her. If she's writing back, does that mean....

Not even the bloody poet's voice shrieking in his head to mind the envelope could prevent Spike from

tearing open this one.

Spike.

It's okay. I get it, thanks for explaining. But I'm not going to bed until I get the nice letter you promised.

Love, Buffy.

Spike rocked back at words. *Something has changed when the Slayer doesn't take my head off or hit back.*

He wrote faster.

≈ ≈ ≈

She stared at the closed box and bit her fingernails as she waited. *Please, please, please, hurry.*

It barely whispered its arrival before she flung back the top, snatched up and unfolded the piece of faded parchment. *Oh, God, the ink's still wet.*

She was shaking so hard and shaking the paper so hard that she had to take deep, calming breaths before the words would focus before her.

Dear Buffy.

Mea culpa. Mea maxima culpa.

I can hear you asking what that means and can predict your frustration behind the question, so I'll tell you. 'Mea culpa' is Latin for 'my own fault'.

"Mea maxima culpa" means "my most grievous fault."

What, you didn't think I was going to grovel for forgiveness without trying to teach you something, too? Come on, Slayer, you know me better than that.

I think we're up to lesson the...what?

I just got your letters. All of them, today. Came home and they were blocking the entry of my humble abode. Sorted them out and started with the first and, as you read, let my temper get in the way of my manners.

My mum taught me better than that, she did. I am truly sorry to have hurt you again, Slayer. I'll do better next time, won't go off on you no matter what you've written. The letters are a sodding miracle, just like you are.

Yeah, dip pens are a pain, I don't have a lot of good memories about using them, and here I am doing it again. Nothing else within reach at the moment, so I'm stuck for it.

When I went to school, we learned how to write on slates and switched to dip pens when we got old enough to write in a copybook. Each school desk had a hole for an inkwell at the top right side, and the inkwell was a small ceramic pot.

One of us was chosen each week to be the ink monitor responsible for filling the inkwells for the whole class. We had to collect all of the wells, pour into

them from a large bottle, and then return them to each desk. We were caned if we spilled.

We were caned if we blotted our copybooks too, which sucked because I'm one of those sinister lefties who messes things up a lot more than any righteous rightie. The ink froze when it was cold, too, so writing then was impossible.

Yeah, you did promise we'd talk once the whole First Evil thing was done. I have to admit, I never pictured us talking like this, but who's complaining?

Wait. Guess I already did. Always was slow.

You've sent down a lot of letters, Buffy, and I'm going to read every one very slowly over the next few hours and cherish every word. Now, don't scrunch up your nose like that, you'll get wrinkles. Next thing you know, you'll look all old, and the Bit will be teasing you.

I had no idea that my leaving would hurt you so much, but perhaps now the hurting can stop? I'm not dead--no more than usual, anyway--and we're talking. That's 'of the good', right? So no more tears, yeah? No vampire is worth a Slayer's tears--especially not yours.

Thanks for the update on the Niblet. I'm glad she seems to have finally settled into a school she likes. There were nights while you were gone when I had to threaten to yank out her toenails and never paint them again if she didn't finish her summer-school homework. It got to the point where she wouldn't do it at all if I wasn't there--which I think was to muck up things for the Scoobies after they tried to cut me out of her life rather than because she needed my help all of the time. I mean, what do I know about the American Revolution? We fought, you won, you've imported KFC and Mountain Dew into Britain.

Yeah, you Yanks won all right. Can't see the Bit writing a paper on that, though, know what I mean?

Maybe, by the time it's time for your little sis to enter university, you and I will have thought of a way to handle Giles and uni funding. We'll give it some thought, yeah? There's time yet.

If you do make copies of the mall photos of the Bit and me, would you mind throwing a few my way? I miss her something fierce--you, too--so if you

tossed in a photo or two of yourself as well, I'd be ever so.

You're still training Slayers? Can't say I'm surprised. You're the best they've got to learn them how to stay alive.

Have to admit, I miss fighting and teaching or whatever at your side as much as it sounds like you miss having me there. I'll never be comfortable with anybody else watching your back. I know I'm the best to keep you safe, if you don't mind my saying, but you've got a whole gaggle of young Slayers now, so maybe some little thing will do it better than I could.

On second thought, no. Never happen.

Still, somebody's better than nobody, and nothing says you have to be alone, pet. In fact, you're not alone, see the above gaggle of Slayers.

I didn't mean to leave you, Buffy. I hope you know that. Didn't have a death wish either, per se. Just wanted to get it right down there in the hellmouth, clean things up a bit so that you wouldn't have to worry for a time. A long time. Wanted the world safe for you and the Bit, didn't sodding care about anybody else. Wanted you to have the life you want, the life you deserve.

Still want that.

And yeah, I guess I am like that cat who kept coming back. There are some really nasty verses to that song, though. He wasn't a very elegant moggie by the end. Won't go into detail, pet--no pun intended--know you wouldn't appreciate that.

And if you were writing William, you'd get a sight less interesting reply than you'll ever get from me. Should be grateful he's not boring you witless.

Let's see, what else did you ask? Think I'd have had a happy life if Dru hadn't turned me? Maybe so, but it's so long ago and so far away that I can't think what it would have been. Am happy being a vampire because it meant I could help you. But most likely if the turning hadn't happened, then I'd likely have married any little mouse who'd have me, become a nervous solicitor, and died of consumption before seeing 35. My mum and da succumbed to it, I imagine I was in line to, as well.

I'll write you again, just see if I don't, once I've made my way through some of these letters of yours. You're bloody amazing, Buffy, you know

that? Never thought you'd miss me.

And you're wrong. I did believe, and I do believe what you said to me down in the hellmouth. Next time, could you say it when I'm not busy saving the world and the roof's not caving in--not to mention when I'm not on fire?

I love you too. But then, you already know that.

Sleep well, Slayer.

Love, Spike.

~ ~ ~

She was smiling by the time she reached the end of the letter and could practically feel him sitting on the other side of their very strange connection, waiting for her reply.

Dear Spike,

Now that's more like it. A letter from my Spike who grovels so prettily and still manages to be the snarky, mouthy vampire I know and love.

So spill it--who taught you that the way to a woman's heart is through her mailbox?

Since I'm being totally honest with you now--it's a new policy you'll discover when you read the other letters, and God, I know I'm going to be embarrassed about some of those letters--I should mention that by now I'm used to going from heaven into hell within seconds--I've done it physically and emotionally how many times now? And you've been there for most of them. Your first letter made me feel like that, so you know it hurt.

But given the points you made about not wanting to stick around and listen to me talk about new boyfriends and new life stuff--I can't really blame you for that grump. You were being honest, and that's definitely of the good. In your place, I know I'd feel the same way.

So I should tell you up front that there are no new guys in my life. The old ones are gone too, except for Giles who lives downstairs, but that's because our new Slayer school owns the building, and Giles is a sort of a Dumbledore to us. Without the phoenix, the beard, and the robes. He handles the Slayerette parents and the money, the things I can't do.

How do you know about the Immortal? Who, by the way, is so not in my life. I met him during a weak moment at the Museo di Roma while visiting Dawn for Easter vacation, just after I had to rescue Andrew from an unfortunate thing that happened in his apartment. I was really missing you and thought I should try moving on. It so didn't work. First because he wasn't you and secondly because he has this thing for American blondes and their not-so-little sisters.

I broke his jaw after he started macking on Dawn, and he hit the Roman pavement in more ways than one, but there was really very little blood. Mostly.

Dawn was outraged that somebody that old would come on to her, so she was all for the beheading. It's not like he's human, so killing him would have been okay.

So why didn't I kill him? I settled for slicing off one of his testicles instead, after which he promised to never come near Dawn or me. If he does, he knows I'll kill him after taking his other testicle.

Did I say there wasn't much blood? I lied.

He sent some nice jewelry by way of a "don't hurt me anymore" apology, and we sold it to help pay next year's tuition at Dawn's nifty Catholic college prep school. Oh, don't look at me like that, she chose the school and says she feels safe with all

those crosses around. The priests and nuns are so mean, no nasty demon, hellgod, or evil would dare set foot on the school's property. Feeling safe is a big thing with Dawn these days. It's not like she's interested in becoming a nun, but they are encouraging her to pass her tests.

Okay, Buffy babbling here. It's late and I have to sleep, but I wanted to tell you how absolutely glad I am that you're on the other end of our letters. It's okay that you were grumpy earlier. If you're in hell that's one reason to be grumpy, and heaven knows I haven't given you many reasons lately to not be grumpy.

I haven't stopped shaking since you first wrote back. I'm so glad that you're not ashes and that you're talking to me after everything that happened between us. I want to write more, talk to you some more, but the adrenaline is all gone now and my words are going to come out sideways soon. I'll darken your mailbox again tomorrow, okay?

Besides, I figure I shouldn't flood you very much with new stuff until you get through the old stuff. For all I know, you might get through the old stuff and never want to talk to me again.

Enjoy the night, okay? I miss the nights we spent together, and I'm glad you're not mad at me anymore. I'm also major glad you're there--wherever there is.

Don't stop writing, okay? If you disappeared on me after all this, that would hurt worse than anything else could right now.

Love, Buffy

~

CHAPTER FIVE

With a stretch and a growled purr, Spike set aside his latest letter from Buffy. He was well satisfied with their evening's work and relieved that she really did seem to have forgiven him his temper tantrum. His Slayer was now safe abed, at peace for the first time in months, and all was right in Spike's world.

Not only that, but he had a small mountain of mail waiting to get through,. What better time was there to read, after all, than in the middle of the night--especially when one was naturally nocturnal?

Taking himself back downstairs, Spike settled back on the floor with another mug of blood and dug into Buffy's letters. What he discovered over the next few hours was an entirely open, honest Slayer who took his breath away all over again--regardless he didn't need to breathe in the first place. Reading her words was like dropping eyes first into her mind, with her sharing things he'd always wanted to know or to be but thought never to discover or to have.

Some of the letters he set aside to read again and again.

~ ~ ~

Excerpts from the Slayer's Letters

...I know you're gone, that you'll never read this, Spike. But I wish you could somehow know what's in my heart. How much I miss you every day as I face these girls who can only learn of you through Gile's histories. They'll never know your wicked sense of humor, your obnoxiousness, your honor or your power first-hand. I've tried explaining, but they don't get it. All they get is, "We kill vampires, we don't make friends with them. You should too." Same song, boring verses.

I wish that you could know how much I miss your voice, your snarking at me about everything, your patience and impatience when you dealt with me. I even miss the way you drank blood and licked at the edges of the mug just to annoy me. I don't miss how you left your mugs for me to clean those last weeks. I love you, but...no, I don't miss that.

I miss your fingers in my hair and the coolness of your skin, how your voice rumbled through me when you were talking and I lay against you, and oh my god, the other things that voice and that tongue could do to me. It's probably a good thing you

never knew. Or, rather, that I never told you.

~ ~ ~

...I can see so clearly now how much I failed you by not saying so many things before it was too late.

I know that you thought you failed by not rescuing Dawn and me on the tower, but you know that unexpected things always happen during battles. Who could have predicted Doc's intrusion or how strong a fighter he was?

Dawn told me what happened up there. She still has nightmares about the despair in your eyes before you fell, and she knows how desperate you were to save her. She never thought you failed, and neither do I. She knows, if there had been any way, you would have stayed and kept fighting to get her to safety.

She says she told you so over and over during that summer, but you wouldn't listen. Your explanation was that you were a stubborn John Bull and she should give it up, and then you had to explain exactly what that meant. I love how you were always teaching all of us something, all of the time, even when you didn't mean to.

You never failed my mother either, and I think you know that. She liked you, and I never understood why until I saw the movie ticket stubs you kept. I think I get it now--she could talk to you about Dawnie and me, and she somehow knew you could be trusted with us.

I think, too, that you were her friend. So you two snuck off to go to the movies...good for you. Both of you. She needed a break from worrying all of the time about the gallery and the bills, while you...I guess you needed her, didn't you?

You took such good care of the people I loved, and I think I understand that in time you came to love them too. Oh, not Giles and the Scoobies--they made it

impossible for you, didn't they?--but Mom and Dawn were different. You guarded the house and looked after them when I was worried Glory would find them.

And then you saved the world for Dawn and me. You made the world safe and laid it at our feet, and then you died because...I guess you thought that's what I needed. But it's not. How could I need a world without you in it?

If I had it to do over, Spike, you know I'd find a way to save you for my own selfishness. You're so much less selfish than I'll ever be. I hope you won't hold that against me. It's just that living without you is so very hard.

~ ~ ~

Giles is reading some book by Nietzsche (go me for spelling that right), and I glanced through it in his office after breakfast. This immediately made me think of you and what we shared--"You must have chaos within you to give birth to a dancing star."

I miss dancing with you.

I like using your seal. It makes me feel closer to you. Sort of like when you stole my sweaters, I guess?

~ ~ ~

Now that I have time to think about things and try to put some pieces together without everyone pulling on me to be The Slayer (another gift from you, go Spike!), I can see that everyone you loved seems to have left you. Me included--even when I was still there.

I know what it feels like to be left, over and over. Not good.

Your being turned and your being undead had to hurt. I know that how I

treated you hurt as well, and it's bothering me. I wake up in the middle of the night wishing I could change things between us. Love you and not leave you.

How much pain did you feel that I never knew about, that you couldn't share with me? Did I ever help with any of it, Spike, or did I just hurt you more?

I'm so sorry. I write that a lot to you--I'm sorry--and I so know that it's not enough. My father used to do that, say he was sorry, so that it lost all meaning.

I want to do something or be someone who can help you now. I want to hold you and help you heal. I want us to be together.

But you're gone, out of reach, and it's like what Hamlet said--the rest is silence. The silence totally sucks.

~ ~ ~

I've finally gotten around to reading all of the Watcher records on Angelus. Spike, I am so angry with him and so ashamed of myself at the same time. I was a virgin, and I let him in.

I believed Angel wasn't Angelus. I was so stupid.

You tried to tell me, didn't you? "Angel could pull it off." Your smile was so sad, and now I get that if he hadn't been distracted by Acathla, he'd have systematically destroyed everyone close to me until I was all that was left. And then he'd have driven me as insane as he made Dru.

You saved everything. And you know what? I think you knew you were doing it. Yeah, Dru was part of it. You wanted your girlfriend back. But I don't think that was all of it.

"I want to save the world," is what you said.

I know now that you were telling the truth. Looking back, I can't remember a

time when you ever lied to me.

Unlike Angel/Angelus. He was great at lying by omission, if nothing else.

I still don't know even half of his history. I'll never know all of it, but I know a little bit, and I am so over Angel. He always told me he wasn't Angelus, but he is. Even when he's ensouled, he's still Angelus underneath, isn't he?

He's not like you--he's never fought for his soul and asked for it to be anchored.

You may have been evil but, from the first time we met, you were honest about the state of your soul. I'm starting to get how rare that is in the mortal world, never mind in the demon world. You really were something very special.

~ ~ ~

If we were together now, I'd know to hold onto you like you wanted to hold onto me. I'd never let go unless you wanted to be let go. To wash your car or play some pool or go do something really evil like you had to do from time to time, even if it was only cheating at kitten poker. Or teaching Dawn how to cheat at...whatever.

I wish you hadn't loved me enough to give me the world and leave.

~ ~ ~

I took a deep breath tonight and called Dawn to explain to her how what happened in the bathroom was more my fault than yours.

I was so messed up that year, Spike. I messed you up too, in ways I don't think you'd ever been messed up before even with everything Angelus did to you.

I know now how close to the edge I drove you--I confused you and made you hurt inside and feel more lonely than ever.

What I expected of you was so unfair that year. You were supposed to be perfect without any support from me or anybody, really. To have all of the answers

and do all of the right things just because I wanted it. You got so much right, but all I held onto was what I claimed you got wrong.

Not only that, I expected to be able to be intimate with you and then to drop it and walk away with you just accepting it. I was entirely out of line, and I know it. I knew it then, but wouldn't admit it.

"No" had always meant "yes" between us before--how were you supposed to know that it meant "no" that time? A demon wouldn't have stopped, Spike. A demon would have kept coming and kept coming until I was forced to kill it. Even some humans wouldn't have stopped.

You stopped.

You aren't a monster. You aren't an evil, undead thing. You never were. All you wanted was for me to see you, to acknowledge your feelings and respect you.

You wanted me to love you the way you loved me.

I couldn't then, I couldn't love anybody. Not even myself. I was too messed up as the Slayer, and I didn't know how to let myself be me. Just Buffy without the Slayer. I didn't know to handle everything I felt when I was with you--the need, the hunger, the passion, the kink, the heavenly way you had of making me fly. I was so scared, and what's sad is that if I had told you how I was feeling then, you'd have helped me get through it like you helped me get through everything else.

Instead, I used you, shoved you away because of what I feared inside myself and wrecked everything between us.

Dawn understands now that both of us were messed up, and she doesn't blame only you for what happened anymore. She misses and mourns her friend--the coolest vampire on earth who helped with her homework and rocked her when she cried, the friend who had to sneak over the roof and into her room to stay until she fell asleep and chase away her nightmares.

I didn't know that Xander and Willow chased you away from Dawn and at the same time used you to patrol that summer. I didn't exactly encourage you to see her after I came back, either, did I?

You must have gotten so tired of all of us using you.

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I wish that I could do with you what Dawn said you used to do with her in the summer. The two of you would go for ice cream and eat it in the park. I wish you and I could do that now. I wish I could hold your hand for the whole world to see. That I could have another chance to show the world how much I love being with you. I wish we could try being not a vampire and a Slayer, but just you and me. I'd see you now, Spike.

We missed out on so much because I was so messed up--stupid and immature, full of fear about what others would think or say, or whatever else you want to call it.

I will always regret not loving you the way you deserved to be loved. No one has ever wanted to be in my life and have me in his the way you did. I know it's likely no one ever will. But every time I look at the ring you had made for us, I remember that once I was loved, and that you were real.

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It's weird, but only the letters I write to you go to Spike or William at the Queen's Gate address. I've tried writing to Mom, but those letters go nowhere, so what's up with that?

I have to use your nib holder, too. The paper and ink don't seem to matter, but I have to use your pen.

I'm sure that if I told Giles about your magic writing box he'd be all over it. I know that his idea of "all over it" might be to destroy what makes your box send my letters off somewhere. Like his idea of helping last year was to try killing you. In the end, I guess Angel and his pretty amulet did what Giles and Robin couldn't.

Stupid amulet.

I know you saved the world with it, and your soul was beautiful and shiny that day. You were so strong, so brave and so determined, I can still hear you saying, "I gotta do this." But that doesn't make me resent any less that Giles tried to kill you, and that the hellmouth actually managed to do it.

I kept you alive for so long, I never realized until you were gone that you were keeping me alive, too. Maybe that's why the world feels so dead and empty to me now.

~

CHAPTER SIX

Before going to sleep, Buffy relocated the writing box back beside her bed, so that the first thing she could do when she awoke was to check if a Spike letter was waiting for her.

Of course it was.

Snatching it up, she fluffed her pillows and tore into the envelope.

Buffy, love.

Am sending this off to you just before the sun rises, hoping you're not an early riser after the late night we spent writing each other.

You used to say you weren't good with words. "Buffy, talking, not mixy." You'd never bleeding talk to me, and I always thought it was because you felt safer shutting me out. Willow said once that you needed a long time to organize your thoughts. Didn't believe it, not after seeing you out-manuever a bunch of demons. Seemed to me your thoughts were connected really well to actions.

Your quick wit and intelligence were never in question either, so I definitely didn't get whatever Willow was trying to say.

Time was, you'd listen to me and then look as if you'd never seen me before. Next thing I knew, you'd shift gears and go off in a different direction. Sometimes you wanted me with you. Sometimes, not so much.

Never really heard you talk before these letters. You're going to point out that I was there for all your lectures about the First. But that was the Slayer lecturing, not Buffy talking.

Last night I listened to you through your letters. I've always known you were beautiful inside, but this--you've shown me a part of you I've never seen before. You've gone and shared your thoughts and emotions and a love I didn't think you could feel where I'm concerned. Never thought you'd think I might be good enough for you to feel like that.

What I'm feeling now, I last felt only while holding you in that deserted house. Told you it was the best night of my life, so much that I knew I'd never feel that way again.

But your words, forgiveness and understanding--your love--

Bleeding hell, Buffy. I was wrong to think in Sunnydale that I'd seen all sides of you. You've let me inside your heart and inside your mind now in ways I never dreamed could happen. Could never conceive of. I'm surrounded by your sorrow and light in these letters. I know you never thought I'd see any

of this, but please know that I'll keep it safe.

You want me to send all these letters back to you for safekeeping? I'll do it, but am hoping you'll let me keep them. Every time I read one, I find something new and astonishing that's a part of you. Part of the woman I love.

Want to get this off to you now so it's waiting when you wake up. Want to be with you, even if that's possible only with words. Want to reassure you that I'm here, in hopes of easing all the bad things over the past year for you.

Maybe we could work on no more tears, no more regrets, and no more pain for you? We'll work on being here for each other, and on building the life you want, so that things stop sucking. How does that sound?

I've still got your letter from last night to answer. There are others over the last year that seem so raw and tender, am not sure I should answer those. Seems like it'd be more digging up bones than anything you might want to read.

Let me know what you want to do? In the meantime, I'll answer the questions you've posed. Maybe that will lead us both into safer, less miserable waters. God knows I still want to give you the world--a happy one that makes

you smile and won't make you cry ever again. Maybe that's unrealistic, but hey, vampire here. Not high on the metaphysical realism scale to begin with, so I'm being true to my kind, right?

Love you and everything you are. Always will.

Yours, Spike.

~ ~ ~

Dear Spike.

Why aren't you here so I can hug you and cry all over you? Good tears this time, so don't panic, okay? I've done more crying this past year, and over you, than I think I've done my entire life.

Please don't send back my letters. I wrote them to you, after all, and it feels good to know you've gotten them. Slayage doesn't leave much room for mushy stuff, so don't think you're going to get mushy Buffy all of the time? One-shot mourning, mushy Buffy. Don't burn up on me again, okay?

I think it's a great idea if we start talking about other stuff. Life stuff. Or undead stuff. Hell stuff? I mean, are you in hell? I still don't know where my letters are going.

Are you okay? I never thought to ask that before, which is totally rude. I mean, how is it where you are? You saved the world, so I'm hoping you're not in some hell dimension, but like I said before, if you are then I'll find a way to get you out.

Lighter stuff coming up now.

I have to go out and buy more sealing wax today. I used all of yours up early on. Do you want me to get you some too? All you have to do is fold your notes to me--why do I have to do the whole deal? So not fair.

A stick of sealing wax is only good for like thirty letters, and I have to get the kind with a wick because I can't manage the other melty-in-the-spoon kind. And so help me, if you growl me about talking about sealing wax the way you growled me for talking about dip pens, I'm going to find you wherever you are in Dante's inferno and I will so kick your butt.

I'm glad you like what I wrote to you, beyond my first stupid letter, I mean.

Spike, do you know why this is happening? How the letters are arriving, I mean? I don't want to ask Giles, and that's not because I'm ashamed of you--I am so not ashamed of you, I just want to keep you to myself right now.

I know I wrote all sorts of things in those letters, sort of like a diary so you're getting all of me unvarnished. It's embarrassing when I think about what I sent, but if you're still around, then it can't be all bad.

You always wanted the real me, wanted me to talk to you, so you definitely your wish. It'll probably be easier for me to talk to you now because I spilled so much.

Do you mind if I ask you some questions about what you had in your writing box? I'm counting on you to say yes, so I'll just start asking stuff now.

How did you lose your sister, and what's the key to that's on a black ribbon? What do your middle initials stand for?

I'm sorry for the still-shaky handwriting, I'm shaking harder because of your letters than I was the morning we went to fight the First's army. I have Slayerette training to get through this morning, but I'll be back after lunch...sorry, that's dinner in England, right? I'll write more then.

Giles wonders why I spend so much time in my rooms, you know? I haven't felt

like being around anybody since you left. I don't know how you kept going the summer I was gone. Maybe Dawn anchored you? I don't have an anchor. Okay, I do, it was you telling me I had to go on living so one of us is living. Not really workable, Spike. Existing is more like it.

I love you, I'll write more later. You write more too.

So glad you're here. There. You know what I mean.

Love, Buffy

~ ~ ~

Dear Buffy,

You'll hear no complaints from me about anything you want to write to me.

I've learned that lesson well.

Had to duck out this morning myself to get some writing supplies. Thank whoever for thick London clouds. On my time, it was peaseoup fogs fed by burning coal. A vampire could have fun lurking and attack in the fog. Easy to bag whoever you wanted to eat. Now what am I doing? Buying sodding stationery, sheep's blood (nice change from pig's), and smokes. Lo, how the mighty master vampire has fallen.

Not complaining. Really not. All right, maybe I am, but come on, you

expect it by now, don't you?

It was a bit of fun to take the Tube to a little shop that has been there since I was a boy and poke about in the bins. Would have been better if you'd been there with me, but these things take time. Besides, you've got little Slayers to teach. Time for shopping later.

You asked how this letter thing might be happening? Well I see it, "wish" is a powerful word that can move mountains and realities and apparently letters between Slayers and vampires. A bit of neat, don't you think?

You've wished plenty in your letters, so maybe someone was reading over your shoulder. Of the powers that be were listening, then this is the result-- I've got mountains of mail from a non-talky Slayer, and it's all good for both of us. I think we should keep writing, you and me. Seems easier for us to talk like this than any way when we were together.

You can ask me whatever you want, Buffy. You know I'm an open book to you.

Am not in hell, it's more like a museum in Kensington--am back in the house

I grew up in. Supposed to be converting the interior gaslights to electric, but all I'm getting done is writing to you. Again not complaining.

My sister Sarah was sick that Christmas--bronchitis I think it was now. There were no antibiotics to clear the infection back then, and she died of pneumonia in the new year.

The key you've got is to the front door.

Middle initials? Might as well explain the whole name. My father chose William, after his father. My mother chose Arthur because she liked Mallory and Arthurian legend in general--she would have loved Tennyson's 'Idylls of the King', but she didn't live long enough to see it printed.

Gabriel is my confirmation name. I was raised C of E, and confirmation's sort of a rite of passage like baptism. When you're confirmed, the bishop comes and puts two cold candles against your cheeks, blesses you to receive the Holy Spirit, and then he slaps you. Hard.

Just before you're confirmed you get to choose a saint you feel an affinity for. Their name becomes your confirmation name.

⌚ chose Gabriel, as in the archangel. 'Delusions of grandeur, much?' ⌚ hear you asking, and you have a point. ⌚ liked him because he wasn't only God's chief messenger--he's the one who told Mary she was carrying a god-fetus--he was also the angel of death and the prince of fire and thunder. Even at twelve, ⌚ thought that was just neat. So yeah, you can count that as my being delusional or as a bit of foreshadowing, your choice.

Wish ⌚ were there to help with your mini-Slayers. Sure ⌚ could stir them up and terrify them enough to pee their panties. Great fun, that.

Still evil. Still loving you.

Spike.

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Spike!

How in the world am I supposed to stand in front of those little Slayers, teach them, and not laugh while I remember your silly remark about their panties? Seriously, I wish you were here too. I'd definitely put you to work.

I love your middle names, by the way. An eternal king and an archangel suit you. All you need are a set of black wings and...no idea where I'm going with that, and it's probably a good thing. I can feel your scowl from here.

I showed Giles your signed theatre program from Earnest. He got all excited to

the point of hyperventilating and said it's worth a lot of money and how did you know Oscar Wilde? I said that I didn't know because I don't.

You're in the house you grew up in? Dead vampires who saved the world go home to heaven and get to live in their childhood homes? Are you with your mom, then? I'm really glad you're not in hell. Your heaven sure is different than mine was. It's a relief to know that you saved the world and got to go to heaven. I've been so worried about where you ended up.

I'm stuck in Bath. There's no decent shopping, I'd have to take the train to London. Haven't much been in the mood to do that. Dawn knows there's something wrong with me because I have only two pairs of shoes. Now that you're back, a trip to London doesn't sound half as painful as it did before, especially if I can get Dawn to come up from Rome for a long weekend of splurging with the Council's credit card.

Love, Buffy

~ ~ ~

Dear Buffy,

You and Dawn should shop in London and do your part to spend all that lovely Watcher money.

Mum's not with me, I'm not in heaven. Still on this earth, don't really understand how. Make a long story short, that amulet sucked in my essence and somehow got itself sent first class mail to Wolfram & Hart up in Los Angeles.

Angel opened the envelope, dropped the amulet on the floor, and behold!
yours truly returned as a sodding ghost about three weeks after the hellmouth
fell in. No picnic, that. No blood, no smokes, no sex, no fun.

Tried to leave, to get to you. Every time I hit the city limits, my ghostly
self got yanked right back to the great poof's office. I did what any
frustrated vampiric spirit would do--spent most of my days annoying Angel and
my nights terrified of being sucked into a hellhole down in W&H's basement.

Long story short, I got better. Somebody send a package full of light to
me c/o W&H. It flashed, I got solid. First thing I did was walk into
Angel's door. Second thing I did was steal his blood--you know he has the nerve
to drink otter? Aren't those endangered? Third thing I did was try to shag
Harmony, but I doubt you'll be wanting to hear about that.

I'm cutting out a lot of stuff here, but, you hear about the fight that
went down in L.A.? Wonder if you know that Angel decided to take on the
senior partners. Stupid wanker. He managed to destroy their Circle of the
Black Thorn, but cutting off the partners' conduit of communication did nothing

long term to stop the evil. I mean, worldwide law firm, savvy? Short-term, it pissed them off and they sent a demon army after Angel and what was left of his inner circle.

Fred, Gunn, Illyria by way of Fred, Wesley and Angel--they're all gone, pet. Angel died fighting a dragon--I think he forgot they breathe fire. He should have leaped onto its back and started hacking. Instead, he just stood there waving his little sword and let it take him out.

Don't know why I'm still here, I just kept fighting and when the dawn came the demons ran off and I dropped down a manhole. Laid low until nightfall, then broke into the Hyperion for a shower and some clothes and then got the hell out of L.A.

I can't believe he's gone. I mean, he was my grand-sire and I hated him, but I miss him something rotten. Never expected that. Sorry he's gone. Sorry you had to hear it from me, too.

Lighter stuff, right? Here goes.

Wilde. I was at Oxford same time he was. So were a lot of other gents,

and I'd rather Rupert didn't learn my life's details so keep it to yourself if you can? Won't help the Watcher chronicles in the slightest to know that William the Bloody used to be an aesthetic ponce who read Classics at Magdalen.

Am going ahead with the switchover to electric, but still preserving some of the gaslights for ambiance. Can't bear to let 'em go completely.

Am also having the place cleaned (Mum's ashes are still in the carpet from when I dusted her) and the plumbing inspected. Workers are tromping in and out tomorrow which will interfere with my writing to you, so letters won't come as quickly.

I don't want you thinking I'm losing interest or have disappeared on you. Should be back by evening, so don't fret. Go out and patrol, kill something, and I'll have a letter waiting when you've come back.

Love, Spike.

~ ~ ~

Spike,

A quick note, I'm taking your advice and taking a couple of the senior Slayerettes out to prowl a cemetery or two tonight.

I thought Angel had to be gone. The BBC showed footage of the charred

rubble where Wolfram & Hart used to be. Thanks for letting me know what happened. I wish I had known what was going down and that you were there. I'd have helped any way I could. It's terrifying to think that you were fighting without me. I know you're capable and that you've been fighting a lot longer than I've been alive. Still, we're a team. I should have been there.

Giles would want the details of the fight in L.A. to finish his records, but I'm not sharing anything you're telling me with anyone. Not even Dawn. I really want to savor what we have for as long as possible. I'm also not on very good terms with Giles any more because of what he did to you in Sunnydale. But I think I mentioned that elsewhere, so it's old news.

So you're renovating your house? Does that mean you're staying

The sharp nib skittered over the paper, marring it with a fine spray of black ink, but Buffy stared right through it. *Spike came back from the dead and survived the Los Angeles battle, she thought. That means he's not dead.*

"Oh, my God." Her thoughts skittered forward as the pen had skittered across the parchment. *He's renovating an actual, physical house.*

My letters are going to a house in Queen's Gate Terrace. In London.

Abandoning the letter she was writing Spike, Buffy sped out of her flat, didn't bother with the elevator but took the stairs, and headed for the library to snatch up and spread out one of the numerous street maps of London they kept in stock for the Slayers to use on their day trips.

He said he's in the house where he grew up. That his mum was in the carpet because he dusted her there. Oh God, he's not in heaven. Vampire dust is not in heaven. He had to "go out" for writing supplies. He had to buy them. They don't use money in heaven.

She found Kensington Park, Gloucester Road, and her finger moved on to trace Queen's Gate Terrace. *He's in Kensington. Ninety minutes away. Spike is right there.*

Her hands shook as she folded the map and tucked it into her back pocket. Three minutes later, she was knocking on Giles' door to tell him she needed some time off, that she was taking a train up to London the next day and was planning to stay the weekend.

~

CHAPTER SEVEN

It was drizzling rain when Buffy emerged from the Gloucester Road tube station. Pulling her hoodie up over her head to keep off the damp, she shoved her bag higher on her shoulder and glanced up the street. In any other year, at any other time, she'd have been coming to Kensington or to Knightsbridge to answer the siren song of shopping or sightseeing. Harrod's and nearby glittering specialty shops were only a short distance away, but it scarcely mattered --the last thing on her mind was racking up stylishwear charges on the Council's credit card.

Her stomach felt queasy with dread and anticipation while the headache that had begun on the train from Bath to Paddington had blossomed to full strength. Ignoring both, she crossed at the nearest light and found herself in Queen's Gate Terrace. The large, uneven paving stones were worn and full of puddles. Trying to avoid the deepest, Buffy peered fitfully at the numbers on the columns standing before each house. *Number 2...Number 4.... What do I do if he's there? And what do I do if he's not there?*

Her steps slowed as she approached number 16. A small lorry was parked in front of the house. While Buffy watched, a workman in overalls emerged from the back with two large spools of electrical wiring. Slamming closed the rolling door, the workman carried his booty inside the house and left the front door ajar.

Taking shelter beside a tree growing at the curb, Buffy stared at the open door. She had only a few more feet to go, up the steps and across the threshold to discover...what? As it was, her Slayer senses didn't bother waiting for her to gather the courage to go the distance.

Vampire! her instincts shrieked. Like a paranormal bloodhound, she could sense a vamp inside that house. And not just any vampire. Spike had a specific signature, and that signature was beating her temples in double-time with Buffy's headache.

Stepping further around the tree as though its slender presence would shield her, she swallowed hard. *He's really in there. Why is this so difficult, other than the fact that I don't know if he even wants to see me?*

Daring to creep up to the steps, Buffy leaped back out of the way when the workman barreled back out the door, intent on retrieving his tools.

"Get by, miss," the man muttered.

She retreated to her tree once more and bit her lip. *This is ridiculous. How hard should it be to just go up, knock on the door, and call out Spike's name?*

Ultra-hard apparently, because her feet stayed where they were. Curling her arm around the tree, Buffy continued staring at the open door to number 16.

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Slayer! Spike's senses screamed.

Bloody hell, he thought. *She's outside the house.*

"Handle it like we discussed, mate," Spike told the electrician and backed out of the first floor bath. "Need to be somewhere else right now."

Whirling, he strode down the hall and nearly ran over a second workman coming up the stairs. Zigging, the vampire vaulted the balustrade and jumped to the ground floor, oblivious to the man he left gaping in his wake. Poking his head out the front door, he saw that it was still trying to rain. He also saw Buffy trying to hide behind a tree a little way down the block.

So now's the moment when we suss out whether she really missed me, he thought, or whether all she's been feeling is guilt and some misplaced mourning. She's here and we've got to deal. How you gonna play this, mate?

I've no idea, it all depends on the girl in question, doesn't it?

Stepping into the drawing room long enough to grab his duster, Spike shrugged into it and left the house to saunter down the sidewalk toward his Slayer. Buffy's eyes widened at his approach, and she moved away from her tree. Spike thought her eyes were sad and grown-up as they'd never been before. His Slayer was sleek and beautiful, if too skinny, and she never took her eyes off of him as he walked right up to her.

Deliberately invading her personal space, Spike tilted his head and smiled. "Hello, Buffy."

"Oh, my God." Her hand was shaking as she reached for him, but she faltered before touching him.

He heard her heart rate increase, her breathing grow labored. Spike thought tears would be next unless he did something. Stepping closer, enfolded her tightly in his arms and tucked her beneath his chin. "Hush, pet. It's all right, I've got you."

Her hands dove beneath the duster to hug him so hard, Spike thought he felt his ribs creak. Her nose was against his throat, her fingers made fists in the material of his t-shirt to inadvertently pull it out of his jeans. Pressing closer, she breathed him in.

"It's you. You're really, really here." She tightened her grip even more. "Don't let go, okay?"

"Won't ever let go." Pushing back the hoodie, he stroked his fingers through her hair and rocked her a little. "I've got you now, everything's fine."

She rocked with him, and he felt her rigid muscles start to relax. Buffy's hold eventually lessened so that Spike dared lean back a bit and take another good look at her. "Clever thing, you've let your hair grow."

That earned him a watery smile. "What's so clever about growing hair?"

"All of you is clever and beautiful. Your hair is too, Goldilocks."

Her smile became more certain. "You haven't called me that since--"

"Since you cut it out of sheer spite." He shrugged and tugged on an errant curl. "I figured if you were going

to be so contrary, I'd stop mentioning things I didn't want changed."

"I promise not to spite again." Her eyes searched his. "I love you--you know that, right?"

"Yeah. You know I love you too, pet."

That earned him another hug, but not so tight and desperate as what had come before.

"Is it okay that I'm here?" she asked.

"More than a bit of all right, yeah." Nestling Buffy beneath his shoulder, Spike began walking her back to the house. "You up from Bath for the day?"

"For the weekend. I came looking for you, and I know that's probably pushy, but I couldn't wait any longer. Is this your house?"

"Yeah. Been in the family about 150 years, give or take a few. My Da bought it before he married my mum. You hungry?"

"Starving. I was too nervous to eat on the train."

"There's a Caffé Nero close on--coffee and sandwich bar--if you're up for that?"

"Coffee in London? Is it good coffee?"

"Don't know, haven't been here long enough to try it. Think there's a Starbucks about as well. What can I say, you Yanks have corrupted us."

"Giles will hyperventilate when I tell him. Coffee and a sandwich sounds good. But what about--" She pointed up at the still-clouded sky. "What if it clears?"

Spike shook his head. "Won't clear, will spit at us all day, bet you. I'll take the chance, any road." *Going to share the day with her even if it tries to kill me.* He captured her hand and held onto it. "Not to worry, Buffy."

"Not worrying," She glanced down at their interlocked fingers and smiled. "You're here, and nothing bad is going to happen."

"Won't let anything happen." Leaning in through the front door, Spike shouted up the stairs. "Oil!"

A workman shouted back, while Buffy squeezed in beside the vampire to glance around the entry hall. "Ooooh...pretty Victorian."

Buffy cringed when Spike bellowed, "Going out for a bit, mates. If'n I'm not back when you're done, lock up behind, yeah?"

The workers shouted their acknowledgment, and Spike closed the door practically on Buffy's nose.

"Can I have a tour?"

He nodded and captured her hand again. "Later. Food first, then play."

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Spike led Buffy and her lunch to a booth in the back of the cafe. Pulling off his duster, he tucked his shirt back inside his jeans before sitting down. He was startled to find the Slayer pressing close after him.

"Touching good," she said softly. "I want to sit by you."

The edges of her ears were pink, and Buffy didn't meet his gaze as she transferred her lunch to the table, then shoved the tray so that it fell onto the opposite, abandoned seat.

With a sort of quiet triumph, Buffy settled Spike's tea before him. "There."

There, indeed, thought Spike as she tucked into her Chicken Caesar Panini.

"I have something for you." Leaning away from her, Spike retrieved the gift from his coat pocket before gathering his duster and half-rising from the seat to toss it over the table and onto the discarded tray. He set a small, carved frog beside her plate. "I got him because the pigs weren't cute enough. He also seems to illustrate what we both felt a lot of the time back in Sunnydale."

Ducking his head and wincing, Spike mimicked the frog with his fingers curled like claws over his ears, and Buffy nearly choked on her food.



"Sorry, love." Spike rubbed her shoulder.

Buffy took a sip of Coke before picking up her gift. She laughed after inspecting all sides.

"You're right, he's perfect." Turning her head, she pressed her lips briefly to Spike's. "Every time I look at him, I'm going to remember this moment and how you nearly made me spew my sandwich all over the table."

"What can I say? I'm evil, creating messes is what I do."

"Sometimes, yeah. You clean them up sometimes, too, but I won't tell. He's cute, and so are you." She stroked his cheek. "I'm sorry, but I can't seem to stop touching you. It's like I need constant reassurance that you're--"

"Real?" His voice was low, remembering all of the times she'd said he was dead and couldn't possibly be real.

"That you're here," she contradicted, tracing one sharp cheekbone. "You've always been real, Spike. I was just too much of a judgmental, stuck-up Slayer to admit it."

"You did what you felt you had to do, love. I understand that."

She kissed him again, sweet and affectionate and tasting of chicken salad. "You're far too tolerant and understanding, mister."

"Hey, nothing says I'm going to put up with that attitude again." Mindful of her fragility, Spike was careful to keep his tone light. "That's what froggie here is for. You start feeling the pressure, Slayer, you look at him, and he'll make you laugh."

"I'll carry him with me always." Reaching beneath the table, she tucked the carving into her carryall. "I have something for you as well."

She set a key with a black ribbon on the table. "You said this is to your house? I think I need to give it back."

"No. You keep it." He closed her fingers around it. "Use it whenever you want, Buffy. I don't mind if you drop in on me. Got nothing to hide."

"Are you sure? About my keeping the key, I mean. Not the hiding part. I didn't mean to imply--"

"It's fine." He stroked the inside of her wrist and watched while she took a deep, calming breath. "Where's your keyring? We'll put it on properly."

She retrieved her keyring without more argument, and it occurred to Spike that she had definitely changed from the Buffy he had known. *Seems to be respecting me now*, he thought. *Edges don't seem as abrupt or jagged as they were in Sunnydale either. She's keeping my key, almost as if she wants her life to meet mine somewhere.*

"You feel different." He handed the keyring back to her after securing the house key

Her brow creased with worry. "Good different or bad different?"

"Seem softer, less Slayer. Vulnerable but not weak, if that makes any sense."

She went back to her sandwich. "No-frills Buffy, that's me. You've read it all, Spike. Either you'll still want me after what I wrote or you won't. It's not like I can take it back."

"Would you want to?"

"No."

"I'm still me, pet. Still a vampire."

"I like vampires. Well, one vampire. You."

"You didn't used to."

"I know." She stroked his cheek again and then had to wipe it clean. "Hold still, I've mayoed you. I was scared, Spike. I used to be stupid in love with a vampire who had a soul, who couldn't love me without a soul." She winced. "I was messed up because if I had ever admitted that you were loving me when you didn't have a soul, then that would lead to all sorts of questions about why Angel couldn't love me without a soul. I wasn't ready for that."

He pondered that for a moment. "Makes total sense. Not something your Watcher or the Scoobies wanted to look at either. Much easier to stay in the safe places and hate old Spike. Have you told Rupert about our letters yet?"

"Not yet. But that's not because I'm ashamed of you--I'm totally proud of you, and happy you're not ashes. The minute everyone knows you're back, they'll want a big, grand reunion, and I'll lose you to the adoring crowd."

"Always deserved an adoring crowd. Nice to know Rupert and the others know that now."

She giggled, and Spike stared. *Never heard that come out of her before. Wonder what I could do to make her do it again?*

"Their adoration will choke you, Spike. Behind it will be a plea that you sell your soul to the new Watcher's Council and teach the new Slayerettes."

He shook his head. "There's always a catch."

"Always. Anyway, I told Giles only that I was coming to London for the weekend. He was glad I was getting out." She played with Spike's fingers. "I'm tender because you died, but I'm not uncertain of you. I'll never be uncertain of you again."

Glancing down at their entwined fingers, Spike saw something on her ring finger that made him grab her hand. "What's this?"

"It's the wedding ring you had made for me back in Sunnydale, remember?"

"Yeah."

"I put it on the day I found it in your writing box." Buffy curled her fingers around his.

Spike tilted his head. "And you haven't taken it off since."

"No. Not going to, either. Giles has looked at me funny a couple of times, but he hasn't had the nerve to ask

about it, and I'm not volunteering any info." She spun the ring on her finger. "I feel really possessive of it--and you --these days. Go figure. But wait. How did you know I haven't taken it off?



Spike tugged gently at the ring. "May I?"

She hesitated, clearly meaning what she'd said earlier about not taking it off. "Only if you promise to give it back when you're done."

"You know it, love." He slid the ring from her finger, only to have it collapse into four separate, interconnected rings between his fingers.

"Spike! You broke it!"

He laid the pieces between them on the table. "It's a puzzle ring. Can you put it back together?"

She glared at him, and for a moment Spike glimpsed the old Slayer that he knew--irritated and impatient, wanting the problem to go away *now* rather than to find a solution.

"I don't know how," she said, poking the links, "and I've the feeling that if I bend one of those rings with my super Slayer strength, it'll never go back together." Her green eyes pleaded with him. "You can put it back, right?"

"Yeah." He took up the loops.

"Wait. There's an inscription inside. Quod dev...what?"

"Quos deus conjunxit homo non separet," he read. "It's Latin for what God did join, let not man separate." He played with the links. "Puzzle rings are based on gimmal rings. From the Latin *gemelli*, meaning twins. The Elizabethans used them as wedding rings. Thought someone couldn't cheat on their husband or wife without taking off the ring, having it fall apart, and putting it back together afterward. Was sort of a symbolic reminder to not send a marriage into pieces."

In a matter of seconds, Spike had the ring relinked. Sticking out her hand, Buffy made a desperate sound that Spike knew translated to, "Back on my finger, NOW."

He slid it into place and then kissed her hard because it was either that or squeeze her so tightly, she wouldn't have been able to breathe. She tasted of Coke and herself and responded with a desperate welcome that he'd never sensed from her before. Releasing Buffy eventually, Spike kissed the tip of her nose and then between her eyes.

"I love you, Buffy."

"I love you, too," she whispered, licking her upper lip as though to get all of him.

He tilted his head and looked at her. "After everything we've been through, you think it's as simple as that between us?"

"I think it might be if I let it." Her green eyes were warm and hungry for him.

Drawing back, Spike only just realized his Slayer was wearing an outfit more reminiscent of his own with a t-shirt, jeans and sneakers. She wore less makeup than he remembered as well, which made her look younger than her years.

He nudged the bag between her feet. "For someone who's staying a couple of nights, you didn't bring much."

"New Buffy knows how to travel light. I wanted to find you, not worry about what I was wearing. If I need more, I can always buy it." She smirked. "This is London, after all. I have a Council credit card, mister, and I know how to use it. Know any good five-star hotels around here?"

"Yeah. My Victorian's just down the street, you're staying with me. Got plenty of rooms."

Her eyes searched his. "I don't want you to feel obligated to let me into your home. We didn't exactly talk about meeting, and I know you're remodeling so I wasn't sure you'd even want to see me this early."

"Early?" He snorted. "Buffy, we've known each other for years. I've seen you naked and self-destructive, you've seen me pathetic and sniveling. I've stalked you, you've staked me, and you think I'd want you to stay with me out of obligation?"

"Since you put it that way...." She giggled again, and Spike grinned.

This was a Buffy who didn't want to lead the dance all of the time--a Buffy he'd gotten glimpses of from time to time, but only enough to intrigue and frustrate him. This was the Buffy he'd dreamed of being with, the one he'd always suspected lurked beneath the weight of the Slayer's world, the anger and the fear she'd felt.

He stole her pickle, and she protested. "Hey!"

"What's the problem? You weren't going to eat it."

"That's not the point--it's the principle of the thing."

"Still evil, pet." He drank the last of her Coke, and then nudged her out of the booth. "Come on, Slayer. Let's go home."

[End of Part 1. To be continued in Part 2.]