

WHO'S THE BIG BAD



HOLLY DENISE



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HE SHOULD HAVE KNOWN. Bloody hell, he *had* known. The Slayer had started cooing over the little furball the instant they'd pulled it out of that demon nest, going on about how it was all whimpers and wobbles, and that they obviously ought to take it to theirs for the night. Give it a bath, find it some nosh, because what sort of soulless creature would leave a poor, innocent pup out in the cold?

This last point she'd punctuated with the sort of look that had somehow felt like the entirety of the Africa trials in one bloody blow. He'd never stood a chance, though he had done the proper thing and grouched about it all the way home.

"Don't name it," he'd warned her as they traipsed up to their flat. "If you name it, you'll want to keep it, and we don't need a bloody dog."

"But we have to call it something," Buffy had protested, stroking the dog's matted back. "How do you feel about...Fluffy?"

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, if you’re gonna call it anything, call it something proper. Like Darwin.”

“Darwin?”

Yeah, because the dog was a walking, yipping advertisement for the whole *survival of the fittest* thing. But Spike hadn’t said that, and Buffy hadn’t asked, and that was how they’d ended up with a poodle called Darwin.

That’s right. A poodle. Not a rottweiler or a pitbull or hellhound or anything respectable, but rather the sort of miniature breed most often seen in ritzy bitches’ purses. A yappy runt of a thing that liked to sit behind them on their couch where it could lick Spike’s head while he watched the telly—something Buffy found endlessly entertaining, mostly because he allowed it to happen—and assault his heightened vampire senses by relieving itself on the rug under their kitchen table.

If Darwin’s coat had been white rather than charcoal, Spike might have had to toss the little bugger out on principle. It was one thing to be a laughingstock of his kind, but for Christ’s sake, a man had to have some limit. Even if he was a soul-having, Slayer-loving, domesticated sort of monster, the scraps of reputation he had remaining were worth fighting to preserve. Or so he’d tell anyone who dared mention it, all steadfastly ignoring Buffy’s derisive, cover-blowing snickers.

The true insult of the matter was Spike loved the little nuisance. And that was it, the true death-knell. Once he loved something, it was bound to betray him.

Like now. Spike had finally talked Buffy into watching a classic—*Nosferatu*, the first vampire movie to ever grace the silver screen, or any sort of screen. Nearly a hundred years after the film’s release, some tedious preservationists or what all had done the work to restore it and release it to the eager

public. Or Spike had been eager, remembering vividly how entertaining he'd found it the first time.

Only now Count bloody Orklok had finally made his monstrous entrance—full ears, claw-tipped fingers, the whole iconic look—and the bloody poodle was trembling so hard Buffy demanded that he switch the film off.

"What?" Spike asked, bewildered, then looked down into his dog's large, fear-stricken eyes. "You've seen vampires before."

"Not scary ones!" Buffy protested, either blissfully unaware or callously uncaring of how those words were a stake to the heart.

"Not scary?" Spike barked, rising to his feet. "Not bloody scary?"

"Oh, stop, you know what I meant."

"You mean some wanker in makeup is more threatening than I am? The *actual* vampire in the house?" He turned his gaze to their dog, the ungrateful overgrown rat he'd been daft enough to let into his heart, and decided it was time to right a wrong. Obviously, he'd been a soft touch if some fuzzy black-and-white picture was enough to have the animal terrified. In one graceful move, he scooped Darwin into his hands and held him above his face.

Buffy sprang to her feet at once. "Hey!"

"You're gonna fear anything, fear this," he said to the dog, letting his fangs descend as the bones in his face shifted him from man to monster. He stretched his lips in a wide, obscene smile—best to show off the incisors—and when Darwin neglected to let loose so much as a whimper, decided to up the ante and remind the little creature who fancied himself master of the house what a real vampire sounded like when it roared.

And it *was* a roar—a good roar. One that started in the toes and gained momentum on the journey up, so that by the time it pressed against lungs and through his throat, Spike could nearly bloody choke on it. He watched the wisps of the dog's hair ruffle in the wind tunnel he created, watched Darwin's wide, expressive eyes search the less-known contours of what was a very familiar face, and waited for the tremors to start again in earnest. He would not be out-vamped in his own damn home.

Darwin licked his cheek, his fluffy tail starting to wag anew.

And Buffy dissolved into giggles.

"Bloody hell," Spike muttered around his fangs, lowering the dog, who was now struggling to break free so he could explore more of his face with his wet little tongue.

"Aww, don't be grumpy," Buffy cooed, rushing into take the dog into her arms. "Who's the Big Bad, Darwin? Who's the Big Bad?"

"Oi, stuff it."

"Oops." She was laughing again, that sound he loved so much he knew even feigning anger was useless. "You made Daddy angry."

Spike shook his head, the usual litany of words that lived there failing him, and stalked out of the room before he could give her something else to cackle over.

Betrayed by poodle.

How the mighty had fallen.