

GHOSTS APPEAR AND FADE AWAY



HOLLY DENISE



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NEVER ONCE HAD he felt like a hero. Not the night they'd took on a hellgod. Not the night she'd walked down the stairs. Not the night a demon had touched his chest and filled him with soul. Not the night he'd draped himself over a cross. He supposed his résumé was chock full of things which would otherwise seem heroic, but he'd never felt like a hero. Never felt like a champion. Today was no exception.

Intellectually, Spike knew she would object, but he wagered she agreed on some level. No matter the shiny pendant clinging to his chest or the words with which she'd presented it. No matter that she'd sent her honey-pot on his merry way and had come home to him. The image of their mouths fused together would undoubtedly follow him through the netherworlds of wherever the bloody hell he was going.

It was all right. It hurt like a bitch, but it was all right. He'd always known it would never be him. He'd caused far too much damage. He'd hurt her too much. A soul couldn't paste things back together, and no amount of wanting could make it otherwise.

But at least he would die a champion, even if he felt far from the word. Buffy had picked him and he was hers. Her champion. The Slayer's champion. He'd made his choice, and with it came peace. Peace, sorrow, and everything in between.

It hurt to know this would be the last time he saw her face. But his life belonged to her—it always had. It was hers to have. Hers to hold. Hers to love, hate, or shag. Their destinies were entwined and he supposed it would be that way forever.

“Go on, then.”

“No,” she protested. “No, you’ve done enough. You could still—”

Yes, he supposed he could *still*. He could leave. Make a break for it. And perhaps the bad would stop coming. Perhaps, but that didn’t seem likely. This was the one good thing he could do by her. Beyond getting a soul, before bleeding his penance with tears—this was something only he could do. Only he could provide.

There was a life out there waiting for her to live it. And even if it was without him, it was his to give her.

“No, you’ve beat them back,” he replied. “It’s for me to do the cleanup.”

The walls were crumbling. There would be nothing left in a matter of minutes. Everyone knew it—the Hellmouth was gone. Over. The sun shone from above and the First was beaten back. Sunnydale was officially closed for business.

And he was staying.

“Buffy, come on!” Faith shouted.

“Gotta move, lamb,” Spike told her. *“I think it’s fair to say school’s out for bloody summer.”*

The fear in her eyes unmade him. *“Spike!”*

“I mean it! I gotta do this.”

He held out his hand to stop her from yanking him to freedom, but she didn’t yank. Instead, her eyes filled with tears and she laced her fingers through his. He felt her palm against his palm. And with a final surge, they exploded together in flame.

She was crying. She was crying for him.

“I love you.”

Warmth split him apart. His gut turned inside out. He blinked away tears. And in that moment, for the first time in their long relationship, they truly understood each other.

If he’d asked, she would have stayed. But he would never ask. Not while there was a life to be lived.

As it was, there was no better way to die. Buffy's fire racing through him, her eyes shining, love on her lips.

Love for him.

But he couldn't take it. Not now.

"No, *you don't*," he replied, detached, not feeling his words but meaning them all the same. "*But thanks for saying it.*"

There was another earthquake.

Then she was gone.



"SUPPORT HIS HEAD!"

"He's a full-grown man, Xander, not an infant."

"Well...it's drooping." A pause. "I mean, come on. That can't be comfortable."

There was softness. Then cold. Someone was padding his brow with a wet cloth. The floor beneath his body was rough and rumbling, jerking every few seconds with the sharpness of a sudden turn. The smell of rubber and grime filled the air. It came with an odd sense of familiarity, even for one who had no basis for comparison.

"I got his head," she told the others, though for as gentle as her voice was, he knew she wasn't truly speaking to them. Then he was elevated, resting against a warm lap. Soft hands framed his bruised face. "I've got him."

The tender pad of her finger traced what felt like a monster of a cut on his face. It stung but he didn't wince.

He didn't do anything.

He couldn't.

He was dead.



HE WAS IN A CAVE. HE KNEW THIS CAVE. THE WALLS WERE PAINTED and the air was thick; there was a vampire on the ground. A vampire with two black eyes and a scarred chest. The vampire who coughed and fought

for air, gasping and choking on what he forced down his dead lungs. Apparently, souls made even the more seasoned demons go a little dumb when it came to laws already known. Already understood. He might have a fresh conscience but he was still a creature of the night. He was still dead.

He was sobbing.

Spike watched himself, worlds apart. A film unfolding before his eyes, unraveling to reveal what lay at his core. This moment. He was back at this moment for a reason. Watching himself weep. Watching the scorch of blinding tears rip down his face as sobs rocked through his chest. He felt it wiggling inside him—god, how he remembered this. Feeling every inch of his previously cold body explode with heat. Heat completely unlike a lover's touch. There was nothing pleasant about this. Put the spark in and all that was left was pain.

"No good," the vampire moaned. *"All bad. All dirty."*

Spike inhaled, trembling. He *was* here for a reason. Beyond watching the shell that had been himself just a few months before tear around on the floor like a babe searching for his mother, beyond *anything* a sane man could comprehend. He was here. He was standing. He was in a cave.

Why was he in a cave? He should be dead.

The Hellmouth was gone. He remembered that. Remembered holding Buffy's hand as the world fell down around them. Only Buffy wasn't here—she'd never been here.

He paused, frowning. No, that wasn't true.

Spike took in the pitiful creature on the ground. The problem had never been that Buffy hadn't been here, rather the opposite. She was *always* here—she was *always* wherever he was. It was his blessing. His curse. No matter where he went, how far he traveled, how hard he ran, he couldn't escape her. And he never would. At some point, of course, he hadn't wanted to run. Some little turn he'd taken between the moment he carted Dru out of the mansion and their messy breakup in Brazil. He'd been lost without the Slayer, and whenever he was lost, he always came home.

Home for Spike was wherever Buffy was.

It always had been.

"Get up," the ghost whispered. *"Gotta...get up. Come on, Spike."*

Spike watched himself climb to his feet. He felt no inclination to help. There was no helping a shadow. He wasn't here to offer a bloody hand; he was here for something else.

"Get out. Gotta get out."

The climb to freedom would take hours. Ten bloody yards from here to the entrance, but he couldn't move. He couldn't breathe, so moving was well out of the question. Every inch he stole caused him the weight of the world in pain. He felt it squirming inside. Eating him up. Consuming him. The fire was so damned fierce, he thought for certain he would dust before he tasted freedom.

He knew if he just got to the outdoors, it would be all right. The burn would fade. He would feel without flames zinging his nerves.

Only Spike knew better. He watched himself crawl, horrified with the knowledge of what was to come.

The crushing despair of the outside.

The soul didn't stay in the cave. No, the soul was in him. Wiggling in his chest. Torturing him with image after image of a thousand terrible things. The soul was never quiet. The soul screamed as loud as it could in its attempts to drown him in tears.

But vampires couldn't drown. And souls never slept.

Souls also couldn't be carved out of one's chest.

Spike knew this.

The vampire on the ground did not.

But there was no helping him. There was no way to help.

Because Spike hadn't had help. He'd been alone. Somehow, he'd made his way to Sunnydale, because Sunnydale was where she was. And wherever she was doubled as home.

Buffy was home.



SOMETHING SOFT BRUSHED HIS TEMPLE. FINGERS WERE IN HIS HAIR. A voice tickled his ear.

"Please. Please, Spike. Please wake up."

He heard her. Felt her. The world was shapeless. The ground no longer felt jerky and rough; rather he was surrounded by something so

wonderful he barely recognized it. There was something under his head. It wasn't her lap, anymore. They weren't where they'd been before.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered, resting her brow against his. "For... for last night."

The words made as much sense as a politician in a confessional, but heart sang nonetheless. She was so soft. So real. If he could move his hand, he'd be touching her. Her skin would be beneath his. If he could open his eyes, he would see her face. He could take her in. Watch her. Smile at her. Whisper that it was all right. Whatever she was sorry for didn't matter; she was here, he was here. There was nothing beyond that.

But he couldn't move.

The world was shapeless.



THERE WERE CUTS ON HIS CHEST NOW. CUTS FAR FROM HEALED, BUT they had stopped bleeding.

"It's what you wanted, right?"

Buffy looked at him, her eyes filled with horror and tears. With realization. With understanding. Perhaps now, then. Perhaps now she understood.

Spike hadn't seen her that night. Not her face. Not her eyes. He could barely look at her as it was. All he'd seen was the cross, and the cross meant forgiveness. Always. It's what they said, right? Jesus loves him, yes he knows. For the Bible tells him so.

"It's what you wanted, right?"

This question was aimed at the stars. At the ceiling. At the heavens. At anyone who would hear him.

"And now everybody's in here. Talking. Everything I did. Everyone I..."

He heard his voice but didn't look at the ghost. He couldn't; no, as always, Spike was staring at Buffy. The frozen tears trekking down her perfect cheeks. The horror on her face. Not for what he'd done—no, he understood now.

Horror for what she'd pushed him to do.

"And him. And it. The other; the thing beneath—beneath you. It's here, too. Everybody. They all just tell me go...go..." The ghost met her eyes, not understanding the look there. Not getting it. Not like Spike did. *"To hell."*

"Why?" Buffy demanded, rain pouring down her cheeks. *"Why would you do that—"*

"Buffy, shame on you. Why does a man do what he mustn't? For her. To be hers. To be the kind of man who would nev—" The ghost looked away. Spike looked away, too. *"To be a kind of man."*

Spike didn't watch himself approach the cross. It wasn't needed—he knew well what happened. There were times still when he felt the burn of the holy mark against his skin, a silent but persistent reminder of his promise to himself. Thinking about this night alone was too bloody painful for words.

No one had told him it'd be like this. His ignorance and his desperation to prove himself to Buffy had led him across the world. He'd wanted to be worthy of her.

Even if it meant feeling the weight of his sin more deeply than he had already.

"Spike," Buffy muttered, sniffing hard as her feet carried her forward. *"Spike, you gotta come down."*

"No," he replied, hugging himself to the cross. *"Need to feel it, Buffy. Need to feel the burn."*

"You're hurting yourself."

There was no reply. He was quiet, determined in his punishment. It wasn't until Buffy touched him—until her hand brushed his shoulder—that he dared move. The feel of her skin against his was so jarring, he jerked away with a yelp and fell clumsily to the floor. His wide, guilt-ridden, tear-filled eyes drank her in as though only then realizing she was there at all.

Then his face fell and he began crying in earnest. Hard, body-consuming sobs that reverberated through the walls of the empty church, making the ground shake as though God himself shared his pain.

"I'm so sorry," the ghost cried. *"Buffy...oh, Buffy...I'm so sorry."*

Buffy didn't say anything. Her lips pursed and her body trembled,

but she didn't say anything. And watching her, Spike was glad. He couldn't imagine what she would have said to him. No amount of *it's okay*s could make the pain recede. Because it *wasn't* okay and they both knew it. Even though she was the one he needed, being around her was damn near unbearable. Especially when she looked at him the way she was looking at him now.

"Come on," she said at long last, helping him to his feet. The vampire flinched but didn't try to shrink away. He couldn't run from her, no matter how hard he tried. "Come on, Spike. Let's get you out of here."

The ghost murmured something unintelligible. Then his arm was draped over Buffy's shoulder and his legs moved with every step she took. The walk was painful and slow, and no words were shared.

There was only one thing to surprise Spike here. One thing he didn't recall. His mind housed a perfect memory of Buffy helping him back to the school. There, she'd looked around, flustered, and eventually made him a bed comprised of old cardboard boxes. He'd looked up at her and started speaking again, but the words were so jumbled and confused that she'd spooked and torn away. She'd fled, and she hadn't returned for days.

It was understandable. He'd hurt her so badly and disappeared. Now he was back and she had no way of knowing how to react to him or if she even should. She was afraid.

For the first time in their many years together, she actually feared him.

Spike remembered that night. He remembered it well.

What he didn't remember was the detour they took from the church to the school.

The detour to her house. Buffy stopped at her driveway and fell into deep thought. And Spike knew without needing to know *anything* what she was thinking. What amazing, impossible notion was running through her head. She decided against it, of course, and it was for the better. They barely knew each other anymore.

But she'd thought about it. Spike hadn't known that. He had blocked the memory out.

She'd thought about taking him to her home that first night.

And even though her wiser angels had moved to veto the motion, it was the thought that mattered.



HER HEAD WAS AGAINST HIS CHEST, HER ARM STREWN ACROSS HIM. As though the quiet would produce a monster. He knew better. For her, the quiet so often *was* the monster. The quiet left room for thoughts. For the vocalization of every little doubt her overactive brain had ever entertained. It had driven her mad when she'd fallen from the heavens, even if the quiet was something she desired. It had driven her mad when she'd been with him. It drove her mad still today.

His shirt was wet. She'd been crying.

"I didn't mean it, you know," she whispered. "Kissing him. It was stupid. It was such a stupid, *stupid* Buffy thing to do."

Spike didn't say anything. He couldn't. He wasn't really there.

"I throw it in with someone and they leave. It's the way things are. My dad. Angel. Riley. Heck, even Giles left me." She sighed, trembling, and shifted. "I get to the point where I feel like I really...*really* need someone, and they leave me. Of course, I didn't need Riley... and *that* was the problem, right? I didn't need him at all. But Dad? Every girl needs her dad. And Angel... God, when it happened, yes, it felt like I needed him. And Giles... He really left me when I needed him. He left me when I was suffocating and...and I couldn't have you leave me, too. So I thought if I fooled myself into thinking I didn't need you, you wouldn't leave. I was stupid. I was so stupid, Spike. And I ruined our last... I ruined that night 'cause of the...the stupidity that was me." She was crying again, full-body hard tears. "Please, *please* wake up. *Please*. I'll be better, I promise. I'll stop being stupid, 'cause I know I've screwed up. We both did, didn't we? But I...I meant what I said. In the note I left you. And last night. And in the cave. I meant it, I really did. *Please* wake up."

He didn't know how it was possible to weep when dead. His arms ached. His cold body refused to stir. He felt her trembling, sobbing, the weight of her pleading crashing down upon him. He wanted so badly to touch her.

Words died in his throat, and all faded away.



HE'D TOLD BUFFY THE NIGHT HE'D HELD HER WAS THE BEST NIGHT of his life, and it had been.

What he hadn't told her was that the year with her, this wondrous year where their relationship had begun to fuse and heal, where the hurt from months past finally scarred over, had resulted in a compilation of *best nights*. All featuring her. Every one of them.

He was watching now the second-best night of his life.

The night she'd looked at him with love in her eyes.

Of course, Spike hadn't known it to be love at the time. He'd been starved and exhausted, whipped and broken, and he'd been certain until she came close enough to taste that she was nothing but another figment. A shadow. The First playing tricks with his already-bugged brain. His astonishment had completely overwhelmed recognition. He hadn't seen love in her eyes then.

He did now.

And it hit him. It hit him, the shock of a sudden heartbeat, the sense of everything and nothing coming together at long last.

She did. Christ, she did. Buffy loved him.

Buffy loved him.

Buffy loved him, and she had for a long time. At least since this moment. It wasn't sudden. It wasn't gratitude. It wasn't anything other than what she'd said it was. She'd held his hand in the cave and she'd told him then because she'd known there wouldn't be another chance. It was the same thing she'd tried to tell him in her letter. The same thing she'd nearly whispered the night before the battle when they made love for the last time. Buffy loved him.

Fuck.

"She's waiting, you know."

Spike stiffened and turned. Buffy stood behind him, only it *couldn't* be Buffy. Buffy was already here—she was a ghost, but she was here, and she was cutting *his* ghost down from the wall. Buffy here

couldn't see him. Couldn't see the man that wasn't a shadow, because she herself was a shadow as well.

"What's this?" Spike demanded. "Are you the First?"

She rolled her eyes. "No, you big dummy. The First has turned its Firsty head and gone back to the shadows where it belongs. You buried it with the Hellmouth. *You* did that. You saved all of us." A watery smile crossed her lips. "I'm so proud of you, Spike."

His shoulders slumped as warmth kissed his insides, but he didn't dare betray a grin. He believed her. She wasn't the First. But she *couldn't* be Buffy, either. It was impossible. "I died," he said.

"Yes."

"So how's it I'm here?"

She shrugged. "The same way I'm here, I guess. We've both died twice now. It was how the First used us, right? We were dead, or had been, and therefore it could assume our shapes. I think we're here now because souls have a way of imprinting themselves. I've died so a part of me can be here. Same goes for you."

Okay. So maybe she was Buffy. Still didn't make a lick of sense.

"So I'm *not* really here?"

A patented come-on-I-know-you're-not-this-stupid look fell across her face, and the familiarity of it nearly made him laugh. "You can't be where you've been already," she replied enigmatically. "We can't go back and fix things. No matter how much we might want to. There's only ahead."

"And you're here to tell me that, I expect?"

"I'm here to tell you that you have a choice." She worried a lip between her teeth and stepped forward. "A choice I never had."

His breath caught in his throat. "Buffy, love..."

"You've earned it. God, how you've earned it." She blinked with sudden tears, the watery smile coming back into play. "You've given me so much of yourself, Spike. I never thanked you. I never told you how much it meant to me. I never did any of what I should have. After what you did...what you sacrificed...what you put yourself through...for me."

He wanted to reach up and caress her cheek but was too afraid she'd melt into nothing.

"You've earned the decision. The choice." She nodded to their ghosts, who were slowly making their way out of the enemy's den. "You can stay. You can tell me right now that you're ready for it to end. You've taken your bow and you're free to..."

She frowned.

"Leave the crowd?" he supplied with a small smirk.

"It sounded better when I was singing it."

He chuckled. "What's the second choice, pet?"

Buffy paused, glanced down, then met his eyes again. There was life there. Life beyond life. A life he'd given her. A life waiting for him. "You already know," she replied. "You know, Spike."

A lump caught in his throat. She was right.

He knew. He'd known since the moment the cave had fallen in. He was walking toward something he couldn't quite see. Something that remained perpetually out of reach.

Something he felt but couldn't touch.

Not until this moment, at least. Until now.

Buffy was looking at him, his eternal savior, and he knew without hesitation what he wanted.

He was lost. There was only one place to go.

"Take me home."



"I LOVE YOU."

"No, you don't. But thanks for saying it."

Spike didn't know what he expected, but it certainly wasn't what he received. Especially standing there as he was, watching the world fall apart around him. Feeling Buffy's hand in his, their fingers entwined, their bodies joined by fire. He knew he had to say it—had to say it to get her the bloody hell out. There was no time to ponder whether or not she meant it. The fact that she'd wanted to gift him with the words at all was enough.

In that second, he *did* feel loved.

Until she tore her hand away and glared at him as though he'd spat at her.

"You...you unbelievable, idiotic, pigheaded, small-minded, gorgeous, completely stupid *jerk!*" she screamed, slapping his arm. "Do you have *any* idea how long I've waited to say that?"

He frowned, panic splitting through him. Now was not the time for an argument. "Uhhh, Buffy—"

"And you're not going to die on me now and deny me the pleasure of kicking your ass up and down Main Street for telling me *I don't love you*. I *better* love you. There's no other reason I'd torture myself for you like this."

Buffy grabbed his hand again, but there was no fire this time.

No, this time, there was only liberation.

And it lasted about three seconds.

Then he was on the ground, dead, and the world was caving in.



HE'D MADE HIS CHOICE. HE WAS HOME.

Buffy was still resting against him, her head at his chest. He thought for long minutes that she'd fallen asleep. That her tears had finally exhausted her, her throat was dry with the confessions she'd whispered across his still body, and she'd succumbed at last to the rest she so deserved.

But he was wrong; she wasn't asleep.

She had her ear pressed against his chest. Every inch of her shook—small, delicious little trembles comprised of fear and hope. Of disbelief. Of a thousand things he couldn't put into words right now.

He could move. He could touch her.

And he did.

He raised a hand to her face and brushed locks of hair over her shoulder, feeling her start at the movement and finding himself burned under her heavy stare. And for a short eternity, they were captured. Frozen. Gazing at each other as though years had separated them.

But then he couldn't stand the silence. No more silence.

He had to say her name. He had to know it was real.

"Buffy..."

The dam shattered and she was on him, crying, shaking, bathing

him in kisses and touching him all over. Running her fingers through his hair. Exploring his face with her hands. Tasting every freshly liberated tear that escaped his tired eyes and poured out for her. Her lips touched his, demanding, eager, and consuming him. He burned. He tasted. Her tongue explored his mouth and she couldn't stop touching him. Couldn't stop.

He didn't blame her. His hands weren't recognizing boundaries, either. There *were* no boundaries here. He touched her everywhere.

"I love you," she gasped against his mouth. "I love you. I love you. I love you." She kissed him again before he could respond. "Believe me. *Please*. Please believe me."

His heart broke and mended all in one pull. "I believe you," Spike promised, cupping her cheek. "I love you, Buffy."

"But you didn't! You didn't believe me."

He thought of her eyes in the cave and knew himself to be a fool.

"I do."

"You were gone."

"I'm here." His lips pulled into a smile, one he couldn't help but share with hers. "I always come home when I get lost, kitten. And home's wherever you're at. Never doubt it."

Buffy dissolved into tears again but tackled him back to the bed before he could respond. A bed. They were on a bed. There was nothing else familiar about his surroundings other than the warm, sobbing, elated slayer in his arms. It didn't matter where they were, though. He was here, and so was she. This was home. As long as Buffy was with him, he was home.

"How?" she demanded, trying with futility to master her emotions. He'd never seen her cry like this, and if anything, her tears solidified how very real his future was.

How concrete.

"How what, love?"

"How..." Buffy broke away, shaking her head. "You were...you were *gone* when... You fell. Do you remember falling?"

Spike nodded though he wasn't sure if he remembered it or not. The past didn't matter. The past couldn't be redone. She'd told him as much. "My memory's a little fuzzy," he confessed a second later. "All I

know is I was here but I couldn't touch you. I tried to touch you, but I couldn't. You were too far."

"I've been here," she said hoarsely. "Right here. With you."

He swallowed hard and willed himself to not cry. "I know. But I had to... You found me. I felt it burning...the spark. And then I came home."

Love swelled in her eyes and then she was kissing him again. Hot, desperate, needy kisses. In seconds, she was straddling his waist, nipping at his lips and tugging at his clothing. And God, the feel of her hot little hands on his bare skin nearly did him in.

Then her blissful mouth found his chest and something within him jerked. Warm. It was burning once more. He'd felt it before. In the cave. He'd felt it before everything had gone up. He'd felt it through every memory revisited. He'd felt it. The hum of his soul. And it didn't hurt. Not like it had. For the first time, there was no hurt. Only peace.

No, this was perfect.

"God, I can still feel my soul," Spike gasped, tapping his fingers against his chest. "When you...kiss me there again."

Buffy trembled and obeyed, her lips caressing his skin.

"Bloody hell..." Hard, heavy breaths crashed against his lungs, his eyes wide with astonishment. "Felt it back there, too. In the cave. Just didn't feel it...*God...like this.*"

"Back where you said I didn't love you," Buffy replied with a huff, wiggling, turning her attention to her ruined blouse. It was gone in a blink, and her small, perfect breasts filled his eager hands. He felt the thrum of her heart and nearly burned with the heat of her skin. Her naked nipples grazed his palms and a rush of pure elation tore through his veins. This was perfection, and fuck, it was only going to get better.

"I know you love me, kitten," Spike whispered. "I know it."

"You have a funny way of showing it."

There was no malice in her words, though. In fact, her eyes betrayed the opposite. Whatever she said was a cover. She couldn't hide what she truly felt. Not from him.

She never could.

“Do you feel it?” he wondered, taking one of her hands and placing it against his chest. “I can’t be the only one who feels it. It’s...”

But there were no words for what it was. None he could find.

And there wasn’t a need for words. The look in her eyes would remain with him forever. “I feel it. I felt it, before.”

Something in her voice made him tremble. She’d been with him all night. Had she seen what he’d seen? Had she felt it? Had she truly been there?

They were so linked, he didn’t doubt it. The fire had melted them together once and for all. Their hands would always be united. Nothing could change that now.

“You felt it?”

Buffy nodded, caressing him absently. “But that’s not your soul.”

“No?”

“No, Spike. It’s your heart.”