

GLORY



HOLLY DENISE



SOME VICTORIES BUFFY FELT INSTANTLY. THE PLUMMETING adrenaline, the sudden lightness in the air, that temporary sensation of invincibility that made her feel both tingly and kinda giddy, if not downright slap happy. After all, there was no greater high than cheating death, and boy howdy, she should know.

She'd partied after killing the Master. Celebrated once the mayor had been reduced to smoky snake bits. Done the cozy post-Adam movie night that had...well, not been quite as cozy as advertised on account of murderous sister slayer stalking their dreams, but points for effort. The only battle she'd won that had felt like she'd lost had been Angel.

Buffy didn't feel like she'd lost this time. She didn't know how she felt. There was relief and exhaustion, along with incredulity and more relief—really, way with the relief—but the victory wasn't like the others. For one, there was no mom waiting for her when she opened the door to Revello Drive that morning. No tired but happy smile, no griping about the hairs Buffy was responsible for turning gray. It was just the house as she had left it. Still and quiet. Just the two of them now.

She had just saved the world. Why did she feel like crying?

"Ease up there, Slayer," came from behind her, and she sidestepped in time for Spike to come barreling across the threshold, his arms full of Dawn.

Right. Spike. After the world hadn't ended, her sister had sort of collapsed in on herself. Hell, they all had. Sobbing and hugging before realizing that the sun was peeking over the horizon and one of their party was slightly more flammable than the others. And even though it had been abrupt, Buffy had been glad for the distraction. She didn't think she had it in her to do the whole Scooby celebration thing tonight—or what was now this morning. The past few months had been spent in constant motion, and losing everything she had, everything she'd thought would be here forever, in the process. Riley. School. Mom. The hope of a normal life, that dangling carrot she couldn't seem to stop reaching for no matter how far away it remained. And tonight she'd thought that was coming to an end—that all of it would be over. There was only one thing of value she had left to give the world, and that was her life. So it was and so it would forever be. The sacrifice the Slayer was

called to make. The price of the strength they'd been given—of the choices that had never been theirs.

A not-small part of her had believed she wouldn't be here to see this sunrise. And a not-small part of her didn't know how to feel about the fact that she was.

Every slayer has a death wish, he'd said. She hadn't believed him then, or maybe she hadn't wanted to believe him, but he had been right. On some level she'd craved the quiet that would come after she took her final bow. Dying was easy. Living was hard. Living without the ticking clock even harder, for there was nothing now to distract her from the deafening quiet.

Spike turned to her once he was safely inside, Dawn still curled against his chest and his eyes full of questions she couldn't begin to consider, let alone answer. The whole mess of what came next was a problem for a future Buffy to handle, and hopefully one that didn't feel as lost as the one currently standing in her shoes.

"Upstairs," she said, and nodded at the staircase in question as though he needed directions. But no, that was her. Not knowing what to do with herself with all this time suddenly at her disposal. At a loss, she followed Spike as he carted her sister to her bedroom. Her sister who was her sister fully now and not some mission, not the latest MacGuffin the Powers had thrown in her path to see how high she would jump. Her teenage sister whose entire existence lived in memories of events that had never happened, conked out so heavily that she didn't so much as groan when the vampire who had become her protector tucked her between the sheets.

Buffy knew about adrenaline crashes—it was what had happened to her the night she'd died. She'd partied with her friends to keep herself in motion, to convince herself the body that had betrayed her was still working, and the second she'd gotten home she'd fallen face-first into her mattress. There had been a short-lived battle to keep her eyes open, the fear that once they closed death would seize her for real, but the exhaustion of having fought and won and died and lived had been too much for her to shake off and she'd tumbled into a sleep so hard her mother had called the doctor the next day when she couldn't wake her up. Back in the time before Joyce had known the truth of what went bump in the

night in Sunnydale and had accepted the story she was given about the pressures of school exams and the amount of stress kids were under these days. Sparing Buffy, if only for a little while, the awkward task of explaining to her mother that she had been not alive for a few minutes because that was the way of the real world.

In the hallway of the same house, several years removed from her first death and still breathing after what she'd thought would be her next and final, Buffy tore herself from Dawn's doorway and moved toward the linen closet. Not sure exactly what she was doing until her arms were full of spare blankets and pillows, because it was a bit too sunny for a certain vampire to risk a cross-town trip and even though she knew full well he had means of getting around in the daylight, it seemed rude to kick him out after he had helped save the world. Saved her sister's life. Saved hers.

Even if she didn't know what that meant yet, or if she even wanted to.

She found Spike sitting on the sofa when she returned to the first floor, hunched over with his elbows braced on his knees, his eyes miles away. There was a bruise on his cheek from where he'd hit the pavement, and a streak of dirt along his brow. His hair wasn't carefully sleeked back, rather a tumble of curls that made her fingers twitch with the stupid urge to run through them. He looked like a man at the other end of the apocalypse and perhaps about as uncertain how to feel about that as she was. Just another in the long list of ways they were similar. All things, of course, she didn't want to consider but now couldn't do anything but, with all the time that was suddenly hers.

Like the fact that she was standing now where he had not too long ago, vowing to protect Dawn until the world had ended. And she'd known he meant it. Just as she knew he meant it when he said he loved her. What she didn't know was what to do about it in the abundance of after she'd been given. What forward looked like and if she was an idiot to try to find it.

How to be Buffy around *this* Spike. *This* Spike who she had only started to understand existed beneath the layer of the one she'd met so many years ago.

"Havin' a sleepover, are we?" he asked, a smile in his voice. Then he turned his head and met her eyes with his own, no longer miles away,

rather warm and happy, or as close to happy as she'd ever seen Spike get without the aid of a spell. And now she had that too—no more distraction from whatever it was she had started with him. *If* she had started anything at all, and she thought maybe she had. There hadn't been much of a plan beyond inviting him inside, see whatever came next with the tacit understanding that *nothing* would be next for her. But that wasn't true anymore, if it ever had been, and now she had *this*. This strange vampire who had been her enemy but was something else now. Something she had yet to define.

Something she couldn't think about until after it settled, the fact that the world wasn't over.

Buffy moved forward and dumped the blankets and whatnot onto the empty cushion at his side. "You can stay here," she said. "Just tonight though."

"It's mornin' now."

"Right, that's what I meant. Until the sun goes down."

He dipped his head, his lips twitching, and she wished he'd just say it. Whatever was on his mind—whatever would shift him back into more familiar territory rather than extend his stay in this bizarre place she'd landed. Everything following the mess with the bot had been pure redefinition where Spike was concerned, and if she was to learn to navigate this world she had saved all over again, she could stand to have the old Spike back. The Spike who was gross and creepy and made sex toys out of her likeness, not the one who was loyal and self-sacrificial. The other guy was down there somewhere, waiting to come out, to see that the danger was over and that he could resume being the pest he'd always been. But life was about discovery—learning who people were by how they responded when at its hardest moments. Spike had responded by putting himself between death and Dawn. He might have done it for selfish reasons but he hadn't had to do it at all, and he'd nearly lost his life in the process.

The hard moments were where you truly learned who a person was, and they weren't the sort that could be rewound and done over. That was another thing about still being here when the sun rose—the questions she had asked herself before, the ones she'd mentally blockaded behind the *after* that she'd been sure would never come—were here waiting for

her, with their stubborn reality that going back wasn't in the cards. Even if something truly disgusting came out of his mouth, even if he chained her up and tried to coerce a love confession out of her again, she would know about this part. The one that had stood in this room and looked her in the eye and sworn to be the thing standing between her sister and death.

And that was really, really inconvenient.

Especially when he nodded and worked his throat, shoved back whatever his innate reaction had been in favor of another of those long, searching looks that she knew she shouldn't indulge but couldn't seem to break from. "Thanks," he said hoarsely, and with a small smile that made the confused parts of her feel even more compressed.

"Just today. On account of world saveage."

Again, he nodded. And again her chest constricted. She thought about saying something else—what, she had no idea, but the words didn't come and she didn't feel like trying to force them. Not until she had some sleep behind her and an idea of what her tomorrows would look like.

"Good night, Spike," she said instead, and offered a smile of her own to let him know she already knew.

His eyes went soft and his lips twitched again, only this time, he didn't hold back the grin. "Good night, Buffy."

Buffy held his gaze a moment longer before breaking away with a nod, then she was on the stairs again. Redefining boundaries. Putting the space back where it needed to be. When she awoke in a few hours, she could figure out what her world was supposed to look like. What it meant to be the Slayer who hadn't sacrificed herself rather than the memory of the one who had.

She intended to go straight to bed the second she was at the landing, but that wasn't where her feet took her. Instead, she found herself in the bathroom, staring herself in the eye as she tugged her white shirt over her head before turning her attention to her slacks. Her fingers weren't as fumbly as they should be, having just survived another near-miss, nor were her clothes as trashed. A fight like the one she'd just lived through, and she'd expect there to be at least one casualty. A hole in the sleeve of her top or a grass stain on her pant leg. A broken heel, a broken nail,

anything that would tell the story of the night the world had almost ended.

But there was nothing. No blood, no wounds, nothing that especially needed a good washing off in the shower except her own sweat and exhaustion, but she got under the spray anyway. Turned the nozzle all the way to scalding and let the water bruise her skin with its heat, bring the blood pumping through her arteries to the surface. She soaped up a washcloth and got to work scrubbing away the parts of the fight she couldn't see. Hoping maybe the disconnect she felt at the moment would swirl away in the drain with everything else and she'd step out newly refreshed.

Life didn't work that way. Neither did death, it seemed.

Nothing in her world did.

She didn't linger in the shower long enough to prune or for the mirror to completely steam over, which meant she couldn't help but catch her own eyes as she moved to the counter to find her brush and see that she looked as lost as she felt.

This wasn't the way it was supposed to go after she'd saved the world. She wasn't supposed to not be sure that she was happy she'd made it to the other side. She wasn't supposed to feel hollow, not even for a second, at the loss of the end she'd so clearly seen coming for her. She was supposed to be so relieved she couldn't help but sob with it. She was supposed to crash into a sleep she'd more than earned so that when she opened her eyes again, she'd be ready to celebrate everything she'd been so sure she'd been about to lose for good.

What would it mean if she couldn't find that again? The piece of her that made her Buffy? She was full of love, her guardian had said so. Not closed off at all, not unable to feel, not turning to stone. Death was her gift. She had killed and killed and killed and no matter how many she killed, how often she saved the world, it never stopped coming for her. She gave the gift of death so that others might live the life she never could. Experience the world as she never would.

And she didn't want to feel like this. At all. She didn't want these thoughts inside her head—she didn't want to think about what came next, all the pain she'd shoved into the nebulous after that was suddenly real and tangible because *after* had become *now* and she was still here.

Maybe that was how she found herself on the stairs again, this time in sleep shorts and a tank top she'd put on rather mechanically, her still-wet hair clinging to the back of her neck and spilling over her shoulders. If the world was going to continue to spin with her in it, didn't that mean she got to decide what she did with the time she had? Wrong and right and should and shouldn't notwithstanding, the last time she'd stood on these stairs, she'd been gazing into the eyes of the monster that had tricked himself into believing he was in love with her, only she'd known then it wasn't a trick. She'd known ever since she'd come into his crypt to learn just how badly he'd betrayed her only to discover he hadn't at all. That he'd put himself between Dawn and death when no one would have blamed him for saving his own skin. When she couldn't even be sure, if push came to shove, that her friends would have done the same. Or her watcher.

Spike had been ready to die tonight to save the person who mattered most to her in the world. Giles had been ready to kill her sister if it meant saving it. And now Buffy was expected to go back to a status quo that had become so murky she wasn't sure she could ever trust it again, when all her instincts told her one thing and all her experience told her another.

The world was still here thanks in no small part to the vampire sleeping in her living room. The vampire that somehow knew things about her that she didn't know. She imagined she could go down there right now and let the mess inside her head come tumbling out and he'd understand that too. Understand it in ways no one else ever could. Maybe even Angel. Maybe especially Angel.

It seemed worth a shot.

Buffy drew her lower lip between her teeth and began making her way back to the first floor. She waited for her better senses to wake up from whatever post-apocalypse stupor they'd fallen inside, but they didn't. Not when her bare feet hit the familiar grooves of the hardwood, not when she turned to see Spike strewn across the sofa, half-covered in the blanket she'd brought down, one leg tumbling over the side. He hadn't removed his jeans but had undone the top button, and his shirt was tugged up just enough to expose a sliver of tummy, courtesy of the arm he had stretched above and curled around his head. He could be

asleep or he could be faking it and she'd never know, for his chest didn't rise and fall as a man's would. Because he wasn't a man, as he'd said. She just treated him like one sometimes.

She just *wanted* him to be one sometimes.

Like now.

Guess that was it, then. Decision made. She was here and her head was finally quiet. Maybe that was all it took. Living on her terms and no one else's. Making choices she knew she shouldn't but couldn't really muster up why except there were rules about this stuff and she'd already done all this once before.

But she hadn't done it with Spike. She hadn't made the wrong choices with *Spike*. And for better or worse, Spike was not Angel. If this ended up biting her in the butt, it would be for an entirely new set of reasons. Reasons specific to him and whatever version of *them* they might become.

All she knew, standing in her living room and studying the vampire who had risked everything to save the world, was that Spike loved like he had a soul, and maybe that was enough. And if it wasn't, doing this was her mistake to make. Part of the whole *being alive* thing.

Buffy moved forward, feeling a reckless sort of emboldened. She stopped at the couch, staring down at the monster who was sometimes a man, then leaned forward, still deciding on what she meant to do—shake him awake, slap his face a few times, maybe pop him in the nose just for old time's sake—when his eyes flew open.

“Please bear in mind I’m evil so my standards are bollocks,” he said in a low voice that she no longer wanted to deny did things to her. “But seems to me that spyin’ on someone when they sleep is one of those things that would get a fella staked were the tables turned.”

Buffy offered a flat grin. “You’re not wrong.”

“Everythin’ all right, Slayer?” The tease faded from his eyes when she didn't answer immediately, and that was all it took. He sat up, somehow rumpled as though he'd been sleeping soundly for hours and not just a handful of minutes. Or maybe that was the aftermath of the fight. Could be either with him. “Thought savin’ the world again would have you properly knackered.”

“One would think. Alas, I remain tragically unknackered.” She hesi-

tated for a beat—just one, a last chance for the universe to talk her out of doing this line-crossy thing she intended to do—but when nothing happened, she focused instead on that feeling she was trying to outrun. The path well-traveled. Sleep. Wake. Live. Fight. Save the world. Repeat as needed until the end finally found her, whenever that would be. The death wish unfulfilled and waiting, waiting, waiting for that one good day when she would finally know rest.

There wasn't much difference between the path well-traveled and the one she was staring down now, except if she took this new one, she could make the rules herself. Stop trying for the thing that would eventually kill her for real—chasing down a normal that didn't exist—and embrace what she was and would always be.

“Buffy?”

She blinked and met his eyes again. It still threw her when he addressed her by name. Made whatever was happening seem serious and real. Spike not hiding behind nicknames and titles but bearing himself without flinching. Or maybe she was seeing things that weren't there, but she didn't think so. She thought she was seeing *him* the way he really was.

“Don't read too much into this,” she said, before crawling into his lap. He let out a breath—short and surprised—before she took his mouth and barreled down the less-traveled path.

She didn't know what she expected—Spike to pull back, ask a bunch of questions she couldn't answer yet, or any number of possibilities, but he did none of the above. Instead, he groaned into her and cupped the back of her head, fingers tangling in her hair as he performed outright magic with his lips and teeth. Nipping and tugging and licking and pulling, like he wanted to consume her.

And he did. She knew he did, and that was terrifying. It was also pure liberation. The weight that had settled over her began at once to lift, psychosomatic or truly and she didn't care because this was it. This was what she'd been waiting for ever since she'd stumbled away from the makeshift tower built by Glory's brain-sucked slaves, her heart still beating, her blood still pumping, everything inside of her defiantly alive.

“Fuck,” Spike murmured against her lips before chasing them back with his own. “Buffy... I—”

She pressed a finger to his lips. "No talking."

For a second, it looked like he might argue. Something flashed across his face, his eyes, perhaps that innate need he had to fight her at every turn. It didn't last but she almost wished it had, or that he'd given into it before his better senses took over. Not because she needed the wake-up call—Buffy felt she was past second or even third thoughts now—but fighting with Spike did things to her she'd never before been confident in admitting to herself. He didn't leave her guessing as to what was on his mind. It was all there, on his face and spilling out of his mouth, and she hated how much she loved it. How much she'd come to rely on it—on him—over these last few weeks. His love for her hadn't tempered his tendency to spout off when it was most inconvenient; hadn't turned him into a simpering yes-man, eager to please even if it meant swallowing what he thought. Spike was unabashedly himself at every turn. Even those agendas he attempted to keep hidden were in plain view, and that was...refreshing. Everything about him was.

And damn, if that didn't feel good to admit to herself.

The second lapsed, and he didn't argue. Instead, he lowered his eyes to her mouth again, drew her back to him with a hungry mewl—a sound that seemed to slide under her skin, touch parts of her no sound should touch. That she could evoke that sound from a man who had lived as long as he had, done as much as he had, make him want her with this much ferocity, was its own blend of intoxicating. As was the urgency with which he tugged at her clothes, which were already on the skimpy side, as though he couldn't touch her fast enough. Or maybe that was just *enough*. He didn't wait for permission before palming her breasts or dragging his thumbs over her nipples. And when she trembled, he tore the top over her head without asking, growling now, and then his mouth was there. Teasing her with his teeth, swirling his tongue around her nipple, then sucking with pressure that was both too much and the opposite of too much, and it made no sense that Spike should exist within that dichotomy, but he did. Somehow, he did. Rumbling around her flesh, thrusting against her center, grounding into her best he could, and his best was nothing to sneeze at.

And she had to touch him too. She jerked his tee over his head—Spike moving with her without direction, lifting his arms and pitching

the fabric over her head the second he was free. Then it was her turn to explore, and there was so much of him to touch. His chest, lifting and falling as it hadn't been before she'd woken him up, his flat nipples—he trembled and moaned and bucked and she decided to tease him with her teeth because hey, fair's fair—then lower until she was finally pulling on his jeans, the air around her suddenly heavy with the echo of her own hard breaths. It had happened fast. As fast as the decision she'd made. He shifted and she shifted and then her hand was around his cock, and he was growling again. Deeper, more guttural, but still soft as a whisper against her mouth. He made quick work of her sleep shorts—quick as in they were quickly reduced to a useless scrap of fabric and she'd probably be mad about that if he hadn't immediately palmed her where she was hot and aching, groaning himself at the discovery and mouthing words she knew he wanted to voice but she'd told him no and he was taking that seriously. That didn't stop him from hissing when he slid his hand between her soaked folds and pushed his fingers inside her any more than it did her from gasping. Didn't change the way his eyes darkened as he studied her there, the way part of him appeared and disappeared inside her again, glistening in the streaks of early morning light fighting in through the closed curtains. It didn't stop him from panting, either, and then their eyes met again and something inside of her twisted and locked into place.

He withdrew his fingers from her, then sucked them into his mouth without looking away. She wasn't sure what sound she made, but it was enough to get him to grin around the digits, look more like the cocky bastard she knew he was, and that was all she needed. Buffy shifted up and he helped her, positioning his cock at the mouth of her sex, and he was cool and slippery and she was hot and burning and she'd said no words but couldn't begrudge him when he whispered her name. It didn't occur to her that she'd forfeited her last chance to back out until the moment passed, and he was inside of her, stretching her and filling her and it was like hitting the ground in freefall, only the fall kept going.

Buffy threw her head back and dragged in a deep, lung-filling breath that she felt all the way down to her toes. And he was there, peppering soft kisses along her collarbone, up her throat, digging his fingers into her hips as she rolled them and started to move, taking her mouth,

holding her to him, arching up to meet her every time she rocked down. It was just them. No world outside. No world upstairs. No more apocalypses to come knocking on her door. Just Buffy and Spike, hunter and prey, fucking instead of fighting and why the hell not, they were so good at the fighting part that this came easy. Slow and rhythmic at first and then, as need swelled and she swelled with it, following what her body told her to do. Letting go, perhaps for the first real time, of everything she was and wasn't and was supposed to be, clawing instead to seize purchase of the few things that made sense to her anymore. Listening to the intoxicating cadence of the breaths he didn't need to take, the sounds he made, how he felt, so hard and cool and *there*. Right here in the moment with her. Understanding it perhaps the same as she did. Perhaps better. For he'd been right about everything, hadn't he? Especially the things she'd wanted him to be wrong about.

Next time, she'd let him talk. She could tell he wanted to. It was there in his eyes, burning away with the rest of him. Every time she sank back onto his cock, the sound wet and illicit, his jaw firming and his lips pressed hard together and he kept quiet because she'd told him and that was just who he was. Giving her what she needed, no matter what form it took. No matter what he wanted for himself.

They would need to work on that, she thought, a bit loopy. Some other time. Right now she focused on the moment she was in. Spike tugging at her lip with his teeth, helping her work herself up and down his cock with increasing urgency. Their flesh slapping together, coloring the air, her own whimpers becoming harder to keep back. Feeling him hard and full of that same need, and seeing it reflected back at her, along with joy and love and awe and all these other things that made life worth living, somehow in the eyes of a man who had no soul but was inexplicably full of it. And when she felt it spark inside her, the beginning of the release she'd come down here to find, she was so surprised it nearly startled a laugh out of her. Then it did, and Spike laughed too, and kissed her, and loved her, and released his grip on her hip—she didn't like that—to brush her clit every time her pussy swallowed him—she *did* like that—to stoke the fire he knew was building.

When it came, it was unlike any orgasm she'd ever experienced. Maybe it was the occasion—she'd technically never had *we survived the*

apocalypse sex, despite however many opportunities—but somehow she knew that wasn't right, or not entirely. It was choosing. It was him. It was this. It was being in charge of whatever came next. It was everything.

Buffy wasn't sure how long it lasted. She found herself curled against his chest, sweat running into her eyes, his arms around her and his lips on her skin—everywhere he could reach—and still inside her. Which was nice. She guessed she liked having him close.

“Buffy?” he asked after she'd been quiet a moment too long. “Don't stake a bloke for askin', but...”

She forced herself to lift her head, meet his eyes. No staking involved.

And smiled.

