Backstage 23 - First Do No Harm

by Aadler

Summary

Season: Fifth (Buffy), Second (Angel)
Spoiler(s): “Disharmony” (S1-17, Angel)
Teaser: You may not get what you pay for … but you always pay for what you get.
She stood in the pools of light from the street lamps, slim and blonde and pretty, hands on her hips and her mouth set in a pout. She wore a sheer dress that — for all its obvious and failed purpose of appearing *tres chic* — nonetheless looked pretty darn good on her, and in the soft spring night the clean, classic lines of her face might have served as the model for a Raphaelite angel.
“Piece of shit,” she announced distinctly, staring at the flat tire. “Stupid, cheap hunk of Jap-knockoff crap.”

No, she was not quite what she appeared to be. The watcher (as yet unknown to her) could see that much already. But neither was she quite what he believed her to be, and of this he would remain unaware for some time to come.

She added a few more earthy comments regarding the vehicle’s deficiencies (and some highly unlikely ones about provenance and mating habits) before deciding that the venting of her frustration, while briefly satisfying, did nothing to carry her further along her way. She glanced at her darkened surroundings and then at the dark, empty street before her, not in the least uneasy but thoroughly undecided. Part of her hesitation would have sprung from her footwear: stiletto heels, however stylish, have little utility for hiking … and if she took them off to protect them from such harsh use, well, marching along barefoot was just not stylish at all.

The man observing her had himself been undecided, but her clear uncertainty firmed his mind. He stepped away from the window, pushed the door open, and called out, “Do you need any help there, miss?”

Her reaction was both unnerving and reassuring: the moment his presence had become apparent (he suspected as soon as he moved behind the window), she was fixed on him with the calm concentration of a lynx. Yes, she might very well be what he was seeking; no, it was not at all comfortable to find himself the focus of those hunter’s eyes. The most disconcerting aspect was that she didn’t have to shake it off to smile and nod and reply airily, “Yeah, sure, I’ve got a flat and the spare is flat, too, which is SO just the way my life is these days. Is there, like, some place I could call this time of night? ’Cause I totally can pay.” It was still there, running full-force behind the facile tones and sunny, slightly foolish smile.

Well, disquieting or not, these were the qualities he had hoped to find in her, and he automatically shifted into the mode that had always served him in dealing with women. “This isn’t a large town,” he said to her, returning the smile and standing in a casual stance that accented his height and musculature. “There are a couple of guys I could call, yes, but you pay a hefty bonus when they have to get out of bed to come help you. If you’re willing to take a chance, though, I might be able to suggest another way to go about it.”

“A chance,” she said, looking blank rather than wary. “What kind of chance?”

“I know somebody in town,” he told her easily, falling into the familiar rhythm, tilting his head to show his features to their best advantage. “He restores cars as a hobby, and does all his own engine work. He has a full auto shop in his garage, and I know he’d be willing to do me a favor. We could take him the tires, and he’d have no problem fixing them. He might charge you, but not as much as you’d have to pay for a tow.”

“That sounds okay,” she said. Her eyes assessed him with a matter-of-fact flatness at odds with the bubbly voice and mannerisms. “I still have to get there, though. With two tires.”

“Oh, I’ll be happy to drive you,” he said affably. “No problem at all.”

She smiled cynical understanding. “And what would I owe you? Cash, or favors?”

“I’m a Samaritan,” he told her, smiling also. “This is strictly from the goodness of my heart.”

“My lucky night,” she said. He couldn’t tell from her tone whether or not she believed him, but that didn’t really matter. Not as long as she got in the car with him.
She caused him no problems, waiting patiently beside her immobilized vehicle while he went to get his own and pull it around. They loaded the flaccid tires into the back, then she seated herself in the passenger’s side with no sign of hesitation or uneasiness. “I guess it’s a good thing you were around,” she remarked as they pulled out onto the highway. “When I coasted into the parking lot back there, there weren’t any lights or anything, I figured the place was shut down.”

“We’ve been doing some remodeling during the off-season,” he explained. “This time of year, there isn’t enough business to be worth staying open. Once we finish the upgrades, though, we should be able to keep a decent income year-round.”

“Oh.” She thought for a moment, opened her mouth, then seemed to reconsider what she had been about to say. “I didn’t see much, what with the no lights and everything, but it looked … quaint.”

“Forty units,” he said proudly. “We’re in easy driving distance of the ocean, the mountains — and L.A., without having to pay their prices — and there are some nice tours at the national forest. People talk about a peaceful little getaway, that’s what I’ll be giving them. We’ve made a lot of improvements already, and I’m going to have high-speed cable, a sauna and hot tub, game room, might even get a pool into the area out back … It was a decent, comfortable little operation for the last owner, but I’m going to turn it into a real money-maker.”

She didn’t respond — in fact, he thought at first that her mind had gone to an entirely different subject while he was speaking — but then she gave herself a little shake and said, “Well, how much have you done so far?”

“Only two units, just now,” he admitted. “But those were learning experiences, and now we know what to do and how to do it. We’ll speed right through the rest, once we manage the next phase of funding.”

“Funding,” she repeated automatically; then, with a sharp look at him, she asked, “Don’t you need to call this friend of yours, let him know we’re coming?”

“I did that already,” he said, patting the pocket of his windbreaker. “Cell phone.”

She smiled at that. “Ooohh, I’d better keep my eyes on you. You’re sneaky.”

“I just try to plan ahead,” he said. Then: “I haven’t seen you around, and I think I would have heard of someone like you. Are you traveling?”

“Hmm? Oh, sure.” She thought on it for a moment. “I left home a few months ago, actually, but … well, there was this guy, and it turned into a whole scene, and I just couldn’t hang around after that.”

“I can imagine,” he said. “But you said you’d left home, and I was wondering where that was.”

“Little place,” she said. “You probably never heard of it … oh, wait, maybe you have, there was this freak deal last year when the whole town came down with total laryngitis, that made it into state news. Sunnydale? Ring a bell?”

He felt a surge of satisfaction, and worked at keeping it out of his voice. “Yes, I’ve heard of Sunnydale. Not the laryngitis thing, actually, but there have been stories. Some of them pretty hard to believe.” He aimed a smile at her. “So you really lived there.”
“I ruled there.” She sighed. “But that was high school. Things just haven’t been the same since graduation.”

He laughed. “After my graduation, I spent most of a year soaking up the sun on one beach or another.”

She actually shuddered. “Ugh. Not much for the sun, myself. I’m more of a night person.”

“I don’t know,” he said, and favored her with the disarming grin that would melt three women out of four. (The fourth would have seen it before, from him or one like him, and brought away from the experience a dash of healthy cynicism.) “You’d be an absolute knockout in a swimsuit.”

Her return smile was open and genuine, but something else lay behind it as she said, “Play your cards right and we might be able to set up something. But you’d have to make it worth my time … and it’d have to be by moonlight.”

He nodded satisfaction. “I’ll count that as a date,” he said, “and I’ll start planning the kind of thing you might enjoy.”

“I just bet you will,” she said.

It was, as he had said, a fairly small town, and the house he was seeking was close to the still-in-renovation motel where she had come to his attention, so they reached their destination within minutes. Despite the lateness of the hour, lights were on in several of the windows. He parked in the drive, and led her to the door, saying, “See? He’s glad to help, just like I said. We’re all pretty friendly around here.”

“Hospitality, right,” she said. “The whole ‘won’t you come into my parlor’ thing.”

Whatever other capabilities she might have, she would never be an actress. It was obvious that she thought he was leading her into a trap, that the prospect amused her, and that she was looking forward to surprising him in a way he wouldn’t enjoy … and equally obvious that she was convinced she wasn’t letting her awareness or anticipation show. Combined with her conversation during the drive, this was giving him a not especially flattering estimate of her intelligence. Fortunately, it wasn’t her brains that interested him.

The door opened as they reached it; they had been expected. The man standing there could not have appeared less threatening: medium height, slightly built, with thinning hair and wire-framed eyeglasses; he would have been in his early forties, and looked from one of them to the other with doubt and worry. “Andy, what is this?” he said. “The way you were talking, I thought you’d got somebody from the FBI or the CDC. Exactly how is this … this …” He glanced at her. “I’m sorry, miss, but it’s a fact: how can a girl like this be any help in our situation here?”

Perplexity drew her eyebrows together. “FBI? CBS? Okay, I didn’t think this was a tire shop, but … what the heck are you guys talking about?”

“Trust me, Doc,” the younger man said confidently. “She’s exactly what we need. Is Katie up? She’s gonna want to hear this.”

“She’s up,” Doc replied. “And I couldn’t keep her out of this business if I tried. Which I would, if I thought she’d listen.” He looked back to the young woman standing on his porch. “I don’t see any point in asking the two of you in, though, until you can tell me what’s supposed to be so special about her.”

Andy’s grin widened. “Special? You have no idea.” He put an arm around the shoulders of his bewildered guest. “Doc — she’s a Killer.”
She pulled away, looking at them with a distinct absence of pleasure. “What?” she said.


“Oh, the Slayer.” Her forehead smoothed, then furrowed again. “What makes you think I’m a Slayer?”

“That’s a good question,” Doc said. “Well, Andy? What would a Slayer — assuming they actually exist — be doing here?”

“She knew what I was talking about,” Andy pointed out. “She even corrected me on it. And Doc — she’s from Sunnydale.”

“Sunnydale.” The older man considered it. “So she’ll have heard the same stories Katie picked up from that lurid Web site. That’s no guarantee they’re true, or that this young lady is their object.”

The young lady in question was showing signs of annoyance. “You guys are talking about me like I’m not here,” she said.

Andy was undeterred. “Okay, so you need convincing. Fine. I was watching from the window of the front office; you know what I mean, the way things have been going I couldn’t sleep, so I was just there, with the lights out, thinking or trying not to think, I don’t know. Anyhow, she pulled into the motel parking lot with a flat tire, she looked around to see if anybody was nearby, and then she went to change the tire —”

“We’re into the twenty-first century,” Doc observed. “There actually are women who can do that kind of thing. Katie knows more about auto maintenance than I do.”

“Really?” Andy’s grin was triumphant. “And does Katie lift the back end of a car up onto the jack, and then twist the lug nuts off the hub with her fingers?”

Doc’s eyes fixed on the blonde female visitor. Her expression blended embarrassment and annoyance. “Oops,” she said.

“That’s true?” Doc asked. “You did that?”

She sighed. “Yeah, I did. I didn’t know Mister Sneaky-Pants was scoping me out.”

Doc thought for another several seconds, his gaze doubtful. Then he shrugged, and said, “From a comment you made — and knowing Andy — I gather he persuaded you to come here without telling you the real reason. I apologize for that … but, if you’re what he believes you are, there’s something going on in this town that might very well interest you. You’re under no obligation, but I’d appreciate it if you could hear us out.” He stepped back away from the door, motioning her toward the interior of the house. “It’s entirely your choice.”

She studied him, frowning slightly. “You’re inviting me inside?”

He nodded. “I am.”

She started to move forward, paused. “You’re sure,” she said.

“Absolutely,” he told her. “Please, come in, if you’re willing to trust us this far. If not, no one would blame you.”

She smiled quickly, brightly. “Okay, if you’re sure.”
As she passed by him, Doc looked to Andy and said, “You should have told her the truth. I don’t like her being deceived this way.”

“I had to get her here so you could explain it,” Andy answered, showing no trace of apology. “Women like me, but they trust you.”

“Yes,” Doc said. “I wonder why that is.”

As they reached the living room, a fourth person appeared, catapulting herself down the staircase like a self-propelled cannonball. The newcomer was a teen-aged girl in jeans and an armless sweatshirt: barefoot, pixie-faced, with dirty-blonde hair in a page-boy cut. “Is it her?” she demanded breathlessly. “Is it Judith?”

“No, Katie,” Doc said. “I’m sorry, we still haven’t had any word about Judith. What we have here … well, it’s too early to make any promises, but maybe —”

“I found a Slayer,” Andy said expansively. “Give it up for the Big A, I brought us back a Slayer.”

Katie’s eyes focused for the first time on the visitor. “Is it?” she asked.

“Me,” the other girl said.

Katie looked her over in wondering assessment. “This is so cool,” she said. “There’s this whole site just about Sunnydale and all the off-the-wall stuff that goes on there, I’ve been going through it trying to get some ideas about what we’ve been … and about half the stories talk about you, you’re sort of this Net-celebrity for the weird-but-true set … I mean, there was supposed to be another Slayer for awhile, only they say she’s in prison now — like any prison could hold a Slayer! — and now here you are. ” She was beaming in awe and delight. “The Slayer, in my living room. Buffy Summers, herself!”

“Buffy?” Andy said.

Buffy?, Doc mouthed.

“Buffy, right,” the older girl said. “That’s Buffy, I’m me.” Blink. “I mean, that’s me, I’m Buffy.”

She was not, of course, Buffy Summers.

* * *

“I suppose I should explain our situation,” Doc said. “And identify ourselves to you. I’m Douglas Ballard; I’m a general practitioner, the only one in the community, though we have four veterinarians. Katie is my daughter. Andy Sexton you’ve met; his wife, Judith, is my office manager.

“Cromwell — this town — has a population of less than five thousand, but it’s also the hub for a rural population about five times that size. The thing is, because of some irregularities in the districting of this region, Cromwell has been grandfathered into a kind of special status; we’re unaffiliated with any of the county governments, at least for now, and … well, things being the way they are, I’ve wound up as the official coroner for this little independent enclave. That really doesn’t mean anything as far as what’s going on right now, but it will give you some idea of how things stand. We’re … isolated, officially; even though geographically we deal all the time with surrounding communities, there’s an entire middle layer of government bureaucracy that doesn’t touch us at all.”

The young woman who had answered to ‘Buffy’ shook away a slightly glazed expression and
said, “Isn’t less government, like, a good thing?”

Andy laughed, and Katie grinned. “Most people feel that way,” Doc said. “But it also means that, if something happens that’s … unusual, but indefinite … then there’s no one I can consult who’s close to the matter, who understands the people and the conditions, and can make a decision or take action based on knowledge of the full situation.”

Buffy’s eyes were starting to go blank again. “Uh, you’re talking a lot, but I don’t have any idea what you’re saying here. There’s some kind of problem?”

“Yes, I’ve been giving you background so you can understand that.” Doc pursed his lips, studying the purported Slayer with obvious reservation. “As I said, I’m the town’s only doctor. Most of my work here is fairly routine: vaccinations, annual check-ups, minor injuries. I’m not a specialist, so people with severe problems tend to go to larger cities for treatment — I refer some of them myself, I know my limitations — and that works out well for everyone. The thing is, for the last several weeks … well, things go in cycles, you’ll get a long, slow period and then a rush of cases … but, still, I’ve been referring quite a few cases lately. Things outside my normal practice, that I couldn’t responsibly attempt to handle myself, but I see the initial symptomology, and over time I started to become concerned.”

“You’re seeing weird stuff,” Buffy said. “I got that. What kind of stuff?”

“That’s part of the problem,” Doc said. “There’s no pattern. That is to say, there’s such a pronounced atypical absence of pattern that it begins to form a pattern itself.”

“Uh … what?” Buffy said.

“In just the last few months,” Doc went on, “I’ve seen people showing symptoms that might indicate malaria, mad cow disease, osteomyelitis, dengue fever, Tay-Sachs disease, liver fluke infestation, Guillame-Barré syndrome, intestinal worms, bacterial meningitis, Kaposi’s sarcoma — that’s a classic AIDS marker — trichinosis, tularemia, pseudomonas, lupus erythematosis … over a dozen people with different symptoms, no discernible overlap or common factor, no toxin or biological pathogen I’ve been able to identify … People have been getting sick with everything, from no cause I can find, some of them with conditions it should be difficult or impossible to acquire in this area.”

He shook his head. “I’ve done tissue cultures and found nothing. I don’t mean I couldn’t identify what I found, I mean there wasn’t anything there, and I suspect the specialists elsewhere have been stumped as well. Meningitis, for instance: if that was confirmed, there would be epidemiological investigators here from the state, trying to find the source and make sure it wasn’t spreading — and I can’t imagine them shrugging off a mad-cow case, either — but there’s been nothing. There are symptoms without any detectible causative agent. It’s … incomprehensible.”

Buffy blinked several times. “People are getting sick,” she said at last. “What am I supposed to do about it?”

“You’ve never seen anything like this, as a Slayer?” Andy asked.

She shook her head. “Look, people, I don’t think you understand how the whole Slayer deal works. Back in Sunnydale, there’s a creepy old … I mean, there was this guy, a Watcher. He read up on stuff, and studied prophecies, and told me what was what. Me, I killed things. That’s what I do. Slayer, get it? I don’t figure things out, people do that for me. Then, once they point me at a problem, I go kill it.”

“That’s just it,” Doc insisted. “We don’t know what the problem is.”
“Which, I can see, it’s a total bummer for you.” Buffy smiled cheerily. “But, without a target? not my job.”

“There’s more,” Katie said suddenly.

“Like what?” Buffy said.

“There have been animals killed on some of the farms in the area,” Katie explained. “Mostly sheep, but some cows, too, and one man near the county line had a horse disappear out of its stable. Just last night, nothing left in the stall but some blood. People have been seeing things out in the countryside, and sometimes inside the city limits, nobody’s got a good look but they’re saying everything from wild dogs to escaped hyenas. Three different times, somebody’s painted funny symbols on the sidewalk at the town square — I got photos of one set — and some of them look kind of like glyphs listed in ‘Demons, Demons, Demons’. And …” She stopped, looked to Andy and her father.

“Yes,” Doc said. “That’s what moved us from worry to a belief that something had to be done. Judith — Andy’s wife — was the first to notice that we were getting several very odd cases that couldn’t be explained. I would have seen it myself within a very short time, but she’s quite perceptive. She’s the one who helped me organize my inquiries, she’s the one who suggested that there might be some connections to the other odd events —”

“She’s just awesome,” Katie said. “She’s the coolest grown-up person I know.”

“And she’s missing,” Andy added. “Nobody’s seen her for more than a day.”

Buffy brightened visibly. “Kidnapping? Now, that’s juicy. What do the cops say?”

“They say there’s no case,” Doc said flatly. “I know the chief of police, and he’s doing what he can off the record, but officially he has no cause to act. Her car is gone. There was a note saying she needed to spend some time by herself, and nobody should worry.”

“Oh,” Buffy said. “Forget that, then.”

“Except she wouldn’t do that,” Katie protested. “She’s just not like that. I can see why people might believe it, it’s no secret her and Andy are having problems …” She faltered, looking around guiltily, then forged on. “Well, you are! But she’s really responsible, and she wouldn’t just leave without saying something to us.” She paused. “Also, the note was printed out from a word processor. Even her name at the end, no handwriting at all. How lame is that?”

“Huh,” Buffy said. “Okay, you might have something. Weird diseases, dead animals, hex marks, missing lady … I guess I could hang around for awhile, check things out.” She glanced at the trio surrounding her. “So what’s it worth to you?”

“You want to be paid?” Doc asked. “Is that what you’re saying?”

“And why not?” Buffy demanded. “You don’t give shots and slap on band-aids just for kicks, do you? You do a job, you charge a fee. Well, same here. You want me to help you, fine, that’s what us Slayers do. But I’m nobody’s free ride.”

Doc and Andy traded looks. “I’m sure we could arrange something,” Doc said. “We’re neither of us rich, but —”

“Let’s start with my car,” Buffy said. “Sexy-Boy got me here by saying I could get my tires fixed.
I’ll want that by tomorrow. Meanwhile I’ll need a place to stay.” She turned to Andy. “You said you had two units done up already? Good. How are the drapes on them?"

“There are Levolor blinds, plus sliding curtains —” he began.

“Never mind,” she interrupted. “You’ll tape foil over all the windows as soon as we get back.” She saw the confused expressions around her, and smiled. “Slayers hunt vampires, so we get our power from the night. Sunlight makes us weak, like … like mono. I’ll stay indoors all day, and go hunting after dark. In fact, I’ll make a sweep tonight while you’re getting everything comfy for me, and then settle in till sunset tomorrow. Get that all set up, and then we can talk about money.”

“Um, okay,” Andy said. “You, uh, you want me to provide groceries for you?”

She smiled, an odd glint in her eyes. “Nuh-uh. Slayers have a special diet, I’ll take care of that myself. These rooms of yours, do they have unicorn decorations? Like, you know, embroidered on the pillowcases or such?”

Andy was beginning to feel — and look — somewhat dazed. “N-no, no unicorns,” he said.

“Get some,” she told him, blithely imperious. “I like unicorns.”
Andy left, starting back to prepare the lodgings for his new guest, and the others quickly discussed their immediate course of action. There was not, in fact, a great deal they could do without further information, and Doc reluctantly decided that he would need adequate sleep in order to conduct daylight inquiries upon which the Slayer could act the following night. “I’ll drive her back to the motel,” Katie volunteered. “No, better, I’ll show her around town some, it’ll take Andy a while to get things ready.”

“I really don’t think that’s a good idea,” Doc said.

“What?” Buffy asked scornfully. “You think she’d be safer with you than with me?”

“I definitely think she’d be safer at home than out hunting trouble,” Doc replied, even and firm. “Which is precisely what she’s suggesting. If you really want to reconnoiter, the town itself is small enough for you to do that on foot. Which, as I understand it, is your standard approach anyhow.”

Katie was mortified. “Dad! Sure, she can cover everything, but who’s going to tell her what it means, what everything is, who lives where? She’s right, there’s not much we could run into that a Slayer couldn’t handle … and you know I can take care of myself.”

“I still don’t see the purpose,” Doc said, shaking his head. “It’s an unnecessary risk, to little point.”

“Somebody’ll have to do it sooner or later,” Katie argued. “Waiting is just more time Judith stays missing. I know, we can go check out the stables, where the horse was taken. Maybe we can find something there.”

Doc sighed. “I’m not being deliberately obstinate, but I fail to see what you could accomplish. Even if there were something at the stables that would have meaning to a Slayer, any clues would have been muddled or obliterated by the normal daily routine there.”

“I don’t know,” Buffy said with a shrug. “She said there was blood inside the stall. You can tell a lot from blood … if, like, you’ve got special Slayer senses the way I do.”

Doc wasn’t happy, but even he could see that this was a valid action. After further urgings of caution onto his daughter — and a pointed stare at the Slayer to be sure she understood her responsibility — he relented, and Katie ran to make quick preparations, and a few minutes later the two girls departed.

As they pulled out of Doc’s double-wide garage, Katie promptly asked, “So, what’s it like, being a Slayer?”

“It totally rocks,” Buffy replied cheerily. “I’m at the top of the heap, One Girl In All The World. Nobody can tell me what to do, I’d rip ’em a new one if they tried. The good guys — the ones that know, and there’s more of those than you might think — treat me like a queen, ’cause they all know I’m the best. The bad guys practically pee themselves at the thought that I might decide to go after them.”

Katie made a couple of quick turns, and they were cruising down one of the rural routes that led into (or in this case, out of) Cromwell. “It’s just … I have to keep telling myself this is real, that you’re actually a Slayer.”

“I’m still getting used to it myself.” Buffy glanced over at Katie and said, “Okay, I have to ask:
what’s the deal with that get-up you’re wearing?”

Katie grinned, uncowed by the fashionista disapproval in the Slayer’s tone. “It’s a Blackhawk tactical vest,” she said proudly. “Keen, huh? I went over all the specs on their Web site, and picked out exactly the model I wanted. My dad got it for me for my birthday, and then I customized it a little more.”

Buffy shook her head. “You’ve got some weird kind of dad. What are you, thirteen?”

Katie made a face. “I’m seventeen. I’ve always looked young for my age. My dad says I’ll be glad of that when I get past thirty, but right now it’s a major ache in the you-know-what.”

“Right.” Buffy gave her a tilted look. “What do you need all that junk for? Better yet, what is all that junk?”

Still grinning happily, Katie began a running inventory, pointing with one hand while she steered the sporty Rav-4 with the other. “Glock 17 in a front-mounted Serpa carbon-fiber holster, trigger-guard retention system instead of straps. Spare 9mm magazines, three on each side, so with one in the chamber I’m carrying over seventy rounds. Spyderco folding knife. Garmin Rino GPS/radio. In these front flaps I’ve got a compass, in case the GPS craps out, some energy bars, Zeiss 12x25 compact binoculars, and a digital camera. Mounted on the web belt, I’ve got a mini-maglight, some glow sticks, compact first-aid kit, Gerber Fairbairn-Applegate lockblade, zip ties for handcuffs or to lock things in place, and a Leatherman folding multi-tool kit. Oh, and you can’t see it but there’s a two-litre Camelbak secured to the back of the vest, with the drinking tube looped over here so I can hydrate on the move.”

Buffy was silent for perhaps half a minute. At last she said, “So, no Kevlar?”

Katie laughed. “Maybe next birthday. Or maybe I’ll try to get a folding-stock Kel-Tec carbine, the model that’ll accept the same magazines as the Glock.”

“Okay.” Buffy settled back into her seat. “Can I ask you something?”

“All right. So, are you, like, a lesbian or something? Or are you just crazy?”

Katie looked wounded but not surprised; this was, perhaps, not the first time she had heard the accusation. “Not a lesbian,” she said. “I have a boyfriend, and besides, other girls are dumb. And there’s nothing crazy about being prepared.”

“Prepared for what? Sneak attack from Canada?” Buffy shook her head. “I mean, jeez louise, you look like Barbie’s little sister, Scooter or Skipper or whatever, but you’re decked out like that bull-dyke Ripley in Aliens —”

“She wasn’t a dyke!” Katie protested. “She’d had a daughter, and you could see she was sweet on Michal Biehn’s character —”

“— sure, after that big wet kiss she laid on Winona Ryder —”

“— that was Ripley’s clone, and it was two movies later, James Cameron did Aliens but I don’t know what Hollywood hophead cranked out Alien Resurrection —”

“— and you rattle off all these brand-names like they’re important, like, like, like shoes, and it’s just so many different kinds of total freakishness!”
Katie slumped slightly behind the steering wheel, but the set of her mouth was disillusioned rather than embarrassed. “I never would have thought I had to explain this to a Slayer,” she said.


“I just love this stuff,” Katie said. “And why shouldn’t I? The whole world expects girls to be a certain way, and that’s fine if they are that way, but I’m not. I don’t want anybody protecting me; helping, sure, but it starts with me. If I need a guy, I get a guy. If I need a truck, I borrow a truck. If I need a gun, I have a gun. But all the way, it’s me doing it.”

She spoke with the earnest intensity of a child, one who knows what’s right and is convinced you’ll agree if she can just make you understand. “I’ll never be big, like Andy,” she said. “I’ll never be strong, like you. — Well, not unless I get called as a Slayer, and I can’t actually wish for that, can I? ’Cause you’d have to, you know, die first. — But I can learn how to fight, and I can learn weapons, and I can learn first aid and CPR … I guess what I mean is, I can be female without having to be helpless.”

“Oh.” There was a slight uncertainty to the way Buffy said it, and one might have wondered if she had quite grasped the nuances of the other girl’s point. “So, your dad bought you this, this Ghost Recon gear, but he didn’t seem very happy about you coming out with me.”

“My dad worries about me sometimes, but he says I should be what I am instead of what other people want, as long as I don’t totally go around the bend.” She shot the Slayer a quick sideways look. “Besides, I think he knows there’s no way he could keep me from hanging out with you as much as I can. I mean, the Slayer, here … you know what a big deal that is!”

Buffy nodded brightly. “Yeah, it’s pretty cool having me around, isn’t it?”

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Katie parked on a side-road, and led the Slayer to the pertinent stable by a circuitous rear approach that took them clear of the main house, lights, and possibly dogs. She noted with happy approval that Buffy moved surely and comfortably in the night countryside. Struck by a thought, she asked, “Can you see in the dark?”

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At the stable itself, Buffy didn’t bother to go in; she stood outside, head cocked to the side, nostrils slightly flared. “Are you smelling the blood?” Katie asked her.

“Well, naturally,” Buffy said. “I’m not about to go in and taste it, it’ll be all mixed with horse poo.” She evaluated the scent for a few more seconds, then said, “Well, the horse is dead, not that there was much doubt about it. They pulled him apart and carried off the parts they didn’t eat. At least three of them.”

“Pulled him apart?” Katie repeated. “That’s awful.”

“Oh, he was dead first,” Buffy assured her. “There’d be a lot more blood, otherwise.”

“Okay.” Katie studied the other girl. “Vampires?”

Katie wouldn’t be repressed. “So what was it, if not vampires? And how do you know how many of them there were?”

“The blood has some kind of noxious drool mixed in with it,” Buffy explained. “From at least three different whateverss. Once it’s in the blood, I just know.”

“But you don’t know what did it,” Katie insisted.

“No, not just from smelling their slobber.” Buffy had the expression of one who was becoming very annoyed, but was being quite virtuous about controlling it. “But we can, like, narrow it down.”

“Really? How? Tell me.”

“Well, we know they can work together. We know they can be pretty quiet … I mean, you said nobody realized the horse was gone till morning. We know they like meat; not all demons do, some of them eat the grossest things … We know they weren’t after anything special here, probably — no virgin’s toes, or gallstone of a thrice-cursed frog or anything like that — ’cause there is, like, nothing special about a horse.” Buffy gave the other girl a look. “A Watcher would know all this stuff, and know what books to look in. You should be able to get some idea from that demon Web site you were talking about.”

“You’re right.” They had started back for Katie’s vehicle, moving toward the trees that bordered the stable grounds. “As soon as I get home, I’ll go online —”

Buffy put out a hand to stop her, and the two of them stood quietly in the darkness for a moment. “Oh, that’s just wonderful,” Buffy said.

Katie’s hand was resting on the butt of the Glock. “Is something out there?” she asked.

“Couple of big, sweaty, heavy-breathing somethings.” The Slayer looked over at Katie. “I don’t know about the pistol … it’s noisy, and we’re close to the house, and I think you’d need, like, an elephant gun anyway. Did you see anything back there we could use? A sword would be dandy, but I could get by with an axe —”

“There was a shovel leaning against the door of the next stall down from where we were,” Katie said.

“Oh, sure, I remember. Okay, wait right here.” And she was gone with appropriately supernatural quickness.

Katie stood in the abruptly terrifying night, rooted as much in disbelief as fear. The Slayer had left her? But, no, she had to know what she was doing; she worked with other people all the time, the stories said as much, so she must be trusting Katie to hold steady, cover her back, not panic …

Katie eased the Gerber lockblade out of its nylon case, mindful of Buffy’s admonition against gunfire, but she kept her right hand on the Glock all the same.

Then the Slayer was back, appearing silently from the gloom. “Okay, girlfriend, are you ready for some mayhem? Because it is so happening now!” She twirled the shovel nonchalantly in one hand, effortless as if it were a plastic baton, and her face was split by a wide smile of bloodthirsty glee.

Katie’s heart pounded, but underlying the real fear and tension there was something else, something new, something … “I’m ready when you are,” she said with deceptive evenness.

“Then let’s get our Slay on,” Buffy said, and charged the fringe of trees with a sharp expulsion of
breath that had to be a war-shriek barely restrained.

The struggle in the dark lasted less than a minute, and Katie’s impressions of most of it were confused: fast-moving bodies, thuds of impact and low growls, the chuffing sound of claws scoring moist earth as a hooking swing just missed the Slayer. Katie hung back; she could tell that Buffy was flashing back and forth between her opponents, holding her own and inflicting damage, but she wasn’t at all confident that she could do anything that wouldn’t endanger the Slayer as much as her hulking foes. At one point an indefinite shape broke free of the fray and lunged toward her; Katie cut at it with a tight arc of the Gerber, it drew back from the glint of moonlight on the five-inch blade, and an instant later Buffy had engaged it again.

Perhaps twenty seconds of combat took place in a small open area clear of overhanging branches, and Katie was at last able to follow the action visually. Seen in battle, Buffy was at once impressive and slightly disappointing. She fought in ceaseless, inexhaustible motion, but there was no flow or continuity to her technique; it was choppy, disjointed, fast and powerful and incorporating moves recognizably drawn from taekwon-do and wushu, but without their unifying fluidity. Katie herself was getting ready to test for her red belt in taekwon-do, and was already at fourth kyu in Budoshin Jujitsu (within shouting distance of brown belt), and watching Buffy she knew two things with total certainty. First, she would never, ever be able to match the Slayer’s speed, power, or effortless flexibility; and second, apart from those things, Buffy’s skill was nowhere near her own.

It was sufficient, even so. Back in the trees again, Buffy felled one of her foes with a devastating swing that sent the top third of the broken shovel spinning past Katie; the Slayer clubbed the remaining figure with the metal handle, then jumped onto its back, scissoring her legs around its midsection, and snapped its neck with a sharp, savage twist of her arms.

The thing collapsed beneath her, and she wasn’t able to unlink her ankles quickly enough. She fell to her side with an oof! of surprise, then was on her feet again a second later, brushing leaves and loose grass from her dress. “Do you see my shoes anywhere?” she asked. “I know I jumped out of them somewhere around here.”

“Wow,” Katie breathed. “That was … that was just …” Choosing the right words would have required a delicacy that was beyond her at the moment. “I just watched the Slayer kill two demons,” she said at last. “I mean … wow.”

“Hel-lo,” Buffy said peevishly. “Shoes? Prioritize, already. Those puppies were four hundred and seventy bucks’ worth of genuine Danica Carlisle. Not that I actually paid, but still —”

“I think that might be one over there,” Katie said; then, peering at the limp shape sprawled on the grass, she added, “So these are the things that killed the horse.”

“Oh, not even,” Buffy said, without looking away from her search for the second shoe. “Totally not the same.”

“Huh?” Katie stared at the foraging Slayer. “You’re sure?”

“Different drool,” Buffy announced confidently. “I mean, smell it. Also, these guys? All ‘rarhh, hulk smash’. Not the sneaky raiding type at all.” She straightened, suddenly indignant. “Well, I’ll be … They weren’t just after us, they were sent after us!”

Katie looked around her. “Okay, now I’m starting to feel insecure. After us there’s-a-Slayer-in-town-and-we’re-going-for-her, or after us good-thing-you-happened-to-be-here-or-I’d-be-shredded-cheddar?”
“Beats me,” Buffy said. “But I know demons. Different types working together, especially dim-brain specimens like these? Doesn’t just happen. Somebody around here is pulling strings.” She sighed. “I hate evil masterminds. I mean, they always have to go on about all their diabolical schemes. Doesn’t anybody just want to kill people and have a good time —?”

“We should carry one of these things back so my dad can get a look at it,” Katie said. “Could you maybe …?”

The Slayer vetoed that thought with a half-raspberry. “Think again. Killer here, not carrier of corpses. You said you had a camera, take some pictures.”

Katie wasn’t happy with that (surely there was something useful her father could learn from a demon autopsy), but she wasn’t up to dragging one of the bodies back to the highway, and there was no way to thread the Rav-4 in between the trees. She took a dozen photographs from different angles, hoping the flash would be enough, even rolling the corpse onto its back to make sure she didn’t miss any distinguishing features. If nothing else, she’d have plenty of physical characteristics to check against the listings at ‘Demons, Demons, Demons’. Finally, when she could think of nothing else to do — and when the thought of other things out there in the uncharted night began to fray at her nerves — she and Buffy trveled back to where she had parked.

“That was … pretty awesome,” she said as they began the drive back to Cromwell. “The way you fought those things.”

“That’s the Slayer life,” Buffy answered, smiling. “Amazing is what we do every day. Well, every night.”

After another minute, Katie said, “I’m sorry I wasn’t more help.”

Buffy let out a little laugh that might have been called nasty. “What, jump in and have me tripping over you? or get in trouble and I get messed up having to rescue you? No, thanks.” That hung unpleasantly in the air; and then, as if reminding herself, Buffy added, “You did okay, Midget. I saw that thing go at you, and I saw you turn it back with the knife. I thought that was pretty stupid, actually … but, you know, a brave kind of stupid.”

“Thanks,” Katie said. “I guess. Uh, ‘Midget’? What’s that about?”

Buffy laughed again. “Well, me and you are like some kind of freaky Saturday morning cartoon. You know, the Vampire Slayer and the Midget Commando.”

Katie bit her lip, uncertain how to take that. “So, did you want to go back to the house, or do that patrol of the town you were talking about?”

“Just drop me off when we reach the city limits,” Buffy told her. “I know the way now, I’ll scope the scene, see if there’s anything else shaking, maybe grab a bite.”

“I think everything’s closed right now,” Katie said. “Even the waffle house doesn’t open till five.”

“Don’t worry about that.” Buffy’s smile broadened. Her teeth were very white. “I’ll scare up something.”

* * *

Andy was surveying the windows when cool fingers touched his arm, and only long experience in maintaining appearances kept him from jumping. Yes, it was the Slayer, regarding him with smug satisfaction (she knew something herself about projecting an image) and a certain interest. “So,
“Just finished covering the windows,” Andy said. “I couldn’t manage any unicorns, sorry, but I’ll pick up something as soon as the shops start to open.”

“I guess that’ll have to do,” Buffy said, and followed him into the motel room. After a quick glance around, she said, “Okay, the windows? Do it again, on the inside, I don’t want sunlight diddling up my Slayer mojo. You got cable in here?”

“Till the end of the month,” Andy explained. “Once we get the funding —”

“Oh, I’ll be gone before the end of the month,” Buffy said. “One way or another.”

“That’s good, then,” Andy said. “Does the rest of the place meet with your approval?”

“I’m used to better,” she said. “But I’ve lived with worse. When you go out tomorrow, get me some running shoes, okay? These —” she dangled the stilettos from one thumb by their straps “— will just not cut it for patrol. I’m a seven narrow … and make it Reeboks, I don’t do knockoffs.”

“I’ll see to it,” Andy assured her. “Anything else?”

She thought about it, frowning with the effort. “Jeans, I guess. Stone-washed black denim. T-shirts, I don’t care what kind, just not white, and at least half a dozen.” At his look, she explained, “One gets splattered with monster goo, I just throw it away and pull on another one. Which reminds me, weapons. Everybody needs weapons.”

“On it,” Andy said. “I have a shotgun, and I can borrow another one —”

“No, no, no,” Buffy interrupted. “Weapons. I mean, a shotgun is okay, I guess, for backup, but you’ve got to have the right stuff for close and nasty. You know: sword, axe, crossbow, that kind of thing.”

“Crossbows,” Andy said. “I think I can manage that. And axes, except probably not the kind you’re thinking of. Swords, real fighting swords, and on short notice … that could be a problem.”

“Look, do I have to think of everything?” Buffy snapped. “Watchers are planning and supply, Slayers handle the bloody stuff. How can I do my job if I’m trying to do yours, too?”

“Right,” Andy said. “I’ll check it out. What size on the jeans?”

She sniffed dismissively. “You can’t trust store sizes. Just look at me, guess, and buy that and two sizes on either side. One of them is bound to fit.”

“Okay,” Andy said. “And I already know where I’ll be taking your tires to be repaired.” He paused, smiled. “I might pick up a couple of swimsuits for you while I’m clothes-shopping. I seem to remember something about a date by moonlight. I wasn’t joking about that.”

Buffy smiled, too, but hers had an edge to it. “Sure you’re not forgetting something?”

He thought about that. “I don’t believe so. I’ve paid close attention to everything you’ve said. To everything about you, as a matter of fact.”

The Slayer’s eyes danced with knowledge and amusement. “You didn’t maybe forget to ask if I ran across anything that might give you some idea of what happened to your wife?”
Andy’s smile faltered, but held, and he recovered quickly. “I’m trying to shut off that part of my mind until we have something solid we can work with. And … well, you have to know it’s hard for a man to think of anything else when you’re around.”

She laughed. “What I know is you’re a gorgeous, muscle-y, lying stud-muffin who’ll hump anything in skirts, and then two-time her with the next piece of fluff that walks by.” She stretched, arching her back in a way that pulled the fabric of the thin dress taut across her breasts. “But guess what, Randy Andy? You’re in luck even though I don’t buy your load of crapola for a second. And you know why? it’s because I ran into a couple of soldier-type demons tonight and tore ’em right up, and after a good kill a Slayer always has to work off the rush with a few hours of hard sex, or she’s just worthless for days.”

“No, ma’am,” Andy said through the roaring of blood in his ears. “I think you’ll find that this establishment puts the satisfaction of our guests ahead of everything else.”
Chapter 3

The tires were repaired as promised (one of the areas where Andy had succeeded in satisfying his solitary tenant’s demands, though she had voiced pointed criticism of his shortcomings in other areas), and so immediately upon sunset, Cromwell’s new Slayer emerged from her lodgings and drove to Doc’s house. The owner was waiting with an open door and a forbidding expression. “You weren’t answering your room phone,” he said as she came up the walk.

“I unplugged it,” she told him firmly. “My time is my time. At night I hunt, during the day I don’t want anybody bothering me.”

She stepped inside without invitation, and he followed her to the living room. “And yet you must have plugged it in long enough to wake up Andy and order him to bring you cheesecake,” he said.

“But that didn’t bother me,” she answered. “Except he brought one with strawberries instead of cherries —”

“If your active hours are limited,” Doc interrupted, “then it’s all the more important that I be able to communicate with you during your … downtime. I’ll tell the others to respect your privacy, but you need to keep the phone plugged in from now on.”

“Do I?” She gave him a smile that promised nothing good. “Okay, I’ve seen sour faces before, and yours is about more than a phone. So what is it?”

“I won’t mince words,” Doc told her. “You’re to stay away from Katie. What happened last night —”

“— was probably going to happen to the first person who went sniffing around that stable,” she said. “You should be thanking me for being there, instead of acting like it’s my fault.”

He shook his head. “All the same, I don’t want her around you anymore.”

“The world’s full of things you don’t want, Doc.” Buffy parked herself in one of the overstuffed chairs in the living room, hanging a denim-clad leg over the armrest. “I bet having a daughter who wants to be the first woman on Delta Force sits on the list somewhere. Personally I think the Midget’s a brain case, but she’s kind of fun to have around. Tell her she can’t hang with me. It probably won’t work … but, trying to give me orders?” She tilted a sharp-toothed grin at him. “Definitely won’t.”

Doc sighed and sat down as well. “There was another attack last night.”

That got her attention. “Really? So which bizarre disease was it this time?”

“Not a disease,” Doc said. “A physical assault, and probably not the same things you and Katie fought. We had to call in a life-flight to carry one of our people to the nearest trauma center. A night watchman, left lying under the street lights in the town square where nobody could miss him.” Doc rubbed his eyes. “I didn’t see him myself, but from the reports I think he must have been attacked by a vampire. Neck punctures, heavy blood loss but no excessive blood at the scene … He’s not expected to live.”

Buffy’s eyebrows rose. “No kidding? He must have been weaker than I …” She faltered, recovered. “I mean, that must have been one feeble vampire. Usually they kill you straight out, unless they’ve got a reason to go easy. Like playing, or trying to keep a low profile.”
Doc was not reassured. “According to Katie, you said the demons you fought weren’t the same as the ones that killed the horse, and that there must be some central organizer directing their actions.” He looked to her. “Now we have vampires here, too. This is too big for us, isn’t it? Even with your help, how can we beat such odds?”

“I wouldn’t worry about the vampire,” Buffy said positively. “I mean, you get vampires working with other demons sometimes, but they really don’t like it. Plus, this place is totally the wrong scene for vampires, they boogie to the big-city beat.” She locked her eyes to his. “Trust me, the vampire who did this is just passing through. She — or he, because it totally could be a guy — won’t hang around longer than a week. Count on it.”

“How can you be so sure?” Doc asked her.

She sniffed. “Please, I do this for a living. Besides, any vampire in the neighborhood would scoot for the bright lights once he heard there was a Slayer in town … which, if I’m around as much as a week, you can bet will happen.” She scowled in abrupt, seemingly causeless irritation. “People just never get enough of talking about the Slayer … So, where are the rest of the wannabe Scoobies?”

“Excuse me?” Doc said. “I’m sorry, the what?”

“People who work with the Slayer,” Buffy explained. “They call themselves the Scooby Gang. Don’t ask me why, because I never understood it. That would mean the whole group was built around a big, stupid dog, only since it’s the Slayer it would be a big, stupid she-dog —” She stopped. “Actually, that makes sense. Yeah, it makes a lot of sense.”

“Ah. You mean Katie and Andy, in addition to me.” Doc glanced toward the stairway. “Katie slept most of the day so she’d be alert for night work. I told Andy to join us … well, about ten minutes from now, I wanted to have time to speak with you.”

“Right,” Buffy said. “I wouldn’t count too much on Andy. He doesn’t strike me as the type to have much … staying power.”

Had Doc’s face not been set so severely, the twitch at his mouth might have looked like the precursor to a smile. “And you reached that conclusion in less than a day. Most women require weeks to see that far into his character. Sometimes longer.”

“I’m pretty smart,” Buffy said cheerfully. “And why wait weeks when you can find out right away?” Doc looked perplexed, but she went on without seeming to notice. “Most women, you said. So he must not have been married long.”

“Seven years,” Doc said. “But he and Judith only moved here about two years ago.”

He could see the blankness in her face, but she worked it out within a few seconds. “Oh. Oh, yeah. So he’s been cruising his way through the ladies since him and wifey got here. Sure, I can see it, he’s a total horn-dog and he’s pretty enough there’d be plenty who wanted to try him on …” She gave Doc a crafty look. “What’s she think of that? Or is she too dumb to notice?”

“Not at all,” Doc objected. “She’s far from stupid, she —” He caught himself. “We’ve gotten off the subject. This isn’t the time for vulgar gossip.”

“Okay, now that’s just silly,” Buffy said. “Gossip is what people say about you behind your back, meaning how they really feel. If I’m going to work with Andy, I need the full scoop. Go ahead, give me the dish.”
Doc’s expression showed resistance, but there seemed to be a pressure inside him to add to the Slayer’s urging, and at last he surrendered. “If it weren’t for the fact that his wife is involved, and we need all the help we can get, I wouldn’t willingly associate with Andy Sexton for five consecutive minutes. If he ever had the faintest tinge of character, he abandoned it long ago in favor of getting by on charm.”

Buffy nodded. “Good dirt, but not what I asked. Does his wife not know he’s screwing around on her, or does she just not care?”

“Judith is Catholic,” Doc said. “By conviction, not just by upbringing. To her, marriage is a holy compact with God, a lifelong commitment. She’s known almost from the beginning that she made a mistake, but she won’t shrug away her promises. She’ll stand by him until one of his fast-and-loose schemes lands him in prison, and she’ll keep honoring her vows even after that. When someone like Judith says ‘so long as we both shall live’, she means it.”

Though he had early recognized that the Slayer’s intelligence was sharply limited, she had a predator’s instinct for weakness. “Not like your wife, huh?”

His face stiffened. “Katie’s mother made her own choices, for her own reasons. That was years ago, and it has nothing to do with our situation now.”

She smiled at that. “Uh-huh. Well, I won’t disagree when you say Andy’s a loser. I hadn’t met him more than ten minutes before he was sounding off about what a big deal he was going to turn that crappy motel into. I thought he was just making noise till he could get me off for a little fun-session with his buddy — that’d be you — but even then I knew not to take him seriously.”

“The motel is actually a sound investment,” Doc said. “Judith financed most of it from the sale of her family’s home, after her mother died, and one of her conditions was that she have final say in business decisions. She was honest when she came to work for me that she was doing it for a supplementary income until the motel was in full operation, that she’d leave once it had built up enough business. I accepted because she was up-front from the beginning, and because of her credentials — she’s four years older than Andy, she finished business school right after they were married — and I’ve never had cause to regret it.” His face relaxed into the hint of a smile. “She’s been totally reliable, uncompromisingly trustworthy, unfailingly upbeat no matter how dismal her home situation —”

“Got it, she’s a gem,” Buffy said. “Have you been boning her?”

Doc froze as if he had stared at Medusa. Only his lips moved, and they seemed to be fighting paralysis. “She’s married to someone else.”

“Yeah, we’ve been talking about that,” she said. “The good-looking motel man who’ll jump for a quick romp with any woman holds still long enough. So, have you been boning her?”

“No,” Doc said, carefully and distinctly. “Because she’s married. To someone else.”

“Oh.” Buffy thought about it. “You mean she’s not interested.”

“I mean she wouldn’t be interested even if she were interested. And if she were …” Doc stopped, as if searching for a specialized vocabulary to use in explaining a complicated technical issue. “Judith would never violate her marital vows. It’s part of who she is, and why I value her as I do. If she were capable of such a thing, it would so diminish her in my eyes that I couldn’t desire her. If I were to ask such a thing, she couldn’t possibly continue to associate with me. Can you understand that?”
“Give me a minute,” Buffy said. She sat, eyes distant, lips moving, then looked to him again. “No, I don’t get it. You want her, but you wouldn’t want her if she wanted you … No, no — it’s okay for her to want you as long as she doesn’t do anything about it, and you can bet she knows you want her, but she’s fine with that as long as you don’t do anything about it … You’re both trying to do the right thing, and the right thing is what’s keeping you apart, and what about that isn’t just totally freaking insane?”

Doc shook his head. “I’ve told you as clearly as I know how. If you can’t understand it, you never will.”

“But I want to,” Buffy said. “You’re one of the good guys, I can see that, and your Judy must be one, too — unless she’s just a total tease — and I’m supposed to be a good guy, and I’m really trying but none of the rules make any sense —”

Mercifully, the doorbell rang. It was Andy. Doc ushered him inside … then, seeing him clearly in the interior light, said, “Good Lord. Are you all right? Do you have any odd symptoms — chills, muscle aches, gastric upset —”

Andy waved it off. “Don’t worry, Doc, it’s nothing special.” His eyes found Buffy, and the smile tightened. “Nothing at all special. I had a hard night, couldn’t sleep for worrying about Judith.”

“I don’t know, he might be coming down with something, he looked pretty limp and wrung-out the last time I saw him.” Buffy’s tone was bright with mirth and malice. “Don’t worry, widdle boy, we’ll get Mama back for you so she can make it all better again.”

“I’ll be okay,” Andy assured her. “Right now I feel like I spent all night rolling around on a sack full of rawhide chew toys, but a decent night on something soft will set me right.”

“Good luck with that,” Buffy said. “I’m thinking you don’t do too well when it comes to mattresses.”

“It’s a matter of proper support,” Andy told her. “You want something firm, but also yielding. Some models just aren’t soft enough for any reasonable —”

“Stop it,” Doc said. “Both of you, just shut up. Your childish innuendoes are as offensive as they are obvious.” He leaned closer to Andy and continued softly, “Once we get Judith back — if we do — you’re no longer welcome here. Here, or at the clinic. You make me sick.” Then he turned and went up the staircase to the second floor.

Buffy was still grinning at him, and Andy said, “When we find my wife, if you pull anything —”

“I’ll do whatever I feel like doing,” Buffy returned, and that feral stare fixed him though the smile never shifted. “Unless you want me to feel like some tell-all girl talk with wifey-poo, you don’t need to be pushing out your chest and trying to order me around.”

Danger prickled his scalp. Okay, he couldn’t dominate or intimidate her, and something told him attempts at sweet-talking would be equally fruitless just now. Forcing his tone to something calm and reasonable, he said, “You’re right, I know better than that. I’m just hoping I can rely on your generosity.” He allowed the tiniest possible smile to escape. “You really are very hard to resist … and quite a handful, when you put your mind to it.”

“And you really are nowhere near as good in bed as you used to think you were.” She was far from won over, but some of the hardness left her eyes. “Don’t feel too bad, Sexy-Boy, you’re not the first guy to buckle under Buffy Summers. Why else would so many of them take off running after just one night with the Slayer?”
Andy let the smile widen. “You definitely should come with a warning, ‘DO NOT ATTEMPT IF YOU HAVE A HEART CONDITION —’ ”

“It wasn’t your heart that gave out on me,” Buffy reminded him.

Katie came down the stairs, Doc a few steps behind her. “Hi, guys,” she called. “I had my alarm set, but it must be a few minutes off, I heard the doorbell while I was getting dressed. So, what’ve you got?”

“Hold on,” Buffy said. “First things first. Now that we’re all here, we can deal with the most important item on the agenda. Namely, me.” She looked around at them. “We know there’s at least two kinds of demons, plus whatever Evil Overlord is bossing them around, plus from what Doc says there’s a wandering vampire in town. Oh, and there’s a rescue involved, not just your basic demon-killing. Put all that together, I’d say my services are worth $500 a day.”

There was a silence. Then Andy said, “I’ve already spent more than $200 on tire repair, clothes, unicorns, and cheesecake. Not to mention room rates.”

“The room wasn’t being used,” Buffy said. “And it’s your wife we’re talking about. Come on, guys. Lawyers charge that much per hour … and there are lots of lawyers, but there’s only one Me.”

“I don’t believe this,” Katie said. “You’re haggling? This is about Judith.”

“I’m not saying she’s not worth it,” Andy insisted, “but I’m in a delicate cash position right now —”

“We accept,” Doc said to the Slayer. “You’ve got your $500 a day, on my word. Just help us find her.”

“Fine,” Buffy told him. “And I’ll only charge you $400 for last night; it’d be a freebie, we were still talking rates then, but I did save your daughter.” She looked around. “So, here we are. Ready to tackle the forces of darkness, just the four of us.”

Katie said, “Umm —” All eyes swung to her, and she gave them a self-conscious smile. “Umm, about that …”

“Katie?” Doc prompted. “What is it?”

“Well, I might have sort of actually definitely …” Katie ducked her head and mumbled, “… told Dustin.”

“Oh, my God,” Doc said.

“What?” Buffy said.

“What?” Andy said.

“You can’t be serious,” Andy said.

“I had to,” Katie protested. “He has swords. Buffy told me guns weren’t really the thing against demons, and she said the same to Andy. Dustin has a samurai sword set, katana and wakizashi, not just a display set but actual tempered blades, they cost him over $3,000. I had to tell him why, I couldn’t ask him for the swords without an explanation. And he can help, Dad, you know he can, he already has his black belt and he’s really good at his weapons forms and he’s my boyfriend.”

“God help us,” Andy said.
“Be quiet.” Doc looked to Katie. “How much did you tell him?”

“Uh, pretty much all of it.” She kept her head down, looking up through her eyelashes. “What kind of relationship is it if we don’t trust each other? I told him to give me time to let you all know he was coming … umm, he should be getting here any time now.”

“Settle back,” Andy said to Buffy. “You’re in for a real treat.”

“See?” Buffy said to Doc. “People just have to go blabbing about the Slayer.”

* * *

No explanation was given as to exactly what made ‘Dustin’ so objectionable; perhaps from consideration for Katie’s feeling, or maybe they assumed it would be obvious. Well, it was. When the boyfriend in question arrived a few minutes later, he hadn’t spoken a dozen words before the watching Slayer understood exactly why the two men reacted to him with such forceful disapproval; the only mystery was why Katie was blind to it.

He was Andy, in miniature. Ten years younger, two inches shorter, twenty-five pounds lighter, he projected the exact same smug God’s-gift-to-women cockiness that Andy Sexton always carried. Doc clearly loathed him for the similarity to a man he despised; Andy, it seemed obvious, couldn’t stand him because he was supposed to be the prime male in any gathering (and didn’t at all enjoy dealing with the same attitude he directed at everyone else); and Katie, openly lacking in respect for Andy, turned instantly giddy at Dustin’s appearance, utterly oblivious to the fundamental likeness between the two.

Dustin’s greeting to Doc was polite but perfunctory; his attitude to Katie was at once possessive and dismissive, and Andy he ignored entirely. He looked directly at Buffy, and — the Real Deal has arrived, and it’s up to you to convince him, assuming you can — said, “So this is what a Slayer is supposed to look like.”

She might have trouble understanding the nuances of the good guy role, but of high school head-games she was past master. “Got it on the first try, Sherlock.” She let scorn show through the smile. “Me, I already knew how to recognize a dork.”

It didn’t faze him, but she hadn’t expected it to; this was just the build-up. “If you’re really a Slayer,” he said, “you shouldn’t mind showing me what you’re made of.”

Without moving from the chair, Buffy answered, “If you’re really that stupid, you shouldn’t mind screaming and bleeding.”

Andy smiled. Katie looked distressed. Doc moved next to Buffy and murmured, “Try not to break him … much. He’s an ass, but now that he knows, he actually could be useful.”

“Party pooper,” she said back, just as low.

Dustin couldn’t have heard the exchange, but his eyes followed it. If he felt worry or uncertainty, it didn’t show. “Well?” he said. “I have to see something, I’m not going to take all this on faith.”

Katie’s voice was forlorn. “You said you believed me.”

Dustin gave her a gleaming smile that visibly interfered with the function of her knees. “Reagan said it best: ‘Trust, but verify.’ I’m watching out for both of us here, babe.” He looked back to Buffy. “Still waiting.”

She got up from the chair, taking her time, and observed at large, “I want everybody here to
remember I didn’t start this.”

Then she hit him; she had crossed the room and punched him in the chest before any of the others could do more than blink. Dustin really was quick, and he really was skilled, he intercepted the punch with an outward block, flawlessly timed and classically delivered. It might as well have been directed at a steel piston. His arm went numb, and the punch flung him back against the wall.

He didn’t fall, but it was some seconds before he could get his eyes to focus, more until he could make air move through his lungs again. It was obvious that she could have put the fist completely through him if she had wanted, but pride forced out the words: “I wasn’t ready.”

She snorted. “Like that’s my fault? You’ll never be ready, dimbulb. Not for a Slayer.”

He went for her, launching three strikes with all the quickness he possessed, jab-hook-chop, and she wasn’t there for any of them. Then she stopped dodging; he felt a flare of triumph as the first punch landed, instantly supplanted by fury and despair as she took it and the next three, head barely moving even though he put all his strength into the blows. He planted the last one squarely onto that mocking smile, weight sunk into his hips, shoulders perfectly aligned, directing every last ounce of force into the two forward knuckles, one of the best punches of his life … and at last got a reaction, she caught his wrist as he was pulling the arm back, the other wrist as he tried a shuto to the throat. “Do not smear the lipstick,” she reproved, holding him without effort as he heaved and strained; then she straightened her arms abruptly, sending him crashing back into the wall with even greater impact, and this time he did go down.

“See?” she announced to the rest of the room. “I was nice. I can do that, when I want to.” Then she went to where Dustin lay gasping on the carpet, and squatted next to him. “You got off easy, numb-nuts,” she said, casual and unruffled. “I’ve only run across a couple of humans who were better than you at the fisty stuff, but — breaking news here, jackass — I’m superhuman. I grew up on a Hellmouth, I’ve taken punches from sluggo demons and master vampires and even a Sl— another Slayer, people who make you look like D.J. Qualls with a hernia.” She stood, dusting off her hands. “Rock breaks scissors, and then pounds the pieces into paper-clips, and then pounds the paper-clips into … little twisty messed-up paper-clips.”

She looked around. “I’m thirsty all of a sudden,” she said. “I know what I want — and I know I can’t have it, I’m no dummy — but I could really go for some wine coolers. Then, once Dustin here can sit up and uncross his eyes, we can start making some plans. Okay?”
Planning and playing with the new Scoobies would have been really frustrating if it hadn’t been so funny. The Slayer wasn’t long on group dynamics — one-on-one was her specialty, be it physical combat or social — but the clash of personalities here was as entertaining as anything she’d ever seen among the Harmettes. Doc hated Andy, and regarded Dustin with ill-hid contempt. Andy patronized Doc (power position, he had the woman Doc wanted), and treated Dustin with exaggerated disdain, but was actually most uneasy with Katie, though he covered it well. Katie adored her father while chafing under his protectiveness, didn’t bother to conceal her scorn for Andy, and was simultaneously embarrassed by Dustin’s behavior and frantic for his approval. Dustin disregarded both the adults (anyone outside his immediate age-group didn’t have real-person status to him), and exercised over Katie a pride of ownership that had no visible component of affection or respect. It was a laugh a minute.

All of them, of course, looked down their noses at her — okay, not Katie, though the Midget clearly had growing doubts about her new idol — but their attitudes toward each other made them a cinch to manage. Well, that and the fact that this whole business was about the Slayer. She was the top fighter, she was the authority on the supernatural, she was sitting in the queen’s seat where she had always belonged. Things were in the proper order, and about time.

Gratifying though it might be, however, it wasn’t really accomplishing anything at the moment. “I don’t get it,” she said for the fourth time.

Doc put his hands flat on the tabletop, closing his eyes for a few seconds before trusting himself to speak. “I don’t know how to explain it any better than I already have,” he said at last. “This is a basic epidemiological model, I’ve charted the various disease incidences and tried to find a meaningful correlation among those afflicted: work, food supply, place of residence, patterns of daily movement, anything that might give us an idea —”

“No, I understand that part,” she said. “I mean, I don’t understand it, but I can see what you’re trying to do. Only it’s not telling us anything, so why are we still looking at it?”

“Because we don’t have anything else,” Doc told her. “We have no idea where to begin, so our only option is to keep analyzing the data we have. Unless you have a better suggestion.”

“Me?” Buffy shrugged. “Not so big on the planning. Back in SunnyD, I generally just go out on patrol. Any big meanies in the works, they’ll jump out and try to kill me, and I’ll kill them instead, and there you are. No more problems.”

Andy shifted in his chair, leaned an elbow on the table. “Well, you did that last night and it didn’t really get us anywhere. Any other bright ideas?”

“That’s not fair,” Katie objected. “The things that we fought, I’ve got them narrowed down to maybe half a dozen possible species. It’s just, they’re sorta generic, no horns or third eyes or major identifying marks, and there aren’t as many online demon research sites as you might wish for.” She looked to the Slayer. “Are you sure there’s nobody we could call?”

“Sorry,” Buffy said. “My Watcher went back to England for vacation, and I don’t have his number. Nobody in Sunndyale even knows as much as I do, and as for L.A. …” She shook her head. “Nope. Definitely nobody I can call there.”

“And I guess it’s too much to ask if you know any way demons and diseases might be tied together.” This was Dustin; he had been very quiet following his humiliation, but some of his
brashness seemed to be seeping back. “You being the expert and everything.”

“Can’t help you there,” Buffy said with a bright smile. Then she looked suddenly thoughtful. “Except, you wouldn’t have any old Indian spooky-places around, would you? Because I know this guy who fell into one of those, once, and he came down with all kinds of symptoms even though he didn’t actually have anything, and it all went away once they killed the Indian ghosts.”

She laughed. “My boyfriend — well, not anymore, he’s a total loser and good riddance — he used to love making jokes about the ‘syphilitic butt-monkey’.”

“Symptoms without any actual disease markers?” Doc contrived to look both excited and annoyed. “That’s exactly what I’ve been talking about. Why didn’t you mention this before?”

She shrugged again. “I don’t spend a lot of time thinking about Xan— I mean, the butt-monkey. So, Indian ruins?”

“None I know of,” Doc said. “And with the number of disease cases here, you’d expect someone would have mentioned such a place if there were a connection. I’ll check tomorrow when city hall is open —”

“Better yet, ask Wayne McMillan,” Andy said. Doc frowned at him, and Andy went on. “C’mon, Doc, think about it. Wayne knows most of the people you listed on your incidence chart, and in his business he covers more territory than anybody else you could name. And he talks to people; if anybody would know something like that, or have heard about it, it’d be him.”

“So what is the guy?” Buffy asked. “Mailman? Forest ranger?”

“Real estate agent,” Doc answered. “It’s actually a good idea, I’m just a little surprised that Andy suggested him.” To Andy he added, “You seldom have anything good to say about the man. I wouldn’t have expected him to be your first choice.”

“He knows the area, like I said.” Andy smiled thinly. “And I’m not exactly sending business his way. In fact, if I’m lucky you’ll make him late for a showing, and he’ll have one less juicy commission to brag about.”

“That’s fine for tomorrow,” Dustin broke in, “but what are we going to do right now? You’ve got a Slayer who’ll only operate at night, only we can’t find anything for her to operate on.”

Buffy waved it away. “Don’t worry about me, I can always go on patrol, like I said. There’s demons I can be watching out for, and I can look to see if any other weird stuff pops up.”

“Plus the vampire out there somewhere,” Doc reminded her.

“Oh, sure, that. I don’t figure that’ll be a problem, though; you said the watchman had a lot of blood taken, so our vampire won’t really be getting hungry till tomorrow night.”

“Unless there’s more than one,” Dustin offered.


“We can’t wait till tomorrow to figure something out.” Katie’s expression was distressed, her voice urgent. “Judith’s been missing for two days now. We have to come up with something while it might still do some good.” She looked to Buffy. “You were able to tell a lot from the smells at the stable last night. Is there any way you could, you know, follow a scent trail —?”

“Please,” Buffy said. “Do I look like a droopy-faced tracking dog here? Plus you’re talking about two days ago. Even if it was a blood trail, I couldn’t do much after two days.”
“So that’s it,” Andy observed. “All the education and supernatural experience in this room, and we’re still stumped until tomorrow.”

“Unless you have any better ideas,” Doc said sharply, “the Slayer going on patrol sounds like our best course of action until we know more. She actually might run into something, and we don’t have many options to choose from right now.”

“Fine by me.” Buffy stood. “I’ll shake the bushes, see what pokes its head up. It couldn’t be too hard; I mean, whatever it was, your Judy managed to stumble across it, right? And you know a Slayer can do better than a secretary —”

“Wait,” Doc said. “You … you think Judith was abducted selectively? That this wasn’t just a matter of her being the easiest available target?”

She gave him a blank look. “I don’t know. Maybe. You didn’t mention anybody else being grabbed, it was all animal mutilations and Bombay herpes. If they changed the rules with her, it must have been for a reason. Right?”

“I …” Doc shook his head. “I never thought of it that way. That is to say, all I could think of was what her disappearance meant to us. But, if she was seized because she was investigating — which is plausible, considering you and Katie were attacked while following another lead — then we should try and reconstruct what she was checking, where she was looking.”

“You do that.” Buffy started for the door. “Me, I’m ready for some righteous violence.”

Katie bounced to her feet. “I’m coming with you.”

“No,” Doc said; and then, as the others looked to him: “We need you here, sweetheart. You know my office routine, and you had different conversations with Judith those last few days. You can help us piece together her activities right before she dropped out of sight.”

Katie looked from her father to Buffy, clearly torn. “Well …”

“The same is true of Andy,” Doc went on. “We’ll do a better job, more quickly, if the three of us work together.”

“How about me?” Dustin asked. “I don’t know anything about your secretary. I can go out with the Slayer while you guys are comparing notes.”

“Really?” Buffy considered it, then nodded. “Sure, bring your swords. But I hope you’ve kept up your aerobics, because I’ll be doing my sweep on foot, and don’t expect me to wait up for you.”

“I’ll manage,” Dustin said. “In fact, I think I can even suggest an improvement.”

* * * *

The improvement was a motorcycle, Dustin’s preferred mode of transport, and the Slayer approved the suggestion with a laugh. They cruised the darkened streets at a low speed, the dual mufflers keeping the noise down to an unobtrusive level, and periodically parked to cover selected areas in greater detail and stealth. Dustin was thoughtful and silent for the first half-hour, but as they left the motorcycle for the third time he said abruptly, “I was the one who told Katie about the DarkSun Index site on the Web.”

Buffy frowned at him. “Huh?”

“The place that posts all the stuff about goings-on in Sunnydale. I thought it was one of those
urban legends things, and we got a kick out of tracking the different stories and trying to match them to horror movies … What I’m saying is, I heard about you before any of the others, and I’m still jazzing over finding out that parts of it were actually based on fact.”


“Oh. Well, there was one about you killing the principal and feeding the body to wild pigs, but I never believed —”

“Oh, that was true.” She flashed him a smile. “Flutie was a total porkster himself, it seemed like a pretty good joke. Now, if I’d known who his replacement would be …”

“Oh, was he some kind of monster?”

Buffy shrugged. “I guess. I mean, he acted squirrelly, and you can’t be too careful when you live on a Hellmouth. What else?”

“Well, it said the swim team turned into fish people. I used to think that was a take on the Creature From the Black Lagoon, but …”

“Fish people? For real?”

Dustin looked uncertain. “That’s what the site said.”

“Fish people.” Buffy laughed. “So that’s what those little jokes of Cordelia’s were about.”

“Uh, right. And you were supposed to have saved your prom from werewolves —”

“Hell-hounds,” she corrected him. “There’s no such thing as werewolves, really.”

“Oh.” He blinked several times. “So you never fought a werewolf-hunter, either?”

“Huh? Right, right. He was actually just a bounty hunter, but he liked to brag that he’d shot a werewolf once. You can’t believe everything people say, because they’ll totally lie.”

“And … you were supposed to have had sex with two different vampires.”

“Only two?” She smiled brightly. “Yeah, I can see why they’d say that. The two vampires they would have been talking about were, like, major hot.”

Dustin was regarding her with caution and interest. “And they told the stories because you’re part of the same night-life? And because you’re probably the only human who could have sex with a vampire and survive it?”

“I’m not scared of them, if that’s what you mean.” She gave him a hard glance. “And, yeah, vampires are über-obsessed with the Slayer, and some of them just completely fantasize about sliding her the old chilled salami. But don’t worry, boytoy, I never put out for the undead. Even if it wasn’t, like, my supernatural destiny to kill them, they’re total creeps.”

“Cool. I mean, that’s good to know.” He looked around. “So, there doesn’t seem to be anything here, either. Move on to the next spot?”

“Might as well,” she said. Then, “How much longer are you gonna wait for the Midget to give it up?”

Dustin didn’t answer immediately; at last he said, “I truly don’t have any idea what you just asked me.”
“You know, your girlfriend,” she explained. “Katie. I can tell by how she looks at you that she’s still playing sweet sixteen. I just can’t figure out why a guy like you would bother with such a vanilla muffin.”

Annoyed, Dustin said, “I don’t expect you to understand what’s between me and Katie.”

“You’d be surprised how much I under—” She stopped, put out an arm to halt him. “Hold up.”

He didn’t ask questions, but waited silently. After a moment she said, “You hear that?”

“No,” he said. “What is it?”

“I don’t know. Sort of like … oinking, only different.” She started off, presumably in the direction of what she’d heard.

Dustin followed. She eschewed use of the motorcycle, cutting across properties and through backyards, pausing now and then to listen for cues too faint for Dustin’s hearing to register. It must have been distant as well as faint, because it was nearly ten minutes before she stopped and breathed into his ear, “Just on the other side of that house. I can hear maybe three of the oinkers moving around, but there’s something else, too. A couple of times, something big has put its foot down. Maybe more than one.”

Whispering, Dustin asked, “Should we call the others?”

The Slayer sneered at that. “For what? If there’s too many, we back off. If not, we fight, unless you’re too big a chicken. Wait here a minute.”

She lowered herself to all fours, and moved silently along the side of the house: not going on hands and knees, but flat to the ground like … like SpiderMan, only crawling on a horizontal surface. There was an ease and fluidity to it that sent an odd chill through Dustin; in a way that their brief fight hadn’t done, he suddenly understood that the Slayer truly was other-than-human.

She crept the last few inches to the corner of the house, moving just far enough to angle one eye around at ground-level; then she reversed, easing backward in a motion even more alien. When she was almost back to her starting point, she stood smoothly and motioned him to join her. At her side, he tilted his head to put his ear next to her mouth, and she spoke almost inaudibly. “It’s all good. Four of the oinkers, two uglies like the pair me and the Midget jumped last night. Gimme the big sword, it’s Slaytime.”

“Just like that?” Dustin murmured back. “Charge in and kill them? Is that how they do tactics in Sunnydale?”

“Don’t need tactics when you’re me,” she told him confidently. Then he felt her lips move against his ear in what had to be a smile. “’Course, I do most of my fighting on my own, seeing how nobody else can keep up with me. But if you want to get into it … I know, why don’t you go around to the other side of the house, and jump out where they can see you? Give ’em a big HAH! to get their attention — all breath, not a yell, ’cause we don’t want the people in the house running out and getting in the way — and when I hear you do that, I’ll run in and catch them from behind.”

He stood incredulous. “You want me to be a diversion? You take the katana, and then set it up so they come after ME?”

She drew back far enough that he could see the sunny, unconcerned smile. “Sure. Trolling with bait. Look at it this way, boytoy: if I’m too slow, and you get hurt a little, Katie’ll cry all over you
for a hero. Really rev up your chances. But if I tell her we had a shot at some action and you pussed out on me …?”

He drew himself up, passed over the katana. “You’d better be as good as you think you are.”

She hefted the sword, grinning satisfaction. “Same odds the Midget faced with me last night, and then I only had a shovel. You talk tough; time to deliver. Go be bait.”

How could a ghost-whisper carry so much amusement, scorn, and challenge? Dustin went around the house, stepping as softly as he could. He still had the wakizashi; with its 19-inch blade, it was a formidable weapon in its own right, he wouldn’t be helpless. Still, there was no way he’d be doing this if he could have withdrawn without it being known. He felt no particular loyalty to the Slayer — she was psychotic, a killer who enjoyed it — but he simply couldn’t have anybody looking at him, laughing at him for backing away from a fight his girlfriend had been willing to tackle. No way. Even the thought was unbearable.

He was at the corner of the house. No point in hesitation, waiting would have been greater torture than getting it over with. He took a two-hand grip on the hilt of the short sword, and leaped out into the open, landing with the breathy shout the Slayer had specified.

She delivered exactly as promised. The two menacing figures had barely begun to turn toward him when she was among them, slashifying with the katana.

“Razor-sharp” is an overused term. Most blades aren’t, because they’re constructed for more rugged use than that to which a razor is normally subjected. Dustin was proud of his swords, however, and Japanese blades (and some Arabian) truly were designed for cutting rather than chopping; some people paid less for a sword set than Dustin had paid for the traditional sharpening materials, and he had meticulously honed both katana and wakizashi until a silk scarf dropped on an upturned edge would be split by its own weight. (That was a classical test long before Kevin Costner showed it off in the Bodyguard.)

Couple that ferocious keenness with a Slayer’s speed, power, and aggression, and the demons never had a chance. None. It was over in seconds, though she had used four cuts where two would have sufficed. The smaller “oinkers” — goat-sized, though they ran on muscled hind legs, their forepaws clutched to their chests like kangaroos — stampeded past Dustin, squealing alarm; he swiped at one, the short sword slicing through its haunch, then they were gone, leaving the Slayer and the human and the two dead demons.

Buffy was frowning at the katana. Dustin found his breath (there’d been no time for him to tire, but his heart was racing) and asked, “What’s the matter?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I mean, it worked great, but … it just didn’t feel right. It was too easy, you know what I mean? Not, not satisfying. Killing is supposed to have some oomph! to it.” She glanced at the sword again, sighed. “I’ve got to get an axe. Those always feel good.”

Dustin shook his head. “You’re talking like combat is some kind of … personal, artistic expression.”

“I don’t know art,” Buffy said, “but I know what I like, and that didn’t manage to even start being satisfying.” She gave him a look replete with arch meaning. “Maybe you could help me with that. Think you’re up to it?”

Though he had some idea already, Dustin asked cautiously, “What do you mean?”

“Well, when a Slayer gets her blood up, there’s gotta be a payoff, right? That bit right now wasn’t
anywhere near enough. So, either I find something else to kill … or I scratch the itch some other way.” She smiled at him. “That’s probably why your Website had me getting it on with vampires: ’cause a Slayer has needs, and stories get around, and, yeah, a lot of the guys I did it with wound up as vampires, and then they’d tell stories … Anyway, right now it’s you and me, itch and scratch, yes or no.”

“You, uh … you wouldn’t kill me if I said no, would you?”

She pouted. “No, I guess not. I’d have to find somebody else, though, and fast. Slayer horny is like no other horny on earth. Until I work it off, I can’t really think of anything else, so if you’re gonna turn me down, do it quick.”

Dustin opened his mouth, but after several seconds he still hadn’t said anything. Buffy’s pout gave way to a thoroughly alarming grin. At last he drew a forceful breath and said, “We’d have to … I mean, we can’t, um, do anything right here, and, and I don’t have any, any supplies …”

“If ‘supplies’ means condoms, don’t worry,” she assured him. “I was on the pill by the time I was twelve, and Slayers don’t get diseases, which is good ’cause otherwise I’d be Patient Zero for an STD epidemic clear up and down the western seaboard. And the city park’s nearby, unless you think you can wait till we get back to the motel.”

Not the motel, no, Andy might see him arriving or leaving. “The park is good enough,” he told her.

“Then let’s go.” They started off together, and she added, “You held up your end, so I’ll try to take it easy on you … but you’d better know how to pace yourself, boytoy, this Slayer’s got a gi-normous appetite, and if you fall out too soon, well, somebody could get hurt.”

*               *               *

She was as good as her word, both to the extent of her desires and to her assurance that she wouldn’t overuse him. It had been a memorable experience, striving and gasping on the park grass in the shadows of the central gazebo, and though her grip tightened perilously a few times, it was never quite enough to cause injury. Dustin’s pride (as well as the Slayer’s warning) had moved him to focus conscientiously on seeing to her pleasure, and he fortunately had enough experience and self-control to carry it through.

If he had expected similar artistry from her, however, he would have been grossly disappointed. She had energy, passion, enthusiasm, supernatural flexibility, and a near-total absence of inhibition … but no imagination, no particular concern for her partner, and — worst of all — no appreciation for the fact that occasionally a man will want the woman to just shut the hell up at some point in the proceedings.

So, he had done the deed with a Slayer, and given her no cause for complaint. All the same, he knew he wouldn’t be looking to repeat the experience. When it came right down to it, she just wasn’t that good.

From her position behind him on the seat of the motorcycle, she gave his arm a squeeze, and he could hear the self-satisfied smirk in her voice. “You holding up okay, boytoy? I didn’t ride you too hard, did I?”

“I’ll live,” he told her tersely. There was no point in antagonizing her, but he couldn’t make himself want to pretend, either. Supernatural or not, she was still a woman, and you couldn’t really take them seriously. While this restored the balance that had been shaken when she effortlessly beat him silly in front of witnesses, it was nonetheless a triumph he would never be able to share
... and one that didn’t seem to mean anything to her, for that matter. “I’ll admit, it’s a good thing I stayed in shape, but I’d say I was able to keep up with you.”

“Yeah, I was feeling pretty mellow.” Again, her tone conveyed how pleased she was with herself. “For me, anything without blood and broken bones is an easy session. Where are you going?”

Dustin had swung the motorcycle away from the central section of town selected for patrol. “Back to Katie’s,” he told her. “We’ve been out a couple of hours, and we have something to report.” Plus, now that he’d recovered his self-esteem by adding her as a conquest, her company held no real enjoyment for him. “We should let them know about those things we killed.”

“‘We’?” she repeated, and laughed. “Yeah, sure, let’s tell them all about it.”

They had barely pulled into the driveway when Doc was out the door and running toward them. “Where have you been?” he shouted. “Where have you been? I didn’t know where to look, I didn’t know who to call, for God’s sake where were you?”

The Slayer slid off the back of the motorcycle, and spoke with some of the same puzzlement Dustin felt, though she inevitably flavored it with annoyance. “Patrolling, like I said I’d do. Don’t get snarky with me, Watcher-not, you said it was a good idea. Why do you have your shorts bunches up about it now?”

Dustin felt a tremor of unease at Doc’s behavior and appearance. He had never seen the man lose control before, but now Doc barely seemed able to hold himself in check; his face worked, his hands opening and closing convulsively, eyes almost bulging in his agitation. Andy, too, had come out, moving more slowly, but his expression also was grim.

“It’s Katie,” Doc said, in a voice that blended horror, anguish, and murderous fury. “She’s gone. Whatever this is, whoever is doing this, they took her right out of her own home.”
“This is going too fast,” Dustin protested. “We need to slow down a minute, think this through —”

“No more waiting,” Doc said flatly. He belted on the sheathed machete, and began to work at pulling back the cocking lever on the crossbow. “I tried to play it cautious, and now my daughter is gone. It’s time for action, time for us to move.”

“Sure, but move where?” Dustin shook his head. “We don’t know any more than we did, don’t have any idea where to start.”

“We start by getting off our asses.” Andy fed shells into the magazine of a pump shotgun, then dropped fistfuls of spare shells into his jacket pockets. “And maybe we’d have a location if you two had thought to capture one of those demons for interrogation, instead of just hacking them up to show how heroic you are.”

Buffy made a derisive sound. “Oh, you are just so full of it. Capture one? Sure, if we had forty feet of chain and an engine block to chain him to. Besides, that type, not really known for conversational skills. Even the ones that can talk at all don’t respond too well to torture, pain generally gets them really PO’d.”

“We’ll go back to where you fought them,” Doc announced. “You said the smaller demons ran away. Maybe they left tracks, or maybe we can fan out and spot them, follow them back to wherever they’ve been hiding. It’s all we have to go on, and we have to do something now.”

“No,” Andy said. “We’ll go to see Wayne McMillan.” Doc stopped, fixed him with a glare, and Andy forged on. “Think about it, Doc. Track demons through the middle of town, at night? None of us are hunters. What Buffy said about cursed ruins, that’s the closest thing we have to a solid lead, and Wayne’s the most likely guy to have heard of something like that. He’s the man we need to see.”

“How’d the Midget get grabbed, anyhow?” Buffy wanted to know.

“I don’t know.” Doc put down the crossbow, his hands shaking. “I didn’t hear anything, I had no idea … Andy went back to the motel to pick up Judith’s day planner and some other papers, and Katie and I went to my office for the schedules and appointments Judith had posted for me, then we came back here … I had it spread out on the dining table, trying to sort it into some order while we waited for Andy to get back, and I started to ask Katie something but she wasn’t there, and that’s when I went looking for her, and found the back door open, and … and one of her shoes …” He slammed his closed fists down onto the tabletop, and again, and a third time, then looked at them with tears streaming down his face. “They took my daughter, they stole my little girl, and I didn’t even know!”

“Back door, huh?” Buffy stood up. “Show me where that is.”

Doc led the way, hope warring on his face with the fear of daring to hope. At the door itself he didn’t say anything, but only made a vague gesture and waited for the Slayer’s reaction. Buffy studied the scene, then ostentatiously sniffed the air. “Hmm,” she said. “Just a whiff there, but yes, it’s from one of the oinkers. You know, the things that killed the horse.”

Doc sagged, but he wouldn’t turn away. “Do you think they —?”
“Don’t know.” She shook her head. “No blood spilled. And before you ask, no, I can’t trail them, the scent’s way too faint.” She tilted an uncharitable smile toward Andy. “It’s a wonder I can pick it up at all, over that cheap after-shave of yours. What, do you marinate in the stuff?”

“That’s it, then,” Andy said. “We go to Wayne.”

Buffy regarded him with one eyebrow up. “So you’re the leader now? Funny, I don’t remember that happening.”

“Doc wants to move now,” Andy replied. “And I agree, and Wayne’s our best avenue, unless you can suggest something.”

“Not me, no,” Buffy said. “I just want to be sure you don’t think you’re giving me orders, because that never goes well.”

“I’ll call Wayne,” Doc said, and started for the phone.

“Better if we just showed up,” Andy observed. “Brace him face-to-face. Over the phone … well, you never want to give Wayne too much wiggle-room.”

“I’ll call,” Doc repeated, and punched in the numbers.

There was no answer at the man’s house; after a quick check of the telephone directory, Doc tried the listed office number and cell phone, got a recorded message at both. “That doesn’t make sense,” Doc said, hanging up. “What kind of realtor turns off his cell phone? Especially one as sale-hungry as Wayne?”

“He’s been fixing up new offices in that auction barn he bought,” Andy mused. “You know, the big expansion he’s always going on about. If he’s working there tonight, well, sometimes the power lines mess with cell reception.”

“All right, we’ll go there.” Doc looked to the Slayer. “I’m not ordering you, we all know I couldn’t enforce any such order. But the rest of us are going. I hope you’ll come with us.”

Buffy shrugged. “Sure, why not? It’s your deal; if the guy can’t tell you anything, I’m still getting paid.”

The weapons were loaded into Doc’s pickup truck, a Chevy S-10, and they started off, the Slayer choosing again to ride behind Dustin on his motorcycle. “So what’s Andy’s major grudge against this Duane character?” she asked as they followed the truck.

“Wayne?” Dustin thought about it. “I don’t really know. Katie talked about it a lot, she’s got this mother-fixation with Andy’s wife, and she thought Wayne had done them dirty on some deal … umm, they were going to buy some property next to the motel, beef up the operation, I don’t remember the details. Wayne was handling the sale, but then he chased up a better offer and the property went to somebody else. Andy’s been down on the guy ever since, maybe because Wayne’s business is booming while Andy’s still trying to make ends meet.”

“Huh,” Buffy said, but didn’t offer any further commentary.

The location where they stopped at last was just at the edge of the city limits, well distant from any houses and other structures; the auction barn was dark and closed, but as Justin pulled the motorcycle to a halt, Doc was standing outside his truck, saying to Andy, “All right, his car is here. Let me talk to him, I know you’re not on good terms but I think he’ll listen to me —”

Buffy broke in. “Load up on weapons. Now.”
Andy moved instantly to comply, grabbing the shotgun and a second belted machete, but Doc just stared at her. “I don’t want to alarm him,” he said. “If I go in armed for war, he might think I’ve lost my mind —”

“Excuse me,” she said. “Slayer talking here? Look, when I sliced up the big brawny demons tonight, the oinkers went scampering off, right? And Dustin cut one of them as it ran past him. Well, there’s an oinker blood-trail leading straight to that building — not blood, actually, but close enough — and if they all took off for home when they got scared, well, this is home. So weapons, already.”

“I knew it,” Andy said. “I knew Wayne’s luck had gotten too good all of a sudden! That’s it, Doc, that’s what’s been happening: Wayne has been using these demons to make people sick with mysterious diseases, and then piling up commissions when they have to sell their property to cover medical bills!” He shoved a camp hatchet into his belt, and racked the slide of the shotgun. “He’s the one behind all of this!”

“Whoa,” Dustin said. “An evil real estate agent? Next we’ll have used car salesmen trying to get in on the action.”

“That’s just in the big cities,” Buffy said. “And it’s luxury cars, evil is one thing but nobody wants to be tacky. Okay, spread out, people, we’ll find a rear entrance —”

Doc got back into his truck, started the engine, and gunned the vehicle directly at the main doors.

“— or, we could do that,” the Slayer finished, just before the truck hit.

They were big doors, and heavy, and the S-10 was a relatively light vehicle; still, mass and acceleration were in Doc’s favor, and by luck or design he had aimed directly at the juncture where the two doors met. The impact buckled one door and slammed the other completely out of the sliding track that had supported it, and the truck came to rest in the gap between them, hissing steam billowing from the ruptured radiator. Cushioned by the driver’s-side air bag, Doc was out and pushing into the barn’s interior by the time the others reached the new opening.

Buffy stopped beside the truck, began foraging inside. “Fine, don’t bother to wait,” she said. “We’ll see how you do without me.” She held up a double-bladed axe, a lumberjack’s tool rather than a proper battle-axe, and demanded of Andy, “Where did you get this junk?”


“Wonderful.” She hefted the axe appraisingly, glanced toward the barn’s interior as the boom of a shotgun echoed from inside. “Well, it’ll have to do. Come on, guys, let’s go be cavalry.”

Though it was called a barn because of its former function, the building was a metal structure that would have served perfectly in an industrial park. Frameworks on the interior allowed it to be subdivided into partitioned sections, but at present it was all open area. Doc was partway up a set of stairs at one side; two of the soldier demons lay twitching behind him, and he cut down another with a shotgun blast as Buffy and the two men fanned out inside the entrance created by the pickup. More of the larger demons were beginning to emerge from darkened offices and storage spaces, and Buffy commanded briskly, “Back him up. I’m going to look for the big boss and the missing womenfolk.”

“What —?” Andy began, but she was already gone, a long leap carrying her to the second level of the walkway that ran around the inner wall of the building. She stepped back inside one of the doorways, found an angle with a good view, and settled back to watch.
Neither Andy nor Dustin lacked for courage. After his initial hesitation, Andy advanced, firing the second shotgun, picking his targets and inserting fresh shells into the tubular magazine as opportunity allowed, never letting the weapon go empty. Dustin, carrying the crossbow Doc had left in the truck, moved more slowly, aimed more carefully, and twice had to fight with the katana when one of the soldier demons charged him before he could reload.

They were working it smart, watching their positions, picking off the enemies that came their way and conserving their ammunition. Doc, in contrast, was a screaming maniac. He emptied the shotgun into the demons in front of him as he forced his way up the stairs; when it ran dry, he cast it away, snatched out the machete, and began cutting a path through the opposition. Older and less muscular than either of the other men, he hurled himself against his demon adversaries like a crazed Viking.

Watching, the Slayer hmph!ed in vexation. “Heroes,” she muttered. “Always the same thing with freaking heroes.” The man was about to get himself thoroughly killed, and no way could she count on Andy to cover her fee if Doc kicked it. She sighed, took a good grip on the axe, and charged from her place of concealment.

The situation till now had been tenuous, Doc’s berserker onslaught serving both as the spearhead and the weak point of their group; if he fell, the attack would collapse. With Buffy’s entry into the fray, the balance swung sharply; now the demons on the walkway were caught between two forces, the ones on the main floor were all down, and Dustin and Andy moved up to join Doc. This suited the Slayer perfectly, no allies nearby to get shirty (she didn’t actually know what the word meant, but it felt right) if she didn’t watch exactly where she was swinging, so she laid about with vast cheer, and found to her delight that the axe’s longer handle more than made up for the narrower blades. She hewed in all directions, exulting in the glory of slaughter, laughing and hacking gaily.

A shout caught her attention: Andy, gesturing urgently, and she looked at where he was pointing and at the other side of the building a man in a beige jacket was hurrying along the second-level walkway. As he stumbled momentarily, Buffy saw that he wasn’t alone; he was trying to shove a dark-haired woman ahead of him, she resisting as vigorously as she could with her hands bound behind her. Doc shouted, “Judith!” and broke away from the fight on the walkway to run in the opposite direction, following the periphery of the walls in a route that would carry him to the other side of the upper square. That left Andy and Dustin facing the remaining demons, but those had been markedly thinned by the combined assault, so the Slayer abandoned her attack and mimicked Doc’s tactics, racing back along the walkway. At her speed, and with Judith hindering her captor’s flight, she’d overtake him in seconds … and, even if she didn’t reach him first, he’d be caught between her and Doc.

Best-laid plans, right. The fleeing man saw doom closing on him from two directions, dithered in agonized indecision … and out on the floor, Katie wandered into view, shaking her head dazedly, looked around, looked up, and blurted, “Dad?”

Three things happened then, very suddenly.

One: a pair of the demons who had been fighting Dustin and Andy on the walkway turned away from the struggle, hurdled the railing to land on the stairs, and started for Katie with snarls of bloodthirsty eagerness.

Two: the running man pushed Judith away from him, hard; she bellied over the railing, hooked a foot around one of the metal supports to keep herself from falling, and then cried out as her foot slipped and her body weight started to pull her over.
Three: Doc turned, jammed the gore-spattered machete through his belt, vaulted the railing, caught himself on the mesh flooring of the walkway, hung for a moment, and then dropped to the concrete below. His legs gave out beneath him, but he was back on his feet in an instant, and he charged to his daughter’s aid with a wordless roar of fury and desperation.

“Is this for real?” the Slayer asked of no one in particular. She reached out almost absently to catch Judith’s ankle as the other woman lost her last frantic purchase and began to fall; held her, boosted her back up over the rail, and lowered her to the walkway. “Wait there, okay? They’d be all kinds of torqued at me if I let you go splat on the pavement. Now, if you don’t mind —” And she was off again.

The fleeing man (evil realtor, had to be) had gained vital seconds from her pause to help Judith. It wasn’t nearly enough.

Andy found them in the corner stairwell, and advanced with shotgun leveled. “There you are! Time to close escrow, you double-dealing son of a …” He stopped, lowered the shotgun. “What the hell?”

Buffy looked over her shoulder at him, rubbing her mouth thoughtfully with the back of her hand. “Sorry to disappoint you, Sexy-Boy. Looks like Duane, here, ran out of luck.”

Andy stared at the vacant-eyed corpse sprawled in the stairwell. “What did you do to him?”

“Me?” Buffy pointed to the bloody wound at the man’s throat. “Those are bite marks. I’d say the vampire Doc’s been talking about caught up with Duane before you could.”

“I guess.” Andy’s expression, while grim, was recognizably a smile. “Tough for Duane — Wayne, I mean — but you won’t catch me crying about it.”

“Nope,” Buffy agreed. “I can tell you’re not really a sentimental kind of guy.”

Andy frowned slightly at her tone. “Okay, I know you mean something by that, but I don’t see —”

“Oh, for pete’s sake!” She put a hand on one hip, raked him with an exasperated look. “That little thing you keep forgetting, you just forgot it again. You know? The wife?”

Andy’s face went blank. “Oh, crap,” he said, and turned to dash back up the stairs.

“Let’s hear it for wedded bliss,” the Slayer said to the dead man, then moved without hurry to follow the suddenly concerned husband.

* * *

Hurry or not, she could track the proceedings well before she reached them, parahuman hearing being every bit as useful for eavesdropping as for the hunt. In the minute or so she’d been in the stairwell, the running fight apparently had been resolved, because all that remained was breathless conversation.

Dustin: “I’m sorry, babe, I got to you as quick as I could, it’s just, everybody else took off after Wayne, and there were still those three up on the walk — damn, I’m glad I had my swords with me —”

Katie: “It’s okay, I was okay, my dad was right there before I even knew to be scared … Did you see him, were you watching, he killed both of them with a machete —!”
Doc: “I left you, oh God, I’m sorry, I left you —!”

Judith: “Don’t —”

Doc: “I saw, I saw you about to go over, but I didn’t have a choice, I had to help her —!”

Judith: “I know. I know. Hush, it’s okay.”

Katie: “— it was horrific, he was bellowing and chopping all over the place, those things were twice his size and he just totally annihilated them —!”

Dustin: “Yeah, they were pretty tough, I gutted one right as he got his hands on me … well, his claws, you can see the rip in my shirt —”

Andy: “Hey, everybody okay out here?”

Doc: “— it was like I was being torn in two, I saw you and I saw her and I just … I just …”

Judith: “You went to your daughter. I saw. You went right over, you never hesitated.”

Doc: “… it felt like I stood there forever, like I was frozen …”

Judith: “You didn’t. You weren’t. I saw it. They went after her, and you went after them, faster than I can even say it. It was … I still can’t believe it.”

Doc: “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I left you there, I’m sorry —!”

Judith: “No. NO. Don’t apologize, Douglas. Never apologize for that. You did what you had to, what you were supposed to do.” (more softly) “I wouldn’t have expected anything less of you.”

Andy (loud and fake-cheery): “There you are, baby! It’s okay, I’m here. You can always count on me to be here. Some brawl, huh?”

“Throw him over the rail,” the Slayer said. They were too far away to hear her (and much too focused on each other), but she spoke as if standing next to them. “Just grab his ankles and heave, he’ll never see it coming. You want to, both of you, you know you do.”

If so, neither of them acted on the desire. She hadn’t expected they would, it was the whole excruciating hero mentality.

Knuckleheads.
Chapter 6

Job over, and time to go, only she couldn’t. While nothing physically barred her departure, there was still the matter of the money she was owed, and ATMs wouldn’t fork out cash in the amounts she had coming. So, they had to wait for the banks to open, which meant waiting till sunrise, which meant she was stuck in her motel room all day.

Well, she had cable TV, and there was her new unicorn collection to enjoy, and — unaccustomed exercise though it was — she had a few things to think about. This whole business had gotten a lot more complicated than she had expected.

Plus, she had visitors.

For some reason, they chose to come to her one at a time. Maybe it was just a matter of grabbing whatever time was available to them, or maybe each of them craved a private audience with Her Slayerness. Whatever, it gave her something to liven up the interminable day.

Judith was the first (which made some sense, her being co-owner of the motel). They hadn’t really spoken the night before; everyone else had been preoccupied with reunion and aftermath, and the Slayer — whose evening had included decent sex, first-rate violence, and a satisfying meal — had been ready to return to her accommodations and sleep for awhile. Late in the morning, however, there was a knock at the door; Buffy went back into the bathroom, and called loudly, “Come on in and close it quick!”, and the visitor complied, and there they were.

Andy’s wife, heretofore unintroduced, was a delicate-featured woman with high cheekbones and slender, long-fingered hands. Doc had said she was, what, four years older than Andy? That would make her early- to mid-thirties, and she looked it, but the automatic maturity had probably been there when she was a teenager. “We never really met last night,” she told the Slayer. “I’m Judith Sexton. I owe you a great deal, and I haven’t had the chance to thank you properly.”

“And now you do.” Buffy smiled at her. “So thank away.”

“As I said, I owe you a lot.” Judith paused. “We were all … very lucky, that Andy saw you when he did, and realized what you were.”

“Uh-huh. I’d say Andy’s pretty good at grabbing for opportunities. As for what I am, well, he doesn’t know as much as he thinks he does.”

“Probably not.” Judith took a seat in one of the chairs. “I’m still coming to terms with what happened. I went to see Wayne to ask him about the Bannisters — they were the first to come down sick, they used to own the property next to this place, Wayne brokered the sale — and he must have thought I suspected him, because he called those … those creatures out …” She stopped, visibly composed herself. “Katie tells me this kind of thing is common in your Sunnydale. Is Cromwell about to turn into a place like that? Or was this an, an outbreak, that we managed to stamp out in time?”

Buffy shrugged. “Beats me, I just kill stuff. But Sunnydale’s built on top of a Hellmouth. I think I’d have heard if there was another one of those in California; that kind of thing, word gets around. Once I’m gone, you’re probably good.”

Judith nodded, considered for a moment. “Andy’s theory is that the larger demons were like guards and shepherds for the smaller ones, and the smaller ones were causing the disease symptoms … marking territory with their urine, like dogs do, and then somehow droplets got into
the air … Now that the larger ones have all been killed, assuming you got them all, will the smaller ones scatter, relocate?”

Buffy frowned. “Do I look like I spend all my time studying demon livestock? Maybe they will, maybe not, maybe you’ll have to organize some hunting parties. Not my problem, I’m more the direct combat type.”

“All right.” Judith stood. “Thank you, again.”

“Hey, seeing you back with Andy is all the thanks I need.” Smile. “That, and my money.”

“I don’t think you need to worry on that account,” Judith said, turning to leave. “Douglas keeps his promises.”

“Nice to find a man you can count on,” Buffy said sweetly, retreating to the bathroom again as the other woman approached the door. Judith didn’t respond, and a moment later she was gone.

*               *               *

Katie was the next caller, and by then the sun was high enough that Buffy could avoid it by staying in the corner during the few seconds the door was open. “Hey, Midget,” Buffy greeted her. “Still looking to be all you can be?”

“I feel horrible,” Katie said. “Whatever they used on me … If a hangover is anything like this, I’m never touching alcohol, it’s strictly Gatorade for this girl.”

“Huh,” Buffy said. “So they got you with drugs, not just a power snatch?”

“I don’t know,” Katie admitted. “I don’t remember anything. I … I think I smelled something, but … Then the next thing I knew I was lying on the concrete in one of the vacant offices in the auction barn, puking so hard I thought my eyes would pop out. When I got done with that, I saw I was tied up, except my hands were in front of me and the knots weren’t that tight, it only took me a couple of minutes to get loose …” She gave the Slayer a doubtful look. “I can’t get a straight answer, Andy says you told them that was the place, and Dustin says it was just luck. Did you … was it you that found us?”

“I tagged the place once we were close,” Buffy said. “So Andy gave me the credit, huh? Nice of him.”

“He really came through,” Katie admitted. “All of them did.” She cut a glance at Buffy from the corners of her eyes. “Did you, um, did you see my dad —?”

“Not about to forget that,” Buffy confirmed. “Your pop’s a wild man. He’s, like, Conan on PCP.”

Katie nodded, but she still seemed disturbed. “I knew he was a great guy,” she said. “I knew he … he’s always told me you have to do the right thing, no matter what, and I knew he meant it, and I knew he’d fight if it was something he believed in. But … the way he was, last night …”

“Look, Midget, I know guys,” Buffy said. “Guys are basically two types, jerks and idiots. Your dad is an idiot.”

“He saved me!” Katie protested, scandalized.

“Yeah, charging in like an idiot.” Buffy shook her head. “Look, you’re missing the point. Doc is an idiot, and he raised you by idiot rules, and you’re kind of a head-case yourself so it seems to suit you —”
“I don’t understand what you’re trying to say,” Katie complained.

“Then let me finish, already.” Buffy gave her a glare, then continued. “I’m saying you need to find yourself somebody who’s as big an idiot as your dad is.”

The message sank in, and Katie’s face went stubborn. “Dustin fought. You were there, you saw it.”

“Sure, he was cool, him and Andy both.” The Slayer grinned at the memory. “They were better than cool, they were great. If I had minions like that … They were steady, they were solid, they made sure to stay alive so they could keep fighting. Your dad, though, he didn’t care a rat’s rear about staying alive, all he cared about was you. Getting to you, protecting you, saving you. Total idiot.”

Katie shook her head. “You’re, you’re mixing everything up …”

“Your dad is an idiot,” Buffy went on relentlessly. “Your boyfriend is a jerk. Dump him and find an idiot boyfriend, and raise idiot babies, and live a happy idiot life. That’s pretty much what you’re made for.”

Katie stood up, started for the door. “I can’t be hearing this.”

“Embrace the inner idiot,” Buffy called after her as she fled. “Celebrate your idiotness! Be at peace with the idiot-you!”

The door slammed. The Slayer settled back into her chair. “Hmph,” she said to herself. “Why is it that people who need advice the worst are never any good at taking it?”

* * *

Less than half an hour later, Dustin was at the door. “Katie came to see you,” he announced upon being granted entry. “I tried to talk her out of it.”

“Do tell.” Buffy regarded him with the saccharine smile that conveyed neither warmth nor courtesy. “If you were so worried, I’m surprised you waited this long to check on her.”

“I drove her here,” Dustin said. “When I saw she was determined, I brought her here myself, and then I took her home afterward. She was really upset, but she wouldn’t tell me why. What did you say to her?”

Buffy laughed. “You mean, did I spill any of the dirty details about you and me rolling around on the grass? No, I kept that to myself. I just told her she should dump you.”

“What? Why?”

“Because you’re a jerk.” She lounged back in the chair, still smiling but with eyes like arctic ice. “You’d dump her yourself, as soon as you got what you wanted, so I thought we might as well skip straight to the end part.”

“You had no right,” Dustin told her hotly. “What’s between me and Katie is none of your business —”

“See, business is exactly what it is,” she broke in. “I’m being paid to look after these people. I can’t really make myself care, but it’s like a game, the fun is seeing if you can win even if the rules are stupid. For this game, the rules say the hero gets the girl. Hero, you’re not, so you don’t get her.”
He stared at her, groping for words. “That, that has to be the craziest —”

“Hey, I’m not the one who wrote the rules.” She stood, that infuriating smile still in place, and he automatically fell back a step. “And you shouldn’t complain, this game lets you off a whole lot easier than some others I know.”

“Have it your way.” Dustin turned toward the door. “But no matter what you say, I know what Katie will decide.”

“So do I.” In the time it had taken him to blink, she was standing in his path. “You’re right, she won’t do what I tell her, she’s not that type. She’s like this innocent little fuzzy kitten that keeps running into glass doors because it never can remember they’re there. Always worth a laugh, but at the same time you don’t want anybody else messing with it. So I’m telling you.”

She tapped his chest with her finger, a tilt of one eyebrow acknowledging her memory of the bruises she had left there the previous night. “The Midget is off limits to you. You want to hang around her, your choice, but I’m going to have this witch friend of mine slap a squealer spell on the both of you. If you ever get into her pants, I’ll know, and I’ll come back here and break your arms and legs. Then, when they’re almost healed, I’ll break them again. And I’ll keep doing it till they just won’t heal at all, or else I get bored and kill you.”

Dustin’s throat was so dry suddenly that he could barely get the words out. “You’re not serious.”

The Slayer pouted. “You don’t think so? And I was working really hard at being threatening. Maybe I should tear off a couple of your fingers to convince you I mean business —”

“No,” he said. “No, you don’t have to do that. I believe you.” Blessedly, she let him pass, but to his surprise he found himself pausing at the door. “What if I really care for Katie?” he asked her. “What if we might stay together, make it permanent?”

She snorted at that. “What, like Andy and Judy? I told you, I kind of like the Midget, even if she is as dumb as a bag of toenail clippings.” The smile vanished. “You’re one type. She’s a different type. Stick to your own type. Now shoo.”

When he was gone, she sat down again. “Whew,” she said. “Brain work is tiring.”

* * *

It was late in the afternoon when Doc arrived. “You better be bearing gifts,” she warned as he entered. “I know you have more sense than to try and stiff me, but I’ve already been waiting long enough.”

“I brought your money,” Doc said, and held out an envelope. “I’m sorry it took so long, things have been … Well, here.”

She took the envelope, opened it, and riffled through the bills inside. Then she stopped, her eyebrows rising, and did it again, slowly. When she was done, she stood thoughtfully for several seconds, then looked to Doc. “Huh,” she said.

“It’s twice what you asked for,” he told her. “You earned it, more than earned it. I’ll never be able to truly repay you.”

“So if I’d asked for twice as much, I’d have got four times as much.” She sighed. “Okay, next time I’ll know. So if you weren’t stalling, why’d everything take so long?”
“There was a lot of mess to deal with,” Doc said. “We had the death of a local citizen, two kidnappings, a building full of dead demons … maybe you can kill and walk away from the corpses, but it’s more complicated for those of us who aren’t supernatural. There was no way to hide it, not with the damage to my truck and the auction barn littered with shotgun shells that had our fingerprints —”

Buffy smirked at him. “See? Back entrance, slice- and-dice instead of gunplay; you should have listened to your Slayer.”

“Maybe,” Doc said. “We came out of it okay, so I won’t try to second-guess myself.”

“Really? Came out of it how?”

“I called the chief of police,” Doc explained. “Said I had something to show him. Gene and I get together for poker twice a month, so I knew he’d hear me out. Once he saw the demon bodies, he was … predisposed to believe. He knew Judith had been missing, and it was obvious Wayne hadn’t been killed by anything human; and, as I said, the dead demons made a pretty solid selling point.”

“I can see they would,” Buffy agreed. “So?”

“So we hauled the carcasses away for disposal, and cleaned up as best we could at the barn, and it’s now officially recorded that I let Wayne borrow my truck, and he died on impact when he lost control and slammed into his own building. I signed the death certificate myself; remember, I’m the coroner here. By this time tomorrow, Wayne’s body will be cremated, he has no family here to object. Everything tied up nice and neat.”


“Close enough,” Doc said. “More than I could let myself hope for, once Katie had been … I’ll always be in your debt. Always.”

“And I may come back someday to collect,” the Slayer said. “But probably not, this place doesn’t really have much to offer.” She gave him a look and a quirk of her mouth. “Bet you’re glad to have your secretary back.”

“I’m glad she’s safe,” Doc corrected mildly. “She won’t be with me much longer, though. We’ve … agreed that she needs to find other work.”

Buffy’s brow furrowed. “I don’t get it,” she said. “I heard you talking with her after the big rescue. She knows. She knows what you are, and she knows what she’s married to. Why doesn’t she just bounce the two-timing creep? Then the two of you could both —”

“It’s not about him,” Doc explained. “It’s about her, the promises she made. It’s the kind of person she is, and I wouldn’t want her to be anything else.”

Buffy shook her head slowly, and her lips formed the word, idiot. Then, after a few seconds of reflection, she asked, “Do you want to have sex?”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible,” Doc said. “I told you already, she’ll never betray her vows, and even if —”

“No, dummy,” Buffy interrupted. “I meant with me. Sex with me.”

Doc stopped with his mouth open. Eventually he closed it. “Have you lost your mind?” he asked quietly.
"What?" she said. "You’re a good guy, you’ve been a total White Hat since the beginning, and it’s getting you nothing but hosed. You think you’re, like, Brad Pitt with glasses or something? I’m trying to be nice here!"

"Ah," Doc said. "Well, I, um, I appreciate the kindness of your offer, but I’m afraid I can’t accept."

The Slayer stared at him in bewilderment. "You’re turning me down," she said. "I know you’re not gay, you have a daughter and you’re hot for Judy and that doesn’t go with gay, and you’ve got no woman at all and you’re turning down no-strings sex with a really hot babe — because I am beyond hot, you just have no idea — and are you crazy?"

"That must be it," Doc said gravely. "It’s really the only sensible explanation."

Buffy slumped in her chair. "This is one of those things I just can’t understand, isn’t it?"

"I’m afraid it is," Doc replied. "I’m sorry."

"I want to understand," she told him. "I really do."

"And I really wish I could help you. I simply don’t know how."

They sat silently for several minutes. Then she made a vague motion with her hand, and he stood and left, still without speaking, and she was alone in the room.

*               *               *

Andy was the last, knocking at the door of the room hours after Doc’s departure. "Sunset," he declared cheerfully when she answered. "You wanted me to let you know, and here I am. You all packed?"

"What I’ve got didn’t take long." She surveyed him with a bland gaze. "Sounds like you’re in a hurry to see me gone."

Andy gave her a winning smile. "Hey, you’re big league. We were lucky to run across you when we needed help, but I never expected you’d want to hang around once the job was finished."

"Uh-huh." She glanced at the small suitcase that held her new clothes and reconstituted unicorn collection, but made no move to pick it up. "Has anybody ever told you you’re really smart?"

He grinned at that. "It might have been mentioned a time or two."

"Nobody ever said it to me," she stated matter-of-factly. "Not even guys who were trying to cozy me into bed. There’s the whole dumb-blond stereotype, and if you’re a cheerleader, too, well, you can just forget it. And, yeah, there’s a lot of stuff I don’t get … but, even if I don’t understand everything, I do understand some things. Oh, yeah, some things I’m totally clear on."

"I’m not following," Andy said, regarding her with a puzzlement that was probably genuine, since there was no actual interest attached. "What is it that you understand, and why is it important?"

"Three things," she replied. "One is about demons. One is about evil masterminds. And one is about high school."

"Okay." The corners of his mouth turned up. "I can tell this is going to be good."

"Demons, well, there was this vampire once who mentioned some low-grade demons with what
he said was the perfect defense mechanism: their blood had some kind of numbing agent in it, too much and it’d paralyze you. He said if humans ever managed that trick, vampires would go extinct overnight.”

“I can see how that would work,” Andy said. “So?”

“So I think that’s what I smelled at the house where Dustin cut the oinker, by the back door at Doc’s, and at the auction barn. Just a couple of seconds and I could feel my nose starting to go dead. Katie doesn’t remember being grabbed, but she’s still feeling queasy, so I’m pretty sure she got drugged. I’m thinking somebody used oinker blood to trank her.”

Andy was nodding. “Yeah, makes sense, if Wayne was running those demons he could have known how to use their body fluids. Pretty clever, actually.”

“Maybe, but that takes us to evil masterminds. So, okay, diabolical realtors aren’t exactly the A-list of villains, but the whole business with the Midget was just totally bogus. Why grab her? What did that accomplish? He’d have done better to send all his soldiers against the house, attack us before we could attack him. And then he ties her up so she can get loose in a couple of minutes? Please. There’s bad-tactics dumb, and there’s too-good-to-be-true dumb. This is way past that.”

Andy was listening attentively, with a slight frown. “And I can’t wait to hear what this has to do with high school,” he said.

“That’s where it gets really good,” she assured him. “I ruled in high school, and nobody, I mean nobody, could slip the knife to somebody the way I could.”

Andy’s eyebrows went up. “You knifed people in high school? Was that a Hellmouth deal?”

“No, dimwit, I mean the social scene. You know, climbing the ladder, holding your place, trashing people’s reputations and massaging rumors and planting just the right hint in just the right way …” She flashed him a sudden, chilling smile. “That’s where you blew it, Sexy-Boy. The way you kept trying to steer us at Duane, that was amateur stuff, and you were playing in front of a pro.”

“I admit it,” Andy said after a long moment. “I am now officially lost. What in the world are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about you are busted, bozo!” She took in the room with an extravagant gesture. “I’ve been thinking about this stuff all day, I made lists, I talked to the others and I went over everything anybody said, clear back to the beginning.” She produced a scrap of paper from the pocket of her jeans, and began to tick off items. “You wanted the property next door, they were the first ones to come down with magic measles, that’s when your big feud with Duane started. You jumped right on top of Duane’s oinkers causing all the diseases, and you did it right there, only ten minutes before that we’d all been thinking on mystical ruins. That crappy after-shave of yours was at Doc’s back door when I got there, along with the smell of oinker juice. It was you all along, you were the one —”

“Whoa, slow down, take it easy.” Andy spoke soothingly, making calming motions with his hands. “You’re letting your paranoia run away from you, there’s a reasonable explanation for everything —”

“Give me a break!” Her tone and expression were withering. “I know a weasel when I see one, Tucker Wells trained a bunch of hell-hounds to attack our prom and you’re exactly that kind of small-time dorkster. You started the whole thing, didn’t you? You set the oinkers to infecting the next-door neighbors so you could get their land, only Duane was better at it and he took over the
operation for himself. You kidnapped Katie and dropped her off at Duane’s demon-barn, but tied up loose enough that she could get away and call us, only we got there first, and we got there because you kept saying we had to go there. It was you, it was you, all of it was you, and I was the one who figured it out!”

The last was an exultant shout; she stood glorious, resplendent, all but glowing with triumph. Andy held his place, though it required conscious effort to keep himself from retreating a step, the girl was primed to explode. At last the volatile moment seemed to have passed, and he spoke with careful control. “Okay, I’ll say it; you’re really smart. You’re wrong, but you took things from all over the place and tied them together into a picture that actually holds. I can see why there are so many stories about the Slayer, you’ve got a … I don’t know, a kind of intelligence that’s intuitive instead of analytical.

“The thing is,” he went on, “none of that actually matters. Wayne is dead, the demons are dead or scattered, Judith and Katie are back safe, and Doc has it all neatened up into a clean little package that nobody wants to disturb. So even if you were right about me — and you’re really not — you don’t have any evidence they could act on.”

She snorted. “Evidence? Who needs it? You’re a con artist, and you tried to con me along with everybody else, and I know. I knew while you were doing it.”

Andy grinned. “And, like I said, it doesn’t matter. You’re a Slayer. You kill vampires, demons, mystical menaces up and down the board, and none of them are me. I’m just a guy trying to make a buck, and cuddle up to such ladies as are agreeable. In short, outside your jurisdiction.”

Her expression went blank, and then she slowly smiled. “Ooohh, that’s good. That is good. You’re totally right, Slayers only kill magical things. Oh, whatever is a girl to do?”

He looked to her, suddenly troubled; there was something here he wasn’t seeing, but deep-buried instinct told him it meant danger. She kept smiling at him, watching his assurance dwindle and fade. Then she let the smile grow, and widen, and change into something else. She gave him time to understand what he was seeing, and what it meant, and laughed as she saw terror come alive in his eyes.

She could have taken him before he ever had time to scream.

But, really, what kind of fun would that have been?

* * *

Once she was done with him, she left him in the room, locked it securely, and pulled her car out onto the highway. After an hour and a half of driving — including several reversals, the way they marked the signs just didn’t make any sense — she happily found an Interstate on-ramp, and minutes later she was cruising at a steady 80 miles an hour.

So, which way, up the coast or down? L.A. was just not on the grid, she’d need to wait a year or so before she could even think of going back there. San Francisco was supposed to be a happening place, but it had kind of a snooty air to it; San Diego, well, there was nothing at all cool about San Diego. She could try Vegas … but no, she was a California girl through and through, except for maybe Paris. (How far a drive was that? Her next gas stop, she’d have to snag a road atlas. Yeah, there was an ocean in the way, she knew that much, but that was what the Chunnel was for, right?)

She smiled at the memories of Cromwell. Two thousand bucks, and she’d finally made the good-guy thing work. Sort of. It was hard keeping track of all the little persnickety things a hero was
supposed to do and not do, but she’d totally nailed the basics. She’d put a scare into Dustin (Katie might wonder why her boyfriend had gone lukewarm all of a sudden, but she’d recover and find some nice, reliable idiot); she’d cleared the way for Doc and Judy, who’d never have had a chance if not for her; she’d stopped a plague, slaughtered a warehouse full of demons and taken down two evil masterminds (such as they were), and all without killing anybody who didn’t have it coming to them. Really, why did people make such a big deal about the whole soul issue? All you had to have was a positive attitude.

One thing was for sure: despite her threats to Dustin and hints to Doc, she had no intention of returning to that dinky little burg anytime in her eternal life … but back in Cromwell, there were four people who would never, ever forget the name of Buffy Summers. (Of course, three of them would remember her with gratitude. Too bad about that, but not worth the effort to change it.)

She’d made good on her guarantee, though. She’d driven the lone vampire out of town … and she’d keep on driving till it was time to find a place to wait out the sun.

end

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