

MUDDLE



HOLLY DENISE



HIS HAND TINGLED. IT WAS THE FIRST THING HE NOTICED. THE first explosion of sensation that rocked through his body and made him aware that he was perhaps not as ghostly as he had been just a second ago. That the duster and the body beneath might be solid, for his hand was tingling, a fiery sort of tingle, and that's how it had happened back on the Hellmouth. Standing in that cavern, fingers woven through Buffy's as she looked at him with pride and sorrow and acceptance—*with love*—and said the words he'd been longing to hear her say since long before he'd realized what she was to him. Maybe since that first meeting when he'd clapped and stepped out of the shadows ("*Nice work, love.*") and waited for her to look at him and know, the way he'd looked at her and known. That magical, terrifying moment that had taken years to properly understand.

The moment he'd locked eyes, for the first time, with the person who would redefine his life.

It hadn't happened for her then, which was fine, because it hadn't happened for him then, either. He'd known something had shifted—something profound, something life-changing—but had been too young, too hot-headed and full of himself to stop long enough to ask *what*.

The answer would come later. After heartbreak and defeat and humiliation and despair, Spike would learn the truth about what Buffy Summers actually meant to him. And from that moment on, he'd spend his time split between craving the same from her and wishing with everything he had that he could will his love away.

But he couldn't. That's not how love worked—not for William the Bloody, at least. Not for love's bitch. It had taken more years, more pain, more cockups and one sin so great he could never be fully whole again, and somehow, at the moment of his reckoning, Buffy had looked at him in that cavern and given him those words.

It was a hell of a thing, having exactly what you wanted. The world falling apart, death on the horizon, and Buffy Summers looking at you like you were something more than a killer. More than a monster wrapped in human skin, more than the sum of your worst crimes. The things he'd done to her and others but especially her, for she was the

one whose cries had finally silenced his demon for good. Spike had gripped her tight, their hands aflame, and carried that look, that *feeling*, with him into the great ever after. Saying what he needed to say—releasing her of the burden that would be regretting him—and watching as she dashed away to safety. The woman he loved, the woman who had done more than just tame a monster. Had given him purpose and hope. Had given him peace at last.

Or at least nineteen days of it. Nineteen days and then several eternal months of dodging the fate he had coming. Reconciling that their last seconds together couldn't have meant what he'd thought they'd meant, for Spike wasn't the man anyone cried over at the end of the world.

Except everything had changed again. Spike was standing in the middle of a law firm gone bonkers, lights flashing, phones trilling, the staff running around in a state of confused panic. And his hand was tingling the same as it had when he'd held hers, like the flames had yet to go out, and he understood exactly where he needed to be. What was supposed to happen next.

He needed to follow the fire.

"What the hell is going on here?" Angel asked from what seemed like miles away. He was in a right state, all brooding, scowling forehead turning his thousand-yard glower this way and that, looking at his lot of faithful cronies, whom he'd been speaking with all calm-like just a moment ago. "Someone want to fill me in?"

"Think it's me," Spike said, wiggling his fingers, a slow smile spreading across his face. Rather than fading, the tingles intensified, little sparks pinpricking their way across his skin where just a moment ago he'd felt nothing. "Dunno how you managed it, Fred, but you have my thanks."

"I—I didn't do anything," Fred said, blinking her bewilderment. "I don't even know—eep!"

For Spike had thrown his arms around her with a delighted bark of laughter, heart soaring at the solidness of her, the smell of her, the smell of all of them suddenly alive and in his nostrils. Evidence that he was indeed tied to this realm and not the other. He swung her around

in a circle, cackling, before lowering her back to the floor, then promptly launched himself at an utterly befuddled Gunn to give him the same treatment. Or as close to as he wagered was safe to try.

"You're solid?" Angel barked from what seemed far away. "When did this happen?"

"Round the time everythin' here went wonky," Spike replied cheerily as he spun Gunn away, then waved a hand to indicate the chaos that consumed the floor. "Say, don't reckon those things are related, do you?"

"Spike, what did you do?"

"Not a sodding thing. Not yet, at least." He sighed happily, then turned to eye the elevator bank. Reckoned that was enough celebrating here. He had a slayer to find. "Thanks ever so for the company in Purgatory, lads and lasses, but believe that's my cue."

"Wait!" Angel cried, promptly tearing through said faithful little cronies. "You can't leave yet."

"Care to watch me?"

"Spike—"

"Not about to waste a second here that could be spent with her, mate. I'll send you a bloody Christmas card."

Spike shoved his way into the nearest elevator, turned and grinned at Angel, who stuttered to a stop before he could tumble inside. The look on his grandsire's face was somewhere between desperate and devastated, and it was that look alone that bolstered Spike's confidence in the leap he was making. That made the doubt, the fear, the parts of him that could still be hurt shy away from the thought of seeing her again. For there was no bloody reason Angel should be that miserable if he believed half the things he'd said about Buffy over the last few months. If he truly believed Buffy didn't care.

All this time, Spike had been dangerously close to accepting the lie, accepting the Buffy of Angel's stories more than the Buffy of reality, and that was a mistake he would never let himself make again.

It was over. And it was time to do what he always did for her—surrender.

What happened from there was up to her. It always had been.



Spike,

I never forgot you counted. I've counted too. Not all that impressive yet, seeing as it's only been three days, but I've counted each of those days.

They're long days. Were your days long? I keep thinking hours and hours have passed and then I'll look and it's only been five minutes. I'd swear there was some sort of loopy-loop mummy hand behind everything, but I remember this from before. How slow time was. And how fast. Isn't that weird? There should be some sort of law against it being both. Kind of like how I'm both proud and mad at you, and how confusing that is. Because I am, Spike. I am so proud of what you did.

It's also a good thing you're dead because if you weren't, I might just have to kill you. And not even for that whole "thanks for saying it" bullshit, which was bullshit. You know I don't "just say" things like that. I never have. I'm not the type of person who pulls out love as a consolation prize, and fuck you for making me feel like that, by the way. If I wanted you to feel good about what you were doing and I didn't love you, don't you think I would have said something about being proud instead?

So yeah, I'm a little pissed. But what pissed me off the most was you dying on me. That wasn't supposed to happen. Yes, I knew that we'd lose people. I was prepared for that. I was even prepared to die again if I needed to, but I didn't think I needed to. It wasn't like that fight with Glory, where I felt so done with life. I felt good, Spike. You made me feel good. You made me feel hope. And even though you totally blew me off when I said we could talk about us later, I was hoping to talk about us later. You said you were scared, and guess what, so was I. But it was a good scared. A scared I hadn't felt in a long time, and it was everything I needed.

I blame you for that. For making me scared. For trying to blow me off when I needed to share that with you. I didn't know what it was but I knew it was there and real and that everything I was feeling was because of you.

And in case you're wondering, scared people do stupid things. You should know, you're a poster child for stupid. A big stupid dope. Shirty, too. I still don't know what it means but you're definitely that.

You died on me. You were the one person I could count on to have my back

and you're not here, and I need you here. They're all looking at me like I know what to do. I don't. I knew how to get them through the fight, but the fight's over now and I'm left with a bunch of slayers and the Council is gone and it was my decision so I guess that means they're all my responsibility, and I don't get to rest. Don't get to just have "won." I need to figure out what happens next.

I could really use your help here. I'm so afraid of making the wrong call. I know what I don't want to do, which was what the Council did, but that means starting from scratch. I need someone who knows me, knows slayers. I need someone I trust. I need you here, Spike. And not only because I love you and need you to know that. I need you here to be the person who understands me and what I want. Who will help me figure out ways to get it. Who is with me on everything because you believe in me.

I just need you here. And you're not. You're gone.

I am so mad at you.

And I love you.

You stupid idiot.

— BUFFY



SPIKE DIDN'T ACTUALLY REMEMBER how he'd gotten from Africa back to California. Sometimes, especially after his head had been his again, that had bothered him, as he couldn't say whether he'd had enough wits to keep from doing something instinctive, meaning monstrous. The trip there had been ethically gray enough, but at the time, he hadn't given a lick. Too focused on the objective, wagering any crime he committed now would just be added to the tab, accountable, yes, but once the soul was won and not a second before.

Nothing too terrible, though. Just a half-demon warlock he'd tossed around until the poor bloke had relented and opened a very unstable but highly handy portal to pop him halfway across the world. If the thing had collapsed, it might have cost the warlock his life, but tell that to a half-mad but fully determined vampire who had just committed the ultimate sin against the woman he loved.

Thing about it was, since Spike didn't remember how he'd gotten home, he didn't know where to start now. Travel in the past had been a matter of eating or threatening the right people. Usually a bit of both, because a man got hungry. That wasn't an option anymore, which was a bit of a pickle, as it left him not knowing where to start.

Only that going back to Angel HQ was off the table. Not only would the big sod refuse to help, but he'd also probably have something smart to say that would do little more than make it even more difficult to keep from staking him. And whatever else, Spike was certain Buffy would be cross with him if she learned he'd killed her ex.

And considering he had no idea what to expect whenever he got to where she was, it seemed better to go with a less complicated ice-breaker.

The only place that he could think of starting, though, was unfortunately tied to Angel. Yet Spike decided to head there anyway, just to see if it led him to any other stroke of brilliance. He'd never actually been to the Hyperion when it had been Angel Investigations but Fred had talked about it on occasion, saying she missed the dark, cave-like rooms—she had a thing for caves, he'd learned—and Lorne had mentioned the acoustics there being downright brilliant. While the lot of them had moved out, they had also kept the property for contingency purposes. Could be there were records buried somewhere, or at least a computer he could try to work to do some of the heavy lifting for him.

Assuming Angel hadn't shut off the utilities, but Spike was gambling that he hadn't. Even as careless as Angel had been with the deal he'd made, he wouldn't have boxed himself in to the point that he didn't have a neutral home base to retreat to. And one cut off from resources wasn't much of a home base at all. Put like that, the only real concern Spike had was that the security would be nigh impossible to crack.

Only he didn't get that far.

He didn't need to.

Spike was just examining the padlock on the entrance gate, fishing through his pockets for anything of use, when someone clapped him on the back with a thick, meaty hand.

“Are you him?”

He turned, locked gazes with one of the most unfortunate-looking demons he’d ever seen. Waxy complexion of eggshell-white, interspersed with large splotches of mauve, a noseless face, a wide, lipless mouth, eyes hidden behind a pair of ostentatious glasses, the whole head stuffed under a fat beach-hat. Altogether, the effect was a sort of Jim Henson creation, only not the intimidating kind. More like someone had taken a wrong bloody turn trying to find their way to Sesame Street.

“Are you him?” the thing asked again. “The vampire with a soul? The one who helps people?”

Spike blinked for a moment before realizing the demon was asking if he was Angel. “Fraid you’ve confused me with someone else, mate.”

“But you were going in there.” He pointed one of three pudgy fingers at the Hyperion. “This is where it is, right? I’ve been by every night for the past two weeks hoping he might come back. I *need* him to come back. He’s the only one who can help me.”

More’s the pity for him, then. “Don’t think—”

“It’s not a question of money, either. I have money. Lots of it. That’s sort of the problem.”

Spike opened his mouth to tell the poor pillock the bad news—that Angel had helped himself right out of the helping people business and into the evil law firm business—but then the words registered. “Your problem is that you have too much money?”

“Well, that’s...I guess *a* way to put it. Maybe not the best. More just... There’s this demon...”

And then he went on to share the extremely sad story involving ill-gotten wins from an underground gambling ring—with the assurances that he’d only gone there in the first place to bail out a friend, what a considerate bloke—how he’d scored big, and now a self-proclaimed demon mob boss had decided that the sod had broken some obscure rule of his particularly demon clan and was demanding trial by combat or what all to both defend his honor and reclaim the winnings. It was all very involved and boring, but with the punchline that if the problem went away, Spike would find his pockets lined enough that travel would no longer be a concern.

“Your lucky day,” Spike said, throwing his arm around the walking meal-ticket. “I’ll take half up front. Insurance, you see.”

“Wait... I thought you weren’t Angel?”

“Bloody right, I’m not.”

“But you *are* a vampire.”

“Nothin’ gets by you, mate.”

“But... I need *help*. Not just someone who will take half and skedad-dle. That’s why I thought Angel was safe, you know? He has a soul. And he’s strong enough to take a demon like this in a fight. I mean, he’s done it before.”

“Think you’ll find Angel’s soul is a bit loose these days,” Spike retorted. It wasn’t a lie—even months later, he had no idea what his wanker of a grandsire thought he was getting away with, playing lawyer. Somehow, the big idiot had never once asked himself what it meant that the amulet that had claimed Spike’s life back in Sunnydale had been given to him by the people who had offered him the sodding keys to the castle. Angel was a lot of things—Spike could provide a list if asked—but he generally wasn’t thick, at least not to this degree. It was enough to make Spike wonder if the man was compromised on another level, one that would reveal itself only after some undefined Rubicon had been crossed.

“Loose?” the demon in front of him asked, voice squeaky.

“Always has been.” Or at the very least, looser than a soul that had been won rather than cursed. “And he’s not the only vampire that meets your qualifications.”

The demon gave him a look that was justifiably skeptical, but that was all right. Spike was used to proving his worthiness to naysayers. Less used to it working, but hell, a man had to have a lucky turn at least once in his life, right?

Didn’t seem too much to ask.



Spike,

Today is 19. That's how many days you've been gone.

Feels like a lot more, though. Guess that's just death. It felt longer than 147

days to me when I got back, too. More like centuries. I didn't know it'd be like that on this side of things. Like every day is dragging. It didn't drag before, back when Mom died. But I also didn't really have a lot of quiet moments. It was all go, go, go, getting ready for the big showdown with Glory. Mom being gone was just something I had to accept along with everything else.

It probably says something that I'd kill for another apocalypse right about now. Just anything to take my mind off things. Not just you-things but a lot of you-things. When it is quiet here, that's when I miss you the most.

It's everything, though. I miss things I never thought I would miss. Like, I miss Sunnydale, if you can believe it. I still can't. Always in my head, if I got out of there, I'd just never look back. Carpe all the diem I could because I never thought I'd get a chance. Though I guess it's a little different, thinking "if I get out of here, I'll never go back" and then being out of here and knowing you can't go back, even if you want to. The option is gone, and you didn't know how much you were relying on it always being there until it's too late.

There were things I didn't get to do. Plans and stuff I didn't get to make. I dream about the house almost every night, that I'm there and it's real, and I have the chance to get all the things I left. You know I don't have anything of Mom's? Not even the brooch she gave me when I turned sixteen that was my grandmother's. It meant a lot to me that she did that because that was before she knew about the slayage and right when everything had gone to crap back in LA, and she'd had a lot of talks about how I'd lost her trust and it would take time to get it back. Then she gave me that brooch, said it had been my grandma's and that she'd gotten it when she turned 16 and that she'd always planned on giving it to me and that she hoped it could be a reminder of how much she loved me even when she was mad that I'd gotten kicked so far out of school that we had to move whole towns to start over. I never really appreciated how hard that had to be. I mean, I was up to my elbows in demons so I'm not, like, mad at myself for that or anything. Just that momming Dawn has been all with the eye-opening, and I don't know that I ever told Mom thank you for everything she did while she was here.

And I didn't pack the brooch. I didn't even think about it. I don't know what I thought would happen in that last fight with the First. I mean, we were all ready for something, but for the whole town to just disappear? There's so much me I left behind and, I don't know, I guess I feel like I'm supposed to act

like I don't miss it. Got to be strong because I did all this. The others can't see me afraid. I have to be the one who's brave and sure, even when I'm not.

I know you'd get it, if you were with me. You always just did. When it was just us and I didn't feel like talking, you didn't make me. But you always got it. I needed that. Probably more than I knew. You remember that night you showed up and Willow and Giles were inside arguing about magic? I think that might be when I fell in love with you. You were there, and you understood me without me needing to say much of anything. I'd never had that. Not with anyone. Not even Angel. Actually, especially not Angel. He told me on more than one occasion that he didn't get me. I didn't remember that until after, though. Side effect of being the dumpee.

Or maybe just everyone telling me that he'd done said dumping for my own good and it was the smart move. Like it's hard for me to remember the bad things about Mom, the times she drove me crazy, or just really hurt me by not being what I needed. Once she died, I forgot all about that because it didn't matter anymore. And Angel leaving "for my own good" was kind of a death. It felt like one at the time. And since it wasn't my choice, my glasses got all rose-colored and I forgot the times he drove me the not-good kind of crazy and how sometimes it felt like he was lecturing me the way Giles did, and that even when we were together, I was so worried about doing something or learning something that would make us not together. I never knew what he was thinking and he never told me. He never knew what I was thinking, either. And he never asked.

You just knew. You always did. Even when we were trying to kill each other, you knew me like no one else.

I miss being known like that. I miss having you here to understand me without me saying anything. It's been 19 days, and I think I'll miss that forever.

I know I'll love you that long. Probably be mad at you that long, too.

Goddammit, Spike. You chose the shittiest way to win.

— BUFFY



THE JOB WAS LAUGHABLY easy and didn't take too long to resolve, either. Man gets his skin back just past the midpoint of November and

by the first week of December, he has the financial means to travel just about anywhere in the bloody world. If Spike hadn't been in a state where he really needed the dosh, his conscience, wounded and tattered as it was, might have rebuked him at the notion of accepting payment. But despite not being keen to add to his list of sins, he took the promised payout after the job was done and advised the demon—whose name he learned was Randolph—not to wander into illicit gambling rings if he wanted to keep his head attached to his shoulders. Might not be a good Samaritan around next time to dole out the punishment, or a vampire in need of some quick cash.

With the *how* of the equation nicely covered, Spike was once again able to turn his attention to the *where*. And unfortunately, after more consideration, he'd resigned himself to the fact that the best and quickest way to answer that question involved a certain big-foreheaded git who would be all too happy to send him on a sodding goose chase. Sure, Spike was efficient enough to do a rudimentary computer search—he'd managed on the few occasions that he'd had to, though it had been a struggle—but he wasn't sure what he'd even search. Vampire slayer? Buffy Summers? Council of Wankers? He knew there had to be a way to look up property records and the like, perhaps even easily, but considering the best he could do behind a keyboard was peck at the keys, she might have packed up and moved by the time he found anything of value. He'd do better to just start knocking on every door in Europe until struck gold.

But Angel wasn't the only person Spike knew in this city. And he definitely wasn't the smartest or the kindest.

No, that would be Fred Burkle. A bird who just happened to love tacos and always managed to work through lunch until one of her underlings heard the telltale growl of her belly. Then Fred would shoot out of the place and make a beeline for the taco cart across the street. And if a sunlight-sensitive bloke such as himself just happened to be in the vicinity, he might take advantage of the long shadows cast by the sun as it made its trip back toward the horizon to catch her attention.

"Spike?" Fred blinked at him for a few seconds before the vendor waved a hand in front of her face and reminded her where she was. She made a face and started counting out bills, apologies between every

word, in such a hurry that Spike might have felt a pang of remorse if his need hadn't been greater. "Sorry, Julio. And thank you for saving those peppers for me. They smell delicious."

The vendor gave her a broad, toothy smile that announced his entire day had been made, then cast a glower in Spike's direction as though to chastise him for stealing her focus.

"Not the man you need to worry about, mate," Spike muttered, but had a smile ready for Fred when she stopped all breathless in front of him. "Sorry 'bout that. Just needed a word and didn't fancy the idea of stormin' the castle, the way I left things."

"I thought you *had* left," Fred replied. "You made tracks pretty fast and it's been a few weeks. We all thought you were in Europe with Buffy."

"Right. Sorry about that, too, I suppose. Leaving the way I did."

"No, I get it. You don't have to apologize to me." She offered him the sort of smile that had kept him warm when he had been the coldest since spiraling back to life from the great beyond. Commiserative and kind, too much so for the likes of Angel, but no accounting for taste. "You *are* going after her, right? Buffy?"

"That's the plan, yeah," he replied, rubbing a hand along the back of his neck. "Just need to know where exactly it is I'm going. Don't suppose you have that on you?"

"On me? No. But I can get it."

Spike blinked. For some reason, he'd thought it'd be harder to convince her to help. While the girl was nice enough to just about everyone, whether or not they deserved it, she had known Angel first. Spike had been in her life for but a blip. Yeah, he was fond of her, but he would never make the mistake of thinking they were particularly close. And especially not the sort of close where Fred would help him find Buffy, regardless of Angel's wishes.

"You told me she loved you," Fred said, as though sensing his confusion. "That those were her last words to you."

"Also told you I thought it likely that they were just a nice send-off."

"I know you did. But I think you're wrong."

"How's that?"

“Well...”

And she told him about the day he’d died—the parts on the other side of it. Things he’d never heard before, things Angel certainly hadn’t mentioned.

Not to say Spike hadn’t known any of it. In the days since he’d come tumbling out of that amulet, he’d learned a fair amount of what had happened from haunting various people among Angel’s clan. He knew Buffy and the group of newly switched-on slayers had pulled up to the Hyperion, some rougher for the wear, all battle-worn, but victorious. How Buffy had asked if they could use the hotel for a few days to regroup and suss out the next steps. Whole new world she’d made for herself, and there was a lot to piece together. Angel had magnanimously offered up all the resources at his disposal and had spent the next week and some change playing host. Then Buffy had settled on a course of action and she’d left, promising to let loverboy know where she touched down.

What he hadn’t known were the arguments Buffy had apparently had with Angel about going back to the Sunnydale crater to see if there was any way Spike might have survived the collapse. Getting aid to the wounded had been the priority once the dust had settled, and she’d done that, best she could, but the more she thought about their last moments, the more she worried she’d just taken for granted that he hadn’t made it to the other side. After all, she hadn’t seen him snuff it—she’d just run for it when he’d told her to, and maybe he was trapped down there under the rubble. Someone should at least rule it out before he died of starvation or tried to fight his way to the surface only to run out of nighttime hours in the doing.

That didn’t mean anything, Spike told Fred, though his heart had given a familiar lurch, like it thought it might be able to beat again. It was something he’d only ever felt in relation to Buffy.

And Fred had told him he was right. Maybe by itself it just meant Buffy was the sort of person to never leave anyone behind. That made sense with what she knew of her. But that hadn’t been by itself. Fred had apparently stumbled across Buffy and Giles in a heated discussion sometime toward the end of their stay, Buffy arguing that if Giles had gotten his way, Spike would have been dust before he had a chance to

close the hellmouth. That he was so narrow-minded that he couldn't even admit he'd been wrong after everything Spike had done, and how all he'd had to throw at her was that he thought she was blinded by love. Giles, at his wit's end, had shouted something about how that was exactly the way Buffy had always acted when confronted by the fact that her personal feelings were affecting her judgment. He'd had no way of knowing if she was leading with her head or her heart, and given what he'd known about Spike, he had reason to think the latter.

"Loving him had nothing to do with believing in him," Buffy had thrown back. "I love a lot of people I don't believe in as much as I used to. He just happened to be the exception."

Spike was quiet for long moments after Fred stopped talking, too overwhelmed to know where to begin. What to say. His throat tight and his eyes prickling and his heart breaking and piecing itself together again.

"I know Angel has feelings for Buffy," Fred said after politely pretending not to notice when he wiped at his cheeks. "He was...upset when she told him to leave right before the fight. He didn't say as much but I could tell—he's not as hard to read as he thinks he is." She paused. "Add to the fact that he was also still reeling from Cordelia's prognosis, everything that happened in Sunnydale was just hard for him to swallow. It was like he'd lost them both. And when you appeared... I don't know, I think the fact that Cordelia hasn't woken up made him go a little tunnel-visioned, and I didn't want to get in the middle."

"You also didn't know me," he said softly. "Don't blame you for being loyal."

"No, I didn't. But I got to know you. And I'm really glad I did, Spike."

His throat constricted again, made him glad he didn't need to breathe. "Me, too."

"And maybe I should've told you all this about Buffy sooner. What I knew, I mean. I just didn't know if it'd make things better or worse, especially while you didn't have a body and were tied to LA. And *especially* especially when we were going through all that with Pavayne and we weren't sure if you'd... Well, you know. I didn't want to hurt Buffy,

either. I mean, if we couldn't get you back, then it was almost cruel, wasn't it? Giving her hope and then ripping it away." Another pause. "I've also never died and come back before. But I was lost in Pylea for years until Angel found me. When I came back, it was like being resurrected, and I was a different person. You weren't gone five years but... It seemed like a lot to put on you all at once."

It took a minute to realize what she was saying. "You don't need to explain anything to me," Spike assured her. "Already done more than I could've asked for, pet. Thank you."

"I dunno. You did save my life that one time."

"And getting me to her will save mine. We'll be square."

Fred smiled and cracked off a bit of her taco shell. "It'll be the easiest thing I've done all day."



Spike,

This is going to sound really stupid but part of me really thought you'd show up today. Just appear somewhere, maybe on the staircase inside our apartment building. No reason except Dawn has pointed out that we're kind of bookends for each other. Dying to save the world, loving each other when the other person believes we don't. I am still mad about that, by the way, but enough time has passed that I guess I can't throw stones. How many times did I tell you that you didn't actually love me? Don't answer that.

But yeah, I thought you might show up. Be a bookend. It's day 148 and you've officially been dead longer than I was. I was just banking on forced resurrection being a part of the "us" package.

I know that's not fair. It's actually really selfish. I wouldn't want you to go through any of what I went through after the gang brought me back. I've already said as much to Willow when she brought it up. And apparently she got chatty with Giles, because he thought I'd be comforted to hear there was almost no chance you were in Heaven like I was.

I didn't talk to him for almost a week over that comment, it made me so mad. Not just about you, which it did, but also about what it means for anyone who becomes a vampire. The soul is a lost cause because the person dies? What kind of sense does that make?

We're in England now, though I don't know for how long. Turns out trying to save or start or whatever an organization that helps manage superpowered girls from across the globe is a little involved and a lot bureaucratic. There are days I don't recognize myself, and I'm sure you wouldn't recognize me, either. Probably why it's been so long since I wrote to you last, which, yes, I know is also not of the sense-making but I like to think some part of you can actually hear my words if they're for you. Makes me feel a little less like you're completely gone. And you're not, as I said. No one will ever convince me your soul didn't go to Heaven, same as mine did. I don't know if anyone talked to me when I was dead, and I don't remember anything that they told me if they did, but it helps, sometimes, thinking of you as a long-distance friend rather than someone who's just gone.

Because really, if you're gone-gone, what am I even doing this for? A world that punishes people for dying a certain way? That's insane and cruel, and not where I want to live.

Sorry. Tangent. My mind is as organized as ever. I was talking about England, and about the bureaucracy bullshit. Giles is all old-school thinking, telling me what the Council did and how they were structured, as though the Council was ever useful for anything other than pissing me off and getting people killed. They were rolling in it, though, which has been a big help. Lots of smart investments over the years mean I don't have to worry about money pretty much ever again, and Dawn is set for school and I can afford to hire staff. I'd love to get active slayers on some sort of salary too, like we're an actual business, but Giles warns me about using too many assets and overextending.

There are literally thousands of slayers now. Not talking numbers in the 5 digit range or anything, but we've found around 2,000 of them so far. Some want nothing to do with us, and that's fine, a decision they should get to make. I want those girls trained, at least, because not wanting to be a slayer and getting to not be a slayer are two different things, even now. Demons and glory-hunting vampires like you might still seek them out, and they need to know how to take care of themselves. Then there are the girls who are super into slayage. Like a whole bunch of Faiths and Kennedys, and you can imagine how pleasant they are. Or how well we get along. That is, not. Still, they're the ones who want to be here, and that's why I did what I did, or part of it at least. There's just a lot to work out, so much so that nearly 5 months later I feel like we've made no progress at all.

Everyone wants something. Everyone expects something. I can't help but feel like I'm not living up to what I should be. It's all on me, this decision. If it flops, then I've fucked up several thousand lives for no reason. Well, it saved the world, but maybe you would've done that anyway. Only then I would've been left homeless and one of the Chosen 2 instead of Chosen 2,000, and that would've been a different kind of problem. And sometimes it's all I can do to keep from screaming at people that I'm only 22 years old and making this up as I go along, and that it wouldn't be terrible if someone else stepped up because it's not like it was before. Before, I was the only one. I'm not now. I'm just the most experienced one, and I always will be, so does that mean I'm also always in charge? I never get a break?

And this is going to sound really little kid-like, but fuck it. The holidays are coming up and I miss my mom. And you. And home. It's not the first time I've been in the boo-Christmas spirit, by any means, but at least before I had something to help me through it before. Last year, I was home, and yes, it was crowded and yes, I was hyper-focused on getting you back from the First, and yes, I was constantly stressed to the max, but it was still home. It was my bed in my mom's house in my town. We didn't put a tree up or anything, but I knew where all the decorations and ornaments were, and I could imagine a Christmas again where we'd put them up and make cookies and open presents. I was fighting for that, you know? The year before had been beyond miserable, and the year before that was the last one with Mom, and I just wanted to feel something somewhat normal again. Not even normal people normal, but Buffy normal. I didn't want the misery and apocalypse to be our new tradition. Mom loved the holidays, loved buying presents, loved watching us open them and squeal and be all with the excitement. It was one of those things that kept us together after Dad left. She made a point to be as festive as possible so Dawn and I weren't left being all sad and stuff about things not being the way they were before everything fell apart.

I just remember being in my room last year and promising myself that this year would be better. I'd be better for Dawn and we'd do all the silly things that Mom had done with us. But it's hard to do those things when your town is in a big hole and you're on the other side of the world. Plus Dawn doesn't seem all that interested, which I might be taking a little harder than I should. She's at that stage where hanging out with her big sister isn't exactly how she wants to

spend her nights. Even if her sister is me, though I've become anti-fun over the last few months so maybe I should've seen that coming.

Hey, at least she gets to be a kid. I am happy about that. And that she hasn't forgotten how. That's actually kind of miraculous. She shouldn't be forced to give that up just because her sister has a case of the sads. But the fact that Dawn is thriving now just makes me think of how much I am not, and I don't want to bring her down. She doesn't need me raining on her parade. Which, I know, sounds very self-sacrificial and I've been known to do that before, but I really mean it. She's not even planning on being here for Christmas. Her school has some trip that's a "once in a lifetime" kind of deal and we have the money to send her, so she's going to go with her new friends and do something amazing and have a wonderful time. She deserves it. I'm not getting in the middle of that.

But hell, maybe I should just go to the crater for Christmas anyway. No one would ever expect me to run away back to home. Then I could at least be close to you and Mom.

If you'd come back today like you were supposed to, we could plan the trip together. Or maybe you'd just have something amazing in mind. Show me around London, your favorite spots. I'd like that.

I miss you, Spike. But I hope wherever you are, you're safe and warm and loved. And if you are, I hope you stay there.

If you're not, though, would it kill you to be my bookend one more time?

— BUFFY



SPIKE WAGERED he might have figured out where Buffy and the others had landed on his own if he'd just used his noggin. Made sense that as the new head honcho, and with the Council blown to bloody scraps, she'd have to start in the place where those wankers had set up shop. Whatever hadn't been lost in the explosion was almost certainly hers, waiting to be fashioned into use for the next iteration of world protectors. It'd take a minute to suss through, too. Enough so that the Slayer would likely still be in London months after the Hellmouth had fallen, even into mid-December.

Still, it was nice to know. Nicer to have an address. A phone

number, too, though there were certain things that were too important to be done at a distance. The first time he heard Buffy's voice after scraping himself out of the yawning maw of the great bloody beyond, he wanted it to be because she was right in front of him. Looking at him with those soft eyes and hopefully gearing up to throw herself into his arms. Not to snog him, though god knows he'd be all right with that, but just to envelop him in her warmth. Let him feel the thrum of her heart against his chest, hear the sweet song of her blood as it pumped through her marvel of a body, drown in her earthy scent, and just relish in the sensation that was being home at last.

Or maybe just saying his name. That would be fine, too. Hell, anything would do so long as he got to see her do it.

The information Fred had given him led him to a home on Bywater Street, and he was glad for it. After everything she'd been through, Buffy deserved to live in a nice, posh neighborhood. Chelsea was everything he could have wanted for her and more, with its neat little rows of historic homes done up in soft yellows and blues and other assorted pastels. Right in the thick of things, too, close to some of the best shops and the like. All things that would appeal to the parts of Buffy she'd so frequently had to sacrifice in the name of duty.

The place she'd selected was a pretty petal pink wedged between two homes of robin's egg blue. For a long while, he lingered on the other side of the street, trying to drum up what it was he meant to say when he saw her. The revelations Fred had left him with helped calm the loudest of his nerves but not the full lot. It was quite a thing, he knew, seeing someone come back from the dead. That night that Buffy had walked down the stairs, an angel descending, had reshaped his world in ways he was still trying to understand. A piece of him left there at Revello Drive, watching her as his head caught up with his heart, realizing that someone could wish something into existence after all. That miracles did happen.

But even with the reassurance he'd been given, the hope that Buffy's words to him in that cavern hadn't just been a pleasant sendoff, he wasn't so daft as to think her time without him had mirrored his without her. She had so much to live for, his Slayer. So much more than he ever had. And there was no telling that she felt the same as she did now, all these months

later, as she had when his death had been fresh. She could have healed, moved on. Seeing him might be a shock to the system—a step backward in the life she'd started to build for herself. The lengths she'd taken to put everything Sunnyhell, including him, in the past where it belonged.

Those thoughts were almost enough to convince him to leave her be. Let her live her life without the inconvenience of phantoms from her past.

Except he knew he'd never forgive himself if he didn't take this chance. And he'd never be able to move on, himself, if he left any question about Buffy Summers unanswered.

It was that knowledge that bolstered him with the courage he needed to drag his feet up the steps to her home. To raise his fist and knock. To not tuck tail and run when he heard movement from inside, movement attached to heartbeats, or flinch back when the door opened to a face he'd missed desperately.

A face that was full of trepidation and hope, as though she'd known to expect him. Hell, he might have even fooled himself into thinking just that had her hope not fallen slack and the color drained from her cheeks the second their eyes connected.

For a long moment, she didn't say anything. Just stared at him. A living ghost.

Then finally, Dawn Summers worked her throat and parted her lips. "Spike?"

He'd had months to get used to being someone other than a hero to her—months of Dawn glaring stakes at him whenever they were in a room together, if not ignoring him entirely. Pretending like there hadn't been a time when she'd hung onto his every word, considered him a friend or more, the brother she knew would always be there to help get her into and often out of tight spots. What he'd done to Buffy had cost him everything—including a relationship he hadn't realized he treasured as much as he did until it had been gone.

The way she'd said his name just now, though, shot him back to a time before that awful night in the bathroom. As though the Dawn he'd known and loved had been on bloody sabbatical for a year or more and just now come home. He didn't know if he could trust it, knew he

probably shouldn't, but he couldn't help from grinning a little. Spreading his arms as though to entice her to embrace him in welcome. Man could dream, right?

"Lo, Nibblet," he said. "Hope it's not a bad time, but—"

The next thing he knew, he had bloody well been bulldozed by Dawn Summers, her arms around his neck, her body shaking, the scent of salt on the air the only warning he had before she started to cry. Spike stood frozen for a second, then closed her into a hug he'd needed more than he'd realized.

"Is it really you?" she asked in a voice that trembled nearly as much as she did. "If this is some stupid demon trick, I'm going to have to kick some serious ass. And I can now, too. I'm really good."

Spike chuckled and gave her a squeeze. She was taller than she'd been the last time she'd properly hugged him, and had more hard lines and angles that betrayed just how much she had changed and underscored the threat in her words. It made his heart swell and ache at the same measure in a unique way that could only be credited to the ever-cruel forward march of time. No going back, just catching up. That was all he could hope to do.

"Really me," he told her now. "Far as I can tell, at least."

Dawn sniffed and pulled back, wiping at her eyes. Giving him a chance to look at her properly—see what he'd just felt, how much older she was now than the girl in his memory. "How?"

"Dunno. Last thing I remember was goin' up like a bloody firework on the Hellmouth. Then I'm spilling out in Angel's office—"

"Angel? What the hell were you doing with Angel?"

"No sodding idea. Just how it happened." He let out a breath, and though he tried not to, couldn't quite manage to keep his eyes from wandering to the space behind her. The racket they were making would surely have caught someone's attention by now, if anyone were home. The fact that Buffy hadn't stumbled out of the shadows just yet had his heart in a slow plummet.

She might be out. Patrolling or doing something with all the newfound freedom that had fallen in her lap. Maybe on a date somewhere, smiling up at some bloke who had no idea how very lucky he

was, Spike a memory she held dear but had decided to relegate to her past.

It must have been all over his face, for Dawn reached out and touched his arm. “She’s not here,” she said, and was at least good enough to cushion the blow with a soft tone.

For it was exactly that—a blow, one powerful enough to cut his legs out from under him. Make all the nerves he’d been riding, the waffling between his head and his heart, plummet somewhere too deep for any sane man to follow.

Had they been spoken by anyone else, he might have only heard the words, but Dawn had never been just anyone. He understood enough.

Buffy wasn’t just out. She was gone.



Spike,

I learned today that the line in “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” about hanging a star on a bough wasn’t the original line. That’s something you probably already knew, being all old, but I didn’t know it. Not before today. I was getting groceries and the song was playing over the speakers. Judy Garland was singing, and she sang the original line.

I remember when I was a kid, one of the things my dad would get out for me to watch every year was a Sesame Street Christmas special. I don’t remember much about it, except Big Bird ice-skating to “Feliz Navidad,” which might have been the actual start of my ice-skating obsession. (I’m just putting this together now.) But there was also a segment with Bert and Ernie singing “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” and I don’t know why, but that stuck with me. Aside from being the first place I remember hearing that song, it always seemed sad, which also seemed illegal for Christmas. When you’re a kid, Christmas is always happy. Who doesn’t like presents?

I actually think that’s exactly why Christmas is so hard to get through now. As a kid, you know it’s the best time of the year because you get the things you want. Even school starts getting fun the closer you get to break. There are whole movies with talking animals and funny cartoons telling you that everything is great because it’s Christmas. And then you spend lots of time with the people you

love, and there's great food and singing and magic because Santa's coming. It's wonderful.

And then you grow up. The holidays keep coming every year, and a part of you feels like you should be happy because you remember when it was easier. When there was real Christmas magic, and all the things they said in those movies felt true. So you keep trying to find the magic you once felt, but you never can. Every year you get further from it. And every year brings change, sometimes small, like going to college. Sometimes big like losing your mom, or dying and being resurrected. Sometimes you're so focused on your actual life you don't get to slow down and even think about the holidays, and maybe that's better. Because right now I'm the Judy Garland version of "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," where the line is "until then, we'll have to muddle through somehow" rather than hanging stars. I feel like the hanging stars line is trying to convince me Christmas is something it's not. Like, the rest of the song is about how Christmas is once you grow up. Everything you hope for but know isn't going to happen. Like getting to day 148 and the person you thought might just show up for no reason whatsoever doesn't, and you're crushed all over again when you know it's stupid.

It just bit me, I don't want to try this year. I don't want to pretend to be happy so that people don't ask, and I also don't want people to ask. I don't need more pep talks or assurances that it'll get better, that new things take time. I know they do. I know there's a chance I'll be in a good mood next year, or the year after. That this might be the hardest Christmas because it's the first away from home, the first without you, not the first without Mom but I feel like I'm feeling that too. Losing her house was like losing the last bit of her I had. I'm not in the mood to be all with the festive.

I just have to muddle through somehow. And it's probably crazy, but I think the best place to do that is Sunnydale. Even if no one will be there but me and the ghosts. The idea hasn't left my head since I had it, and now that we're getting closer and Dawn's all packed up for her holiday trip, I'm starting to think about what I want to do. I'm not going to be with her, so I might as well be with the other people I love. Lucky me, they're in one convenient location.

And I'm pretty sure you're the only person in the world who would get that, so you're the only person I'm telling.

I guess I'll see you soon.

— BUFFY



HE SHOULDN'T HAVE TAKEN them. Should have just left them where they were, let her keep her privacy. But hell, the soul didn't mean he was a saint, and every envelope he'd nicked had had his name on the outside. Meant they were for him, didn't it? Wasn't like Buffy had left any correspondence for Dawn lying about, save for the one note telling her to have a good holiday and she'd see her in the new year.

Of course, she hadn't exactly left these notes lying about either, but he'd found them anyway. Looking for clues as to where Buffy might have gone, which meant leafing through all the papers he found crammed in her desk. That was after getting over the shock of Buffy having a desk in the first place. It was like her, beautiful bloody chaos, with calendars and training schedules, status reports of the slayers they had identified and whether or not they had been contacted, and financial statements scattered all over the place. Giving a glimpse of the regimented life she'd been leading since the Hellmouth caved in on itself.

And in a drawer, underneath a load of receipts and a few of those fashion magazines she'd always fancied, had been a small stack of envelopes all bearing his name. There hadn't been many, but considering he hadn't expected anything like that, the discovery had knocked Spike for six. For a long beat, he'd just stood hunched over her desk, breathing hard, willing the ink to form a different shape or the like, but it hadn't and when Dawn had called his name, he'd acted without thought. Seized the envelopes and stuffed them into his duster pocket. Told her that he hadn't found anything, either, which had probably also been selfish. Or definitely had been.

Except Dawn's name hadn't been on any of those envelopes. Looked like the only person Buffy had written to at all was him, and if she hadn't felt like sharing with anyone else, then maybe he didn't need to, either. Not yet.

It was piss-poor justification, but he would stand by it if pressed.

The rest of the time there had been spent sharing the sordid story of how it was William the Bloody was more undead than dead, Dawn peppering him with questions and thoroughly abusing Angel about

keeping all this to himself. Livid, actually, for she thought it likely that hearing Spike was in any form of existence in Los Angeles would have snapped Buffy out of what Dawn called *her funk*.

"Not that she told us much," she'd added, rolling her eyes. "You know how she is. I mean, she's gotten better, but it's like every time we have improvement something big happens. And some of it is probably me. I haven't been around as much, especially since Buffy's so...*not Buffy* about where I go and how late I'm out, as long as all schoolwork gets done. Like, obviously. She left me here *by myself* to go off wherever."

That was quite the turn for the Slayer, though Spike supposed it had to have happened sometime. The Hellmouth being nothing more than a large hole in the ground likely eased Buffy's concerns about the sort of uglies Dawn might stumble across these days, even if unchaperoned in a foreign country was a tad further than he would have expected. Granted, Dawn had some trip coming up that she was leaving for day after tomorrow, and Rupert and Andrew were evidently frequent stoppers-by, as well as reasonably close in the event something came up.

"Do you think you can find her?" Dawn had asked as he'd helped himself back onto the porch. He'd had to stop her from doing something daft, like canceling the plans she'd had with her mates—canceling the whole bloody trip, even, in honor of his being home. Promised her he hadn't come back from the dead just to kick off again, so there would be plenty of time to celebrate the wonder that was his return. Properly, when everyone was together, safe and sound.

"I'll find her," he'd promised, running his fingers along one of the envelopes he'd tucked into his pocket. He'd have sworn they were burning a hole in the lining, how desperate he was to rip into them. "The pair of us'll be back here before it's time to ring in the new year."

Dawn had favored him with the sort of look he hadn't earned from her in what felt like lifetimes. At once not the brave girl on the cusp of turning eighteen, but the child who used to hang onto his every word in such a way he'd gotten to savor the good old days while still serving as her protector. It had made his chest go tight, damn near made his

eyes well up, but he'd blinked and forced himself to focus before he could get swept away.

He'd let her down once—more than he'd ever thought possible—and there was no reason for her to trust him now. No reason for Buffy to be writing to him, either, or loving him, either at the Hellmouth or in any of the days that had followed. For his crimes, he bloody well should have forever lost both the woman he loved and the sister he'd never had.

Somehow, he hadn't, though. At least not yet.

And now he was sitting on the edge of the bed in a hotel room in London, turning over an envelope that had his name on it, several others stacked at his side. Wondering what sort of man he was, should he open it up, infringe upon Buffy's innermost thoughts without her knowing. Balancing how great a crime that would be in the grand scheme of all his others, especially knowing whatever these letters contained had been put there partially for him. Or maybe that was all his own twisted rationalization. Buffy might have written to him but that didn't mean she'd ever intended for him to read it. Truly whispering in a dead man's ear.

At the same time, though, he knew what he was going to do. The decision had been made the second he'd seen them. What was one more transgression in a life that held so many?

Not a lot. If she hadn't staked him yet...

Spike let out a breath and flipped the envelope over again. Then, with shaking hands, peeled back the seal and let the pages tumble onto the bedspread.



Spike,

So, it turns out if a whole town just up and vanishes from the face of the earth, people notice. Even if that town is Sunnydale, where no one ever noticed anything unusual, even when it happened right in front of them. Go figure, huh?

Meaning, this isn't the quiet Christmas I was hoping for. Which is why I'm writing to you again rather than talking to you at the edge of that canyon.

There's a whole enclave of weirdos who have decided to camp out here too, courtesy of the internet and its ability to spread conspiracy theories far and wide. Someone I talked to today seems to think the mothership is landing here at the stroke of midnight on Christmas to transport the true believers to the next plane of existence.

Well, at least I'll be entertained.

You're probably wondering if I'm having buyer's remorse. It was already a wacky idea, up and leave to spend Christmas in a tent in the middle of nowhere. And yeah, I've asked myself the same thing a few hundred times or so, especially when I was trying to put up said tent and remembered that the last time I went camping, it was in my backyard and my dad had done all the hard stuff. Buffy was never outdoor adventure girl. She was always very much a pool girl, or a beach girl if I needed actual nature, but roughing it? Voluntarily?

I'm writing this and realizing how amazing it was that Riley and I lasted as long as we did. I bet he takes Sam and the kids (I assume they have kids, or will some day) camping every summer. Can you imagine?

But I did get the tent up. And my lantern all lanterny. I also found the cushiest sleeping bag which, yeah, was more than a little pricey but when you're the head of the Council, or something like it, you can afford to splurge every now and then.

Back to the question, though. Do I regret my decision to leave? The answer is no, surprisingly. I thought I would. I really did. I kept expecting to snap out of it, but even being one among many here is kind of nice, because no one in that many has any idea who I am or what actually happened here. They think I'm just another true believer. They think I'm here waiting for the mothership. It's almost like being back in Sunnydale after all. Weird things happening, everyone clueless, and just being one of the many who take the town's weirdness in stride.

There are worse ways to muddle.

Though I do wish I had a chance to talk to you. Like really talk. I had this idea that maybe here is the place you could actually hear me. Mom, too. All the energy that it took to keep the hellmouth hellmouthy could carry me to you both in some way. And maybe I could hear you, too. Or at least pretend like I did.

Instead, all I hear right now is a bunch of college kids singing the "Batman Smells" version of "Jingle Bells" around a campfire and laughing like it's the first time they've heard it.

In hindsight, I really should have seen that coming.



HE'D HALF-EXPECTED to arrive and find he'd come all this way for nothing. Instead, on Christmas Eve, when Spike pulled the bike he'd convinced Fred to liberate from Angel's private collection of luxury vehicles to a stop, he was still a good mile or so from the crater proper, and on the outskirts of what looked to be a bloody festival of some sort. There was a scattering of tents hosting what seemed to be the entire population of southern California, and people milling everywhere. Shouting each other's names, huddled around campfires, sprinting from one end of the site to the other, and generally acting the way Spike had come to expect humans to act when congregated in large groups.

It wasn't until he strolled through the vending area—because no good festival was complete without a load of hucksters peddling their wares—that he realized what had brought the lot of them here to begin with. And then promptly rolled his eyes at himself for not cottoning on from the start and stuck a fag between his lips. Bloody figured this decade's version of hippies had turned the Sunnydale crater into Woodstock.

He wondered if Buffy had known right away or if she'd also needed to take a tour of the place to realize the obvious. If she hadn't been chased off by the lights alone, mourning the loss of a quiet holiday along the graveside of the town she hadn't ever expected to miss. The idea that she'd come here at all was one Spike hadn't quite wrapped his lobes around, but it was all there. In black and white, detailed in words that had been scribbled in her handwriting, on paper that smelled like her, in a voice he could hear as hers. All of it written for him.

It was enough to make his soul bleed.

His first run-through of the letters had taken less than ten minutes, his eyes and heart greedy for her, desperate, half-dreading and entirely needing to consume every word she'd put to paper. The meaning behind those words drawn in but not fully hitting until he'd visited them for a second time. No, the first had been a rush to the end, his

chest tight and his throat tight and all of him bloody tight, and Buffy's voice in his ears, whispering as though from a thousand miles away. Telling him things that aligned with what he'd already been told, the assurances he'd already been given, calming even the worry that had nipped at his heels as he'd mounted his courage to knock on her front door. It was just a small part of him that had doubted, but a part nurtured by years of good bloody reasons to expect heartbreak, even when he should have been on top of the world.

But the words hadn't changed, nor had the voice whispering in his ear, and for the first time since that night in Sunnydale, that sodding lifetime ago when he'd fallen into the unique Buffy Summers gravity as she'd enchanted him on the dance floor of a club now buried under rubble, Spike felt the corresponding pull. The sensation that he wasn't lost after all, that she'd found him the same way he'd found her.

Maybe he was selfish for being glad she hadn't moved on, but he didn't care. After all, there was no moving on for him. There was just her. Just finding her.

And though it was likely she had been scared off her original plans, Spike wasn't keen to leave just yet. A predator's sense had him moving deeper into the festivities, pushing through and over all the people who had no idea they were a tummy rumble away from looking like dinner. There was just something in the air, something in his gut, that whispered not to give up so fast. That felt either her or the imprint of her nearby, the way he once had on those nights when she'd visit his crypt to lose herself for a few decadent hours. The part of him that was all demon would feel her the second she stepped into the cemetery, a sense of awareness that had been more primal even than slayer and vampire. More like his mate stalking near, ready to again claim what they both knew was hers. And it could be he was imagining it, probably was, but there was also the chance he wasn't.

If he wasn't and he left, he'd never forgive himself.

It wasn't until he was closer to the crater itself that the scent hit him. Faint and distant, but very present, and entirely Buffy. The same that had teased him in soft whiffs when he'd been in London, crawled into his gut and his throat what felt like lifetimes ago, uprooted everything he knew about himself and the world he'd made his own. She was

here, somewhere, camped out amid the hordes of loonies, and it hit him as it should have from the start, the realization that Buffy wouldn't have been put off by the company. No, she'd relish it. The chance to be surrounded by noise that wasn't her problem, fill the silence with sounds of life to lose herself inside.

She'd been lonely in the letters, but a kind of lonely only Buffy could ever experience. The weight of expectation thrust upon her shoulders, everyone looking up to her, waiting for her to lead and to do it without stumbling. No chance to be anonymous in her world—not like there was here. If anyone came looking for her, they'd have a time doing it.

Unless the person looking wasn't a person at all.

Spike inhaled deeply, pulling her into him, and let his nose do the leading. His chest was heavy, full, and ached like it wanted to seize, his mind spinning to come up with what he meant to tell her when she was in front of him again. Lines and confessions he'd read in her letters surged forward without care or concern, overwhelming him again as they had at the first, the edge not gone, and maybe it never would be. Maybe he would always be exactly here, feeling exactly this. The shock that was her love and her grief, the regrets she'd mentioned and all the other things she'd confessed. What she'd trusted with him, if only his memory, that she hadn't with anyone else. Hoping, as she'd said, that he could hear her wherever he was. That the conversation wasn't one-sided.

Still, it was one thing to think something, even write it down; another to be confronted with that something being true. He couldn't assume anything, least of all that she'd be as happy to see him as he would be her. Easier to make promises to a ghost than someone with flesh and bone. Also easy to romanticize the dead, forget all the reasons you might have had to keep them at a distance when they'd been a part of your every day.

Spike forced back that thought and the fears that came with it best he could just as his eyes landed on the tent he felt, *knew*, to be hers. He was viewing it from the side, its mouth pointed at the crater's edge, the whole thing about as close to the drop as he reckoned she could safely get, and while not isolated, also as far as she could manage from

the others. Even from the angle, he could see the front flap was open almost carelessly, not quite an invitation but also not shutting herself off. The Buffy Summers approach to letting in the world. He stopped short to gather his bearings, keenly aware of himself as only she could make him. Even now. Maybe especially now.

Then there was nothing to do but move forward.

He was just debating how a man might go about knocking on the door to a bloody tent when a slender slayer hand emerged to push a flap aside, and she stepped into the night. Buffy. Truly Buffy, with her Buffy shoulders and Buffy arms and her Buffy face, all there, all in motion, fueled by the effortless grace that seemed to define her every movement. Facing forward so he caught her in profile. Spike stood transfixed, his voice stuck in his throat and his heart stuck where it had stopped beating more than a century ago, unable to do anything more than drink her in.

Barely any time had passed—he knew that logically. Just a few months, all told, a handful of days in the grand scheme of things. Yet he seemed to feel the weight of every second they had spent apart, what that had cost him, what grief and loss had cost her. She somehow looked the same and older, beyond the woman of hard-won wisdom he'd fallen in love with all over again over their last year. Aged in ways the body wouldn't betray but the eyes always would. And all of the doubts that he'd carried with him, the fears that might have paralyzed him if he'd let them find their footing, went up like smoke. The woman who had written those letters lived in that body, behind those eyes. The woman who had written those letters lived every word she'd given him and more, bore it in the flat line of her smile when she turned her head to regard the surrounding celebrations, tired and baffled but welcoming of the nonsense all the same.

His hand had tingled when solid form had been returned to him. It tingled again now, palm and fingers inexplicably warm for a creature whose body generated no heat. The flame he'd held with her had pulled him home. And nothing else mattered but that.

Spike knew the second she sensed him, the instant her instincts kicked in. Her shoulders snapped back along with her spine, her head canted slightly in the manner of a predator feeling out its prey. She

became the sort of unearthly still only a slayer could master, and then she was turning toward him, and he hadn't worked out what he meant to say. Hadn't done more than fumble through his own head, scripting fresh verses in her honor, but he was out of time now.

Not too long ago, she'd gotten to watch him stare at her, this figment from beyond made flesh, standing on the stairs of her home. It was a moment he revisited often—one of those that had been among the best of his life, and also the most painful. Nothing unusual there, as it was a line all his best nights seemed to walk. The reality of having what he wanted most in this world or any other but knowing there were strings. Caveats. That the perfect he thought he had came with a price he would mortgage his existence to pay.

Somehow, tonight, Spike found himself wondering if he'd ever looked at her the way she was looking at him now, with eyes that were round without being wide, as though she had taken a hearty thump on the head and was struggling to make sense of the world behind the blinking stars. Her mouth fell open, slack, her breaths and the rush of her pulse deep and fast at the same time. It was something, being seen. Feeling the shift in the air, in her, as she took him in—a shift unlike any they had shared before, for the questions and uncertainty that had defined them for so long were absent—struck him as one of the most profound experiences of his life. Finally existing in a space where his presence was more than an accessory—where everything he was, ever had been or could be, was exactly what had been missing.

Buffy stepped forward on legs he could tell were shaking, her gaze fixed on him as though she were determined not to blink. Then she parted her lips, those wonderful lips, and her voice filled the air between them. "Spike?"

He opened his mouth but all the air had left his lungs, taking his ability to speak with it. All he could do was watch as she stepped closer to him, her movements slow and deliberate as though afraid he might vanish if she went too fast. It was like a dream made physical, Buffy drawing so near she took up all his vision, the look on her face remaining the same no matter how much space between them she consumed. He wasn't fooling himself; he wasn't imagining rot. He was

looking into the eyes of a woman who loved him, who had missed him, and at whose side he'd remain as long as she allowed him.

There was so much to tell her, so much to explain, so many questions he knew he had to get ahead of, apologies and promises to make, and conversations that had been long overdue even before he'd gone up a bloody blaze of glory. So many paths to choose from, and he hadn't the faintest where to start.

Thank Christ she was the brains of the operation. The next thing he knew, she was against him, all warmth and sunshine, all Buffy, searing him with that soul-deep gaze as her hands found his arms and trailed up over the leather to his shoulders, along his neck, and then her skin was on his skin, fire against cold, and she pulled him down to her mouth and swallowed the enormity of all there was to say with her kiss.

Spike groaned, seized her shoulders and pulled her closer, even if *closer* didn't exist. Buffy's mouth, Buffy's tongue, Buffy's sweet gasps, the scent of wet salt and Buffy shaking as tears spilled down her cheeks. But she didn't pull back, just let them run with his own. Shared and indistinguishable.

Talking could wait. Hell, the whole sodding world could wait.
He was home at last.



Spike,

First of all, Merry Christmas. In case I forget to say it.

Second of all, I couldn't sleep.

It's weird—all these months, I've been talking to you, and it's been easy. Maybe because it wasn't talking and you weren't actually in the room with me. But you are now, and I know you'll read this when you wake up, and for some reason, that makes it hard for me to write. Weird, huh?

Or I guess not. Talking about feelings where someone can hear me? Not among Buffy's fortes. I told you that night that I close myself off, become unattainable, and guess what, that hasn't changed. Case in point: I spent months being open and honest with someone I thought I'd never see again.

And now I can't sleep. The part of me that has watched way too many

Christmas movies thought you might just vanish on December 26. Like, how do I know I'm not Jimmy Stewart in this scenario? Or Scrooge? Even if he had a change of heart, it's not like he got a happy ending with that Belle lady. I mean, I don't think. I've never actually read A Christmas Carol, but I definitely don't remember her showing up at the end of the Muppet version of the story.

So if I fall asleep in this chair and you happen to be here in the morning, that's why I'm not in bed with you. I'm just waiting for you to disappear.

On the off chance that you don't, though, I need you to know the following things. It might take me a while to say them to you with my actual voice, but they're the things I'm thinking.

I want to get better at saying stuff to you even if I'm scared of it. Things like "I love you." Which I do.

Thank you for finding me, and thank you for having wheels. Crater Christmas was okay when you were dead but with you not dead anymore, I was in desperate need of an actual bed to get some actual sleep (or try, but no worries that I'm still awake – it's more comfortable to not sleep here, too, than it was in the tent). I might just take a third shower while you sleep. I still feel like I have dirt between my toes.

I'm still mad at you, but I'll get over it.

I will probably drive you crazy, and I know you'll make me want to stake you, but I will always remember that I want my life to be spent being annoyed by you. I know what it's like when I'm not. One thing I definitely learned while you were dead: I am the best me when I'm with you.

There are also a lot of questions I have. Like, tonight, was that your first time having sex with a soul? The way you looked at me, I think maybe it was. Is it different, being with me now? Does this feel real to you? Do you think it ever will? I hope it will, because I'm ready to stop muddling, Spike. I know it'll be hard and you being here doesn't fix everything, but it fixes enough for me. You are my best Christmas present ever.

And hey, crazy Buffy worries aside, I know you're probably going to read that (it's almost 6am so if you were a Christmas visitor, you missed your train back) and I'm not going to cross it out. I'm only a little embarrassed to be so gushy. Okay, maybe a lot embarrassed. If you give me hell for it, I'll kick your ass, which I know you'll probably just read as a bonus because you're a freak.

Looks like you're stirring. Or no, you just turned over (and thank you for the view, yum). And maybe writing things down helped, because I think I'm

ready to believe this is all real. Of course, I've now been up half the night, so good luck trying to wake me up and happy reading when you find this. I guess I'll see you later.

No, scratch that.

I'll see you now.

