

DOYLE INVESTIGATIONS

various authors
compiled by Jan-Eric Pietralla

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1 Introduction

1.1 Doyle Investigations

"Once upon a time there'd been a happily married third grade teacher called Allen Francis Doyle... until the day demons ate his wife, and he discovered the reason they didn't eat him too was because he was half one of them himself. After that, he turned himself into a vampire-killing machine, stripping from himself and his life everything else that had ever mattered, everything else that had made up the man he'd been..."

Doyle - Evidence of Things Not Seen

In a darker world where the forces of darkness run unchecked, a bitter Doyle is all that stands between LA citizens and the terrors that stalk the streets. Alongside Faith the Vampire Slayer and her Watcher, Wesley Wyndham-Price, Doyle fights in the world inspired by the Buffy episode 'The Wish', a world with the Master ascendant in Sunnydale and with Buffy Summers and Angel dead and gone.

Welcome to this darker corner of the Wishverse...

Welcome to Doyle Investigations.

2 City of Doyle

by Ellen, Cedar and Roseveare

2.1 Chapter 1

The sign says 'Doyle Investigations,' but I know there was a time when it said something different.

I'd seen it in one of those damned visions. 'Guardian Angel' or something like that, I don't know for sure. The visions aren't always clear, for all they hurt like the very devil.

Still, I suppose it's apt enough. If this city's going to have a guardian angel, it'll just have to be me, which is nicely ironic, given what I've got hidden inside me.

But there's nobody else to do this job, at least in this city, and it needed doing, so, here I am.

I gave up on keeping a receptionist some time back. They don't care for the cigarettes, or the fact that I keep an extra bottle around at all times, just in case a vision hits. They especially don't like it when I have one of the visions in front of 'em.

One of 'em even got to see me sneeze, and ran out screaming. She never even came back for her last paycheck.

Now the voice mail picks up the calls, and there are days I don't talk to anyone.

Most days, it's just as well.

Now, tonight, that was a good example. The last vision showed me some fledgling vamps, not good enough for the Master in Sunnydale, I guess. We get all the rejects here. They were going to pick up a couple of girls at a bar I knew, with something less than honorable intentions.

So I went over there to hang out for the evening, which, when you think about it, isn't too far different from what I would have been doing if I hadn't had the vision. It would have been nice to be free to choose a better class o'pub, maybe, or a worse kind, if I happened to be in the mood.

If I weren't doing what I'm doing, I'd have gone back to Dublin years ago, when Harry died. The only thing that keeps me here is ... well, the same reason why she isn't.

I couldn't keep on teaching, and I couldn't go home again, not after finding out the reason why I was off the vampire menu.

I needed a way to take something back. It wouldn't bring Harry back. Nothing could. But getting back at what got her was the only thing that made sense to me then.

I had to put in a couple of years working for the L.A.P.D., which wasn't fun at all. Going from third-grade teacher to P.D. newbie was a bit of a jolt, especially when a few of the guys found out I'm not all human. Nothing in the rules quite fit, so they kinda took it upon themselves to make sure I left.

I'm stubborn though. Runs in the family, I think - at least the human side. I really can't say much about the rest.

Anyhow, I didn't leave till I was good and ready. Some of the guys got used to me after a while, some didn't.

So, I did it all up all legal, and got the license. Still, most of my clients aren't the paying kind. Lucky for me, I don't need much.

2 *City of Doyle*

I managed to keep one friend from my time there. Kate always stuck up for me, and once I got past resenting it, we got along. She helps me fill in the blanks that the visions don't touch, and I help her tie up some loose ends, in return. It works pretty well most of the time.

And the drinks, well, on nights like this, they're a business expense.

I blend into the scenery pretty well in these places, if I do say so myself. So, nobody noticed me meandering outside after the three guys when they headed out with the two gals. "Let's go find some real fun." Yeah, right.

The girl was nattering on about knowing the doorman and getting into the Lido or something, whatever. I wasn't paying much attention. The conversation didn't get interesting until the "shut up and die" part.

Three of them against me was a pretty fair match. I distracted them a little - I've got a lot of practice doing the fallin' down drunk routine, and I came by it honestly, for the most part. They weren't expecting anything like those spring-loaded little babies I've been hiding in my sleeves lately, so I got the first two without even breaking a sweat.

The third one managed to get one good wallop in, enough to knock me down. It hurt.

You remember the comic book where the guy says 'It's clobberin' time'? I read it when I was a kid, and years later, when I was teaching, when Harry was still alive, the kids were still readin' the same comics. The more things change. . . .

Well, you have to look like a monster to pull that line off. I manage well enough. But the vamps usually don't get it. Maybe if I said 'flame on'? Naahhh.

"You shouldn't have done that," I told the last vamp, getting up.

"Oh sh**, it's the half-breed. Man, they told me you weren't for real."

He was still gawping like an idiot at my other face when I staked him.

The girls were "oh-my-godding" all over the place, and one of them actually tried to thank me. I don't get much of that. I turned around, and started to smile, before I remembered what face I was wearing at the moment.

She let out a little scream, and both of them took off.

I guess this ain't the face of an angel. Oh well.

Seemed like somebody else might have been watching me, but I couldn't spot anyone. Just a feeling, y'know?

So, I went home. Home being the apartment below the mostly empty office.

I wasn't expecting company. But, when I got downstairs, I could tell pretty fast there was someone there waiting for me.

Someone who didn't want to be seen... or heard.

I whipped around and tossed a stake in the intruder's direction, and a surprisingly small, delicate-looking hand whipped out and caught it, in midair.

"Impressive," I said out loud. "You're not quite human, whatever y'are. No human is that fast."

"Only a slayer," answered the girl, moving forward where I could see her, and she smiled.

"Hi," she said. "I'm Faith."

2 *City of Doyle*

"Faith who?"

"Just Faith. The Vampire Slayer. Hey, saw you in action tonight, lookin' good."

I looked her over, and she stood still, enjoying the attention. She was small, dark-haired, young - still in her teens, I'd guess. She was wearing all black leather, like she wanted to look really tough, but somehow it suited her. She knew she looked good, a real stiffener, and she wasn't afraid to use it.

Everything about her was the opposite of my Harry, but that was a good thing. I don't much care for blondes any more. Don't like the reminder.

I could think of worse things to find in my apartment than Faith, the Vampire Slayer.

"Done getting an eyeful yet?" she asked coolly.

"I'll look all I want. You're in my home, uninvited. The way I look at it, that gives me a free pass on starin'."

"Yeah, well, I'm not a vampire, so invitations are not a problem."

"Go for breakin' and enterin' much?"

She shrugged. "Whatever. So you're Doyle. Word on the street is you're pretty damn good at dusting vampires. From what I saw before, sounds like word on the street was right."

"I'm no slayer, but I get by. So, what would the Chosen One be doing here?"

And, I wondered silently, why hadn't the Powers warned me ahead of time?

"Oh, you've heard the story. Good. I don't tell it well. I always found it pretty boring, myself. Okay if I sit down?"

"Hey, I'm impressed again. The girl knows how to ask permission. Fine. Go right ahead."

"Got any beer?"

"You old enough to drink?"

She laughed. "I'm a slayer. Have you ever heard of a slayer old enough to drink? Come off your high horse, man, and throw me a beer."

I shrugged. "I'm not in favor of corruptin' minors, but in your case, maybe I'll make an exception."

She nabbed the beer I tossed her way, and settled herself down. I took a seat as well.

"So, Faith, what brings you to my humble abode, eh?"

She took a long drink, and smiled. "Ever heard of a little town called Sunnydale?"

"As a matter of fact, yeah. I had a cousin there, till she became vampire food, like most of the rest of the town. You headin' in that direction? Because, if you're lookin' to take on the Master, sorry, thanks but no thanks. I've been around long enough to know what battles to fight and which ones not to fight. I can't do a thing for ya."

"Hey, slow down. If taking on the Master was what I wanted, I'd be there with bells on, and my pansy-assed Watcher applauding from a safe distance. Till I get killed, of course, which, judging by the last two slayers, gives me maybe a week, if I'm lucky. Do you notice my enthusiasm yet?"

2 *City of Doyle*

"It's quite... infectious," I answered drily. "So, the last two slayers went to Sunnydale? I'd heard rumors."

"Yeah, first there was some girl named Buffy - stupid name for a slayer - and then Kendra. The Master chewed both of them up and spit them out, so I got called. One Wesley Wyndham-Pryce," and her voice dripped contempt over the name, "wants me to be number three. There's just one little problem."

"Which is?"

"While my so-called Watcher may think I'm just one more little dart that he can throw at the Master, I happen to like living. I wouldn't mind getting to see eighteen, y'know?"

"So, you ran away?"

"Let's just say I'm pursuing other options. I figure, there's more than one way to do this gig. Maybe even a way that doesn't involve running straight into a trap with my eyes closed and my hands tied behind my back."

"And I fit in where?"

"I hear you've been doing this for a couple of years now, and you're still here. I hear you've got more vampire kills than anyone who's not a slayer. So, I'm thinking, maybe this guy knows a thing or two about this business that the Watcher's Council can't get their heads out of their butts long enough to notice. And, since I'm kinda into survival, that works for me. Get what I mean?"

"What else have you heard about me, then?"

"That you're not quite human yourself," she tossed back promptly, and then, with a touch of hesitation, "That you got in this game in the first place because they got your wife."

I was silent for a moment, then nodded slowly. "True enough."

"Of course, they forgot to tell me that you're damn cute, too. Can I have another beer?"

"Not yet. How much did you hear about the not-human part?"

She stood up and sauntered over to me, sitting down practically in my lap. "I'm not worried about it."

"Maybe you should be."

She shook her head, laughing, and threw a leg around my waist. Agile girl. Good moves.

"Man, I'm a slayer. I can take any man, demon, or vampire, and if I don't like you, I can twist you into a knot so fast that you'll be seeing daylight from the rear. So, why should I worry?"

"You're also just a kid."

"I haven't been in a kid in a long time," she answered softly. "So, what's the what? Big bad demon just waitin' to come out and play?"

"You askin' to see?"

"You think you can scare me? No way. I dare you."

"Dare me, do you? Now, isn't that mature."

2 *City of Doyle*

"I'll show you mature." She pressed herself against me, twining a hand in my hair. "Get a clue, man. I always get what I want. I'm not patient, and I'm not real good at taking no for an answer. So, we play it my way, or I show you what happens when I get mad."

"Or I show you what happens when I get mad, except that you're too young to remember what the hell I'm talking about. Which kind of proves my point, don't you think?"

She wriggled on my lap. "Whatever. Shut up and show me."

Ah, well, it was fun while it lasted, wasn't it? With a resigned sigh, I changed, waiting for her to yelp and jump off my lap.

Surprise. Her eyes widened, and for a moment she did look like a little girl, but like one who'd just received a birthday present. "Wow!" she breathed. "Way cool."

She giggled for a moment, like a child, but her next move wasn't the least bit childish, as she made me gasp.

"Uhhh, Faith?"

"You have some need to talk, here? 'Cause I don't."

"You always come on to demons like this?"

"Naw, only the cute ones like you." Her hands were all over me, even though I still had my demon face on. Gotta say, she was getting to me.

Maybe it had been too long. Or, maybe that wasn't it at all.

Breathless, I got out, "Can't say as anyone's ever called this face cute before."

She shrugged. "Change back if you want, or stay the way you are, doesn't matter to me. I like a little variety, y'know."

"You tryin' to tell me that you're OK with this?" I managed.

"Five by five," she answered. "How about shutting up now?"

She put her hand roughly over my mouth, pushing a spine or two aside in the process, like she didn't even notice. When she took her fingers away, it was only to replace them with her lips, and they weren't any gentler than her hand.

Some things I can smell, and taste, better like this.

She tasted of beer, and impatient youth, and something a long way past innocence.

She tasted of need.

That was it.

Damn it. I was lost, and I knew that I'd probably regret it.

And right then, I didn't care.

2.2 Chapter 2

"That," said Faith, wriggling off the couch in search of her pants, "was wicked fun."

"Wicked fun?" I repeated, dubiously. "I was gonna go with drainin,' but, yeah okay. Not gonna disagree with you."

2 *City of Doyle*

She grinned back at me, her dark makeup smeared off and hair a mess, and suddenly the little kid look was back again. Damn. This girl was gonna seriously mess with my head. And if I let her know that she would wind me around her finger until she was ready to kick me in the ass. So I kept my expression casual. "How d'you feel about pizza?"

The grin got wider. "You buying?"

"I don't have attractive female dinner guests nearly as often as I'd like."

"Especially the kind who like a good screw as appetizers?"

"Especially not those, yeah."

"Make it pepperoni, sausage and anchovies. No vegetables, period."

"Olives aren't vegetables," I countered.

Faith considered this. "The green ones sure as hell are."

I went for the phone. "Hi, yeah. I'd like two large with pepperoni, sausage, anchovies and black olives. And a liter of Coke. For? Yeah, that's right. Third bell down." I hung up, shaking my head. I must have been ordering from there pretty often lately. Possibly during the heavier nights with the bottle, which would explain why I don't remember eating that much pizza lately.

"Coke?" asked the girl now struggling into her top. "You've got plenty of beer."

"And you've gotten acquainted with my fridge, it seems. But I've already dealt with a couple drunken girls this evenin', as you saw. I'd rather you talked sense. Stop that." She was still trying to squeeze herself into the leather torture device she'd been wearing. She glared at me. "Take this," I handed her an ancient but clean bowling shirt, and an equally wash-worn towel, "and have a shower before we eat."

She slipped up to me again, the bad girl smile back in place. "Shower with me, and I'll really show you what 'draining' is."

"Tempting, but just not doable, girl." I had to laugh. "I'm gonna need a full meal at least before I take you up on that one."

Twenty minutes later we had both cleaned up, separately mind you, and had settled in my dim little kitchen for our daily dosages of grease and caffeine. Faith ate with the same single-minded enthusiasm that she did, well, other things, and kept eating well after I called it quits.

"You know, in some societies, they converse durin' meals."

She glanced up at me, dripping sauce on the shirt she had borrowed, probably deliberately. "Usually, I eat alone, or with my Watcher. He doesn't exactly 'converse.'"

"No?"

"He talks at me, instructions, orders, boring rules, really boring warnings. It's pretty one-sided, so usually I just keep eating."

"And ignore him."

"Why not? He ignores me."

"Right then, we'll try something different. I'll ask you a question, and I'll even listen to the answer."

She was wary now. "Maybe I won't feel like answering."

I shrugged. "Then don't and I won't listen. But sadly, my ego's not big enough to believe you came here just for my legendary skills in bed. And if you want help from me you're gonna have to tell me what exactly you want help with."

There was a long silence. "I told you. I just want to explore my options."

"What've you 'explored' so far?"

"My Watcher gave me one. Go after the Master. And die."

"Which you're understandably not thrilled about. Okay, how about this one. Retire. Move someplace with less evil. I hear Duluth is pretty much demon free these days. Get a job, maybe a guy, or a pet, or both. Settle down and live to be 79.4 years old like the rest of America."

"So not me. Look mister, I'm a city girl."

2 *City of Doyle*

"Ever tried being something else? How about a small town girl who never spends the nights lookin' over her shoulder?"

"Sounds dull." But she was gettin' mad, so I kept pushing. Yeah, I've got a death wish. I've come to terms with that.

"How about being someone who doesn't kill or be killed for a livin'?"

For a moment I thought she'd belt me a good one, but then she clamped down on herself with an effort that must have hurt. I was surprised she had that much restraint in her.

"Yeah, I'd like to try that. You think I haven't thought of throwing in the towel, or better yet, stuffing it down Wussley's throat and getting the Hell out of Dodge?"

Her eyes blazed and her fists clenched, but she hadn't hit me yet, and since I wanted to keep it that way I nodded. "Yeah, seems like you have. So why'd you decide different?"

"I'm the Slayer. I can't just chuck that." She glared at me, "but it's not because I've got some kind of 'my duty to save the world' complex."

The lady doth protest too much, I thought, but I was still aiming to avoid a Slayer powered fist, so I nodded some more. "Then why?"

"Cause I'm the Slayer," she repeated. "Which is the equivalent of 'fastest gun in the west.' I can try to quit, but any vampire or demon with something to prove is going to take the fight to me. They'll never leave me alone, and if I wanna live I don't get to pretend I'm Sandra Dee."

Well. I was doing a fast reassessment of Faith's survival chances. She wasn't stupid, she wasn't a sheep and she might learn self-control given a few years and a few lessons.

"Points for knowledge of classic movies," I told her. "And for some common sense. Now, keep goin'."

"About what?"

"You're right girl, you can't just quit. But there's more reasons why not, and I want to see just how deep that logic of yours goes."

"I told you, I don't do the martyrdom shit."

"I heard that part. I'll give you a hint. Why haven't you ditched your Watcher before now?"

There was a long pause. "He was useful. Not that he taught me anything, but he had a little cash. A roof, food, access to weapons, and oh, about twice, some information I actually needed."

"He took care of you."

"Hey, I can take care of myself."

"Yeah, you told me. You always get what you want. But not without becomin' a criminal."

"I protect the damn world from vamps and demons. How many people do you think I've saved by now, thousands? Because in my book, that puts me in the plus column. They can spare me the price of rent once in awhile."

"So the demons aren't enough for you, then? You want the LAPD after you as well?"

"Oh, yeah. Almost forgot, you're pig-trained yourself, aren't you?"

"Yeah. And most of 'em aren't my favorite people in the world, but not all of 'em are as stupid as you seem to think."

"Your point being?"

"You need a Watcher, and you know it. And since you don't like what you're hearin' from your current one you've decided to try me on for size. Well, forget it."

Damn she moved fast. I knew she was gonna hit me this time, but before I could even flinch she grabbed her empty soda glass and to my total shock hurled the thing into the brick wall so hard that the shards came back at us.

We sat for a moment in silence.

When Faith spoke again there was no emotion in her voice. "You wanted logic? How about this? I'm the Chosen One. Their choice, not mine. One Slayer dies, and another is called. right? I try to quit and the Council will put me down like a dog; hoping the next one will be better behaved."

2 *City of Doyle*

I just stared at her. She really did stop being a kid long ago. I wondered how long.

"Yeah, I'm exploring my options. Here are the ones I see. I do what I'm told and I die. I quit and I die. Or I get answers from you, show the demons and the Council that I'm holding my own, and I get to live just a little longer." Those black eyes never left mine. "I need those answers and if I have to hurt you to get them, I'm not gonna cry about it."

Okay. Time to take down the intensity just a notch.

"You might not cry, but I probably will. I'm not a huge fan of torture, especially when I'm on the hurting end."

She relaxed, just a little. "So teach me what I need to know, and I'll go peacefully."

"Back to Wussley?"

She stiffened again. "For now."

"Or I could give you option four."

"I'm listening."

"I told you to forget casting me in the Watcher role. I don't want a snotty houseguest who ignores me unless I feed her. It's too much like having a cat."

That got her. She laughed.

"What I've got here is a business. I've even got occasional paying clients. I help people with problems the police can't touch."

"Meaning demons."

"Meaning usually demons, yeah. I could use a slayer as a partner."

"To do what?"

"Rescue people, track and kill whatever's currently snackin' on the good folks of L.A., before the lawyers show up to start more trouble - in this town, they're worse than most of the demons. If you want to go out and dispose of a few extra vamps pro bono I'm not gonna be against it." I looked at her hopefully. "Possibly answer the phone?"

"I'm five-by-five 'till the last part, Doyle."

"No phones?"

"Not unless you want your greeting to be 'Who in the hell is it?' "

I heaved a fairly fake sigh. "Oh well. Here's the offer: first we pay the office expenses, then we split what's left. You get yourself some place to live, preferably nearby, because the hours in this job are crap and I don't pay overtime."

"What about benefits?"

"In this job? There aren't any."

"Not even sleeping with the boss?"

"Oh. Well, that's negotiable, I suppose. Interested?"

"I'm pretty well qualified, aren't I?"

"That you are."

"Doyle. Why?"

"Why am I offering you a job?"

"Yeah."

"There are a lot of demons out there Faith. Which you know better than anyone. I've been on my own in this gig for years, and there's a hell of a lot more pain in this town that I can deal with on my owwww...." Vision time. Two in one night, damn them.

I could feel Faith grab me. "Doyle? Doyle!?" Then the nightmare pain took over.

2.3 Chapter 3

When I resurfaced from the vision it was to find her dark eyes inches from my own. The look in them was more puzzled curiosity than concern.

2 *City of Doyle*

"Hey, Doyle," she said. "What was that all about? And don't tell me I'm giving guys seizures now. You been holding out on me?"

I groaned and squinted up at her. "Holdin' out...? No, just hadn't got around to mentioning that part."

"The part where you're gonna be spazzing in the middle of a fight and leaving me to get my ass kicked?" she demanded. "What's wrong with you? Come on, spill."

I shook my head, which didn't do it any good at all. The room started doing interesting acrobatics in front of my eyes. "I get - visions. That is to say, splitting migraines with pictures. Of people in danger. People I'm meant to save. Not all of the business here comes from walk-in clients, y'know. Heck, not even most of it."

"Way cool," she said, sounding surprised. "You really do have a mission here. You could almost be a slayer." Then, after a moment's thought. "So that was a vision, huh? Whoa. Major bummer."

"Ouch," I agreed, trying to stand.

She had her hands on my shoulders, presumably some sort of effort to steady me when I'd keeled over, but truth to tell the pressure of those slim fingers wasn't doing me any favours.

I already knew from our, ah, close contact earlier that she had one hell of a grip. Didn't want to ever be on the wrong side of it. With that slayer strength, she could break me in half, demon or no. And with her temper, she just might.

She shifted her grip and backed off as I straightened up. "So," she said, her enthusiasm evident. "Our first case, partner. What'd you see?"

My head thudded viciously. She wasn't helping. I wondered what I'd gotten myself into with this girl.

"The usual," I said, as I unsteadily crossed the room and retrieved my jacket from where I'd thrown it. Two visions in one day was a real bitch; still, it happened now and then. I could have used a drink or ten, but knew I didn't have the time for that; urgency had permeated the vision. "Guy about to become vampire food. A few blocks away, ten minutes if we hurry. And we gotta hurry. You comin'?"

"Sure thing." Faith snatched up a stake and threw another across to me, twirling it through her fingers in a fancy move. Hell, she was fast. Some impressive reflexes, too.

All that strength and power locked within her deceptively delicate form. I had to admit, I was more than a little curious to see how she handled herself in a fight.

Well... I wouldn't have to wait long to find out.

2.4 Chapter 4

As expected, it took about ten minutes to reach the spot where I'd seen the attack take place. One good thing to come out of all that time in the LAPD, I know this city like the back of my hand, including - especially - the bits that ain't so pretty.

Handy for the Powers, that they can send their damned vague headaches to someone with the local know-how to interpret them.

This place, it was a bad spot, close to a couple of major demon hangouts, a real dive. It wasn't the first time a vision had dragged me there to help someone. Had to admit to a certain uneasiness with being in that area myself, and I was glad to have some back-up on hand for once.

We turned left down a narrow street where a pink neon sign on the corner building read 'bar' in stubborn contradiction of the brothel I knew lay within. The noises of shouts and scuffle told me the action had already begun.

As we got closer I could see the scene from my vision being played out. There were four vamps gathered around the one guy, a skinny posh-looking type... wearing a suit, of all things. God knows what he was doing slumming around this neighbourhood.

Nobody had ever taught these vamps not to play with their food. They were gathered around him like the mean kids in the school ground, tormenting, darting forward occasionally to land a blow or just to feint one. They'd done something to one of his legs, and he stumbled in little awkward steps with the limb bent off at a crazy sideways angle at the knee, making futile efforts to get away from them each time they sprang forward for another piece of him.

Faith shot a glance at me even as we hurried to intervene. She was grinning broadly, lit up in pink neon from the corner sign.

"Time to kick some undead b..." Her voice dried up abruptly.

She stopped running, and dragged on my arm to pull me back.

2 *City of Doyle*

"What in the hell are you...?"

"Shut up!" she snapped. Her voice was rough and she sounded, oddly enough, scared.

We'd halted about ten yards from the little scene, and the vampires couldn't help but have noticed our presence. They were directing curious, hungry looks our way, with the exception of the one female who was too engrossed in the business of tormenting their victim, her hands all over his shivering neck in sickening caresses.

"S'okay, folks," Faith drawled, her voice full of harsh amusement, bordering on shock. "You keep right on with what you're doing there. No way I'm going to stop you. Hell, some things you just couldn't pay enough to see."

"Have you gone mad?" I demanded, almost at the same instant as their victim, the guy from my vision, looked up.

Lined in pink neon, his wide, pain-filled eyes rested on Faith and managed to widen even more. "Faith..." he began, breathless and astonished and pleading.

He didn't get to finish because the she-vamp closest to him dealt him a painfully audible fist in the face that dropped him to the pavement. She raised a stiletto-clad foot to bring it down on his head.

I wasn't certain precisely what lay between Faith and this guy, but I wasn't about to let this happen.

Not in my city.

Faith seemed frozen in place. I shook my arm free and surged forward, aligning the stake with the she-vamp's heart as I did. I covered the short distance between us just in time to knock the vamp away the instant before the pointed spike of her heel drove through the guy's skull. She overbalanced backwards, and I overbalanced on top of her. The stake slid easily into her chest with the force of our landing.

She exploded into dust, and I fell the last several inches to the ground as her form disintegrated, bruising my elbows on the pavement.

Unpleasantly aware of the remaining three vamps, I moved to push off from the ground, reaching for the fallen stake, planning to twist around to deliver a hefty kick to the one standing closest and...

I didn't get any further than a few inches before a foot tramped down on the back of my neck, pressing me down into the concrete with a force that skinned the side of my face against the rough surface.

Damn, but one of them was *fast*.

I switched to demon, figuring the additional strength would be enough to shift the vamp's weight, but before I could use it hands grabbed my arms, one pair each side, with undead strength. They twisted, hauling me painfully to my feet as the weight was lifted from my neck. I thrashed around, trying to break their hold... unsuccessfully.

I'd been waiting for Faith's intervention, expecting it at any moment, but now I realised with a sinking feeling that she was nowhere in sight.

"Looks like we've caught ourselves a half-breed," the vampire on my left sneered.

"That's no fun. They taste bad." The one holding my right arm pulled a disgusted face which looked oddly comical on his already vamped-out features. But I didn't feel inclined to laugh.

The remaining vamp, the quick one who'd taken me down, walked around into my line of sight. He had a youth's face, firmly set to human. I'd learned those were the ones to be wary of; the ones with the control to look human even when riled. It took time to learn that control, meant they'd been around a good few decades. They weren't as dim as the fledglings.

"I've heard of you," he said to me. "I've heard of a few pals of mine who didn't walk away from an encounter with you. And of course, now Chrissy." He glanced at the slightly dusty patch on the ground; when he turned back his features were contorted into full vamp mode. "That makes me unhappy."

He picked up the stake I'd dropped and toyed with it, with an amused glee that made me shiver despite myself.

Beyond him, I could see a slim figure slowly walking back through the shadows towards us, hesitating every few steps as though something even stronger than she was kept trying to pull her back. I fixed my eyes on the vampire in front of me, so as not to give away her presence by the direction of my gaze.

2 *City of Doyle*

The vamp set the stake to the side of my neck. He dug it in, just a little way. Enough to hurt like hell. Even a sharpened stake has a pretty blunt, splintery point on it. He dragged it forward through my skin, about an inch or so, pressing down hard, until it met the base of a spine and stuck there.

I jolted in their grasp with the pain, but their grip didn't give. I felt the warm dampness of blood dribble down to soak into my shirt collar.

Faith stood now, immobile, several yards behind him, cloaked in shadows, unnoticed. She had a stake ready in her hand, but she kept staring down at it as though she'd never seen one before. Indecision and despair marked her face. She looked like she was wrestling with something bad, behind those dark-smudged eyes.

She glanced between me and the unconscious man. Her grip on the stake shifted, but she didn't otherwise move.

"You know, I fancy a souvenir," the vamp said. "Wonder if these things'll break off." He pressed the stake down harder at the base of the spine. It hurt like hell. "Yeah, looks like it..." He pushed his grinning face right up to mine, presumably wanting to witness my agony up close.

His mistake. I wrenched my head forward, though the move drove the stake deeper, and let him have a whole face full of spikes.

He howled and fell back, the stake clattering to the floor, hands pressed over his newly-ventilated face.

I heaved my arms, desperately trying to break the grip of the other two. Felt the joints, already held at odd angles, threaten dislocation. What the hell, this form could take it...

Thankfully, though, it didn't need to. "Aw, shit!" Faith snapped, in aggrieved tones, as she finally made her decision and sprang into action. She had already taken several steps further forward, sometime while he'd been cutting me, and she was so close now they'd have seen her in a moment in any case.

She rammed the stake into the vamp whose face I'd colandered and barrelled straight through the resultant dust cloud on her way to me.

At the sight of a slayer in full fight mode, the vamp on my left loosed his grip and ran.

I didn't give the remaining vampire a chance to copy him. The instant my arm was free my fist was making close acquaintance with his face.

Faith sprang after the one who'd lit off, and seconds later it was all over.

I turned on Faith, too angry even to switch back to human.

"You gonna tell me what the hell that was all about?" I snapped, clamping a hand to the side of my neck to stop the spill of blood. They'd avoided the main artery, thankfully, in their efforts to make it slow. "Care to explain why fifteen minutes ago it was 'partners' and now you're suddenly prepared to run off and let me get worked over by the bad guys?"

I had plenty more to say. I'd meant to say it. but the expression on her face stopped me.

From what I'd seen of her so far, I hadn't thought she could be capable of looking so dejected and hopeless.

"I'm sorry, all right!" she yelled hoarsely. I had the impression those weren't words she said too often. "This was supposed to be a new start! Then I see *him* here..." She floundered. "I saw they were gonna kill him, and I thought, okay, maybe we're a fraction of a second too slow, and who could blame us for being too late, just this once? It was like, for one instant, there was the answer to everything right in front of me. And then I realised you wouldn't let him die. So I left... but I came *back*!"

"We don't get to pick and choose who deserves to be saved and who doesn't, whoever he is," I said, hearing the angry edge in my voice and a little surprised by the ferocity of it. I took a few deep, calming breaths and forced my form to revert to human. I walked over to the guy we'd saved and knelt down to feel his neck for a pulse. "The vision sent us to save him. That has to count for something."

His pulse beat strongly. Decidedly alive. His left leg was surely broken, hanging at that peculiar angle, and most of the rest of him was in a bit of a mess.

I asked the question I suspected I already knew the answer to, quietly but insistently. I was in no mood for evasions. "Who is he, Faith?"

She laughed, a raw sound, weighted with irony. "Doesn't look like much, does he?" she growled in angry resignation. "But he's more than this useless waste of flesh wrapped up in a fancy suit. He's the Watcher's Council and everything I'm running from. I should have known I'd never be free of them."

2 *City of Doyle*

She took the few steps necessary to loom over me where I knelt and delivered an illustrative kick to the unconscious guy. "Hey, Doyle," she introduced bitterly. "Meet Wesley Wyndham-Pryce. My Watcher."

2.5 Chapter 5

It took most of the rest of the night to get Wesley Wyndham-Pryce the medical attention he desperately needed and get him back to the office.

Turned out the guy wasn't in the country precisely legal, and hospitals meant documentation and questions, so in the end we had to pay a visit to Farrell, a demon doctor I visited from time to time when the opposition got in a lucky hit or several. Demon genes tend to bring with them the necessity to avoid hospitals and, God forbid, blood tests.

Whether Farrell's qualifications were legit or not I didn't know - just as I wasn't entirely sure if he was demon or human himself - and I didn't ask. But his expertise had saved my skin more than once and, that considered, I could dispense with the need for paper proof.

He answered the door in his dressing gown, irritably, and was no less irritable when we hauled one blood-soaked watcher through his front door and onto his carpets. "I don't treat humans," he said, after a glance and a disparaging sniff in Wesley's direction.

His mood improved only upon delivery into his palm of a wad of creased bank notes.

"Bring him into the office," he said, and led the way into the back room where he practised his trade.

I thought Wesley was beginning to stir as the doc was gathering his things together to set to work. His eyelids fluttered and some hazy awareness of the surely agonising pain twisted his face. But he certainly wasn't conscious enough for speech and I didn't try. He lapsed into deep unconsciousness about half a minute after Farrell stuck a hypodermic in his arm. Probably for the best.

The protests I'd expected from Faith didn't arise. In fact, she remained unnaturally quiet throughout the proceedings, standing against the wall looking bored and cleaning out her fingernails with a knife while Farrell first dealt with Wesley's leg and then the deep cut on my own neck.

At any rate, it was getting dangerously close to sunrise and wake-up hour for the daytime world when we finally carried Wesley's sedated form out to the doc's car and manoeuvred him into the back. I climbed into the back seat too, to stop him rolling off every time we rounded a corner. Wasn't sure I trusted that particular job to Faith.

Farrell drove us across to the office where he ousted us from his car and presented a bill for outstanding medical expenses and transport costs.

"You didn't think a lousy hundred would cover this? I'm not a charity," the doc said in parting, grouchy. "Oh, and I do want the tab paid off by the end of the month, this time. Try to remember I treat professional collection boys, too."

"Yeah, 'course, man." I waved him off, then turned my attention back to Faith and our snoring human burden. "Get his legs. And be careful."

"Yeah, right. Like he'd notice. I do know what was in that syringe." We got him up the steps to the front door between us, awkwardly. Normally it wouldn't have been a problem, but we were drained both physically and emotionally after one hell of a long night. "You're seeing him at his best right now, you do realise that?"

"I'll make my own judgements when he wakes up, if you don't mind."

She shrugged with the assured air of someone who knows their chances of being proven wrong are extremely low. I sighed and struggled with the front door, tiredness blurring my vision and coordination, the key shivering in my hand and doing its damndest to go anywhere but the lock.

"And even if he was the most worthless piece of shit imaginable, he'd still be human, and I still wouldn't abandon him to the fang brigade." I got the lock open finally, and kicked the door back.

"I didn't mean it, you know." She didn't look at me, her face obscured behind her hair, bent over her unconscious watcher and taking most of his weight as we pulled him through the door and across the hallway to the elevator. "I don't want him dead. I just... wanted to be free. We aren't going to be able to get rid of him now, Doyle. He'll ruin it all. I mean, I knew he'd catch up sooner or later, but I thought it'd be more later. That we'd have time to get ourselves established, get the proof to shove down the council's throats when they did catch up. Then I'd show them we could do good here, and maybe their way isn't the only way, or the best way."

2 *City of Doyle*

I considered the point while I punched the button for the basement apartment. "Well, he's certainly not going anywhere without help for a while, not with that leg. Far as he's concerned, we'll be looking after him. He'll owe us. And... I won't tell the council where he is if you don't."

Her grin, absent for hours now, returned in an instant, bringing back with it that dark, amused glitter to her eyes. "You mean that? Wow. Cool. I knew you'd be a great guy to work with. A demon after my own heart, right?"

A pause, and then a few seconds later. "Hey, are we, like, going to keep him chained to the bed or something? Did you see that film?"

I groaned and shot her an exasperated look. "Get your mind outta that sewer - if that's possible - and help me get him to the couch. No chains necessary. He won't walk off."

Once that was done I flopped down in a spare chair and waited for my head to stop spinning, Faith paced restlessly around the room and we existed for a minute in relative quiet, the only sounds her footsteps and Wesley's snores.

"So," she said finally, looking out of the big broad window at the sunrise. "You want to go to bed?"

I looked at her. The glint in her eyes made her meaning quite clear. Hell, the girl had some fierce appetites, not to mention a whole lot more energy than I did.

"Don't take this the wrong way," I said. "And not that I'm usually one to turn down an offer like that. But... I want to go to sleep." I pulled a wry face. "Right now, anything else would just about kill me."

2.6 Chapter 6

My sleep was disturbed and plagued with strange dreams. In them, I saw the earlier fight played out again, only this time the four vamps had some other victim, and neither Faith or Wesley were there...

But the ending, for me, went the same way things had been going prior to Faith's intervention.

I experienced what would have happened if she hadn't come back. Woke up sweating and shaky after what seemed like hours trapped in the nightmare, almost able to smell the lingering odour of my own blood, feeling phantom pains where the knife had gone in, and wondering if it hadn't been more than just a dream.

Wondering if I'd been meant to die that night, if she hadn't come. Four vamps... might have been too much in the best of circumstances. I had to face the possibility that, whether she'd initially run off or not, her presence had saved my life.

It hadn't felt like one of the visions. But then, who knew? I still didn't really understand them, after all this time. Maybe someone was trying to tell me something.

I touched the gauze taped over the cut on my neck, and found it was sticky with fresh blood.

I sighed and glanced at Faith. She was curled up in a well-padded bundle at the other side of the bed with her back to me, having won the battle for the lion's share of the bedclothes hands-down.

My alarm clock said it was nearly 1pm, and my first thought was that it was a bloody liar, but when I groaned my way through into the kitchen to fix a coffee, the clock in there said just the same.

Didn't feel like I'd had nearly six hours sleep. I could've done with about another week's worth. My muscles ached from the night's punishment. I abruptly remembered the severely injured guy on my couch and hurriedly poured the sludgy coffee into a mug, which I sipped at as I went to check on the invalid.

Wesley hadn't moved, which was a relief, although not really a surprise.

Maybe I'd been working on my own too long, I reflected. Whatever Faith's opinion of the man, someone should've stayed up to keep watch over him. But then neither of us had been feeling a hundred percent that morning when we'd staggered off to bed.

I went upstairs and dug out the current case files from the office, then set up the paperwork on the table, near enough the couch to notice if he started coming around. The office would just have to stay shut for the day. It happened often enough.

Faith and Wesley slept on through most of the afternoon, until Wesley surprised me by being the first to wake at about 4pm.

2 *City of Doyle*

His muffled groan drew my attention from the office accounts. "What in Heaven's name did that doctor give me?" asked a very English voice, ragged and creaky but still carrying a far too generous and distinct whiff of 'Public School Education'. I winced.

I hadn't thought he'd been so aware of what was going on, at Farrell's, but evidently I'd been wrong. "You don't want to know", I answered. "Suffice to say he left a few more doses of it for if things get really bad. And some more regular painkillers, too. You need either right now?"

He blinked at me blearily, shaking his head carefully. Considering what he'd just woken up from, there was a surprising amount of sense in his eyes. "You. You were with Faith. You... saved me?"

"Yeah. We both did." No need to go into all the details. "Damn fool thing to do, going into that neighbourhood, at that hour, alone and human and all."

His eyes narrowed, and he propped himself up a few inches taller on his elbows on the couch, and managed a pompous, "I'll have you know I am a trained member of the watcher's council, with a significant knowledge of all varieties of demons and fiends of the night..."

That ridiculous pride would have been funny, if it hadn't nearly got him killed.

He subsided suddenly with a grunt of pain. "I... I think I'd quite like some of those drugs now," he said weakly, his tone a hair short of a whimper.

I fetched, and once he was busy absorbing them and evidently hurting a bit less, resumed the conversation. I said, testing for a reaction to confirm or deny the rest of Faith's assertions about him, "Didn't seem to be doing you any good last night, all that training."

He sighed. "Books," he admitted morosely. "It's mainly books. But I have faced vampires before, under controlled circumstances..."

"Nothin' controlled about these circumstances," I summed up for him. "Welcome to LA, Wesley Wyndham-Pryce."

"Oh, I'm afraid I don't know your name...?"

"Doyle."

He waited as though expecting more, then let it go with a shrug. "I must say, you don't look like Faith's usual type." I winced at the resignation in his tone. Sounded as though he'd seen a lot of her usual type. His hands fluttered as he searched for words. "A lot less... leather. And tattoos."

"Yeah, well, I'm dressed for the office right now."

"Indeed. Office?" He stared around until his eyes found the clock on the wall. "But it's nearly evening."

"We're closed right now, actually, not to say that I don't work unusual hours anyway - pretty much as and when needed, in fact. Faith just accepted a partnership yesterday, by the way."

"Good grief. That can't be right. She's got... other commitments."

"Slayin', right?"

His initial surprise was rather comical. Then he hesitated, and thought it over, his face scrunched up in confusion. His gaze was suspicious when he turned it back upon me. "What precisely is it that you do, Mr Doyle?"

"That's just Doyle. And I'm a licensed PI. Defender of the innocent, helper of the helpless, that sort of thing. Specializing in the sort of stuff the police can't handle. Not too much different to slaying, fact. Faith came here to seek me out, we kind of hit it off."

"A private investigator, Faith?" he spluttered. Had to admit, I could see where he was coming from, there. "And you and she...?"

"That's right. And she's staying. She wants to stay. I ain't gonna argue with her. Are you?"

"You do know she's only seventeen?"

His self-righteous tone made me ignore my automatic stab of guilt and set me on the defensive. I was beginning to see what Faith had been talking about; it wouldn't take too long for this guy to start grating on my nerves. Still, he seemed reasonably well-intentioned, for all that. I just shrugged and said, "If she's old enough to risk her life fighting demons..."

2 *City of Doyle*

"You got that right." Her voice cut through the air. I turned to see her in the bedroom doorway, back in her leather gear again, all cleavage and attitude. "You want me to wait off having a little fun when I want just 'cause it's not proper by your stuffy standards? You'd prefer I waited till I was too dead? The last two slayers died before they were even eighteen. You remember? 'Cause I can't forget."

There was a silence. Wesley shook his head, looking bewildered and unhappy. "Faith," he began softly.

There was affection there, I was surprised to note. It was kind of strict and pompous and proprietorial, but it was there nonetheless.

She knew it too. She looked repentant, a little. Her aggressive posture abruptly drooped. "Hi, Wes," she said, grudgingly, guiltily.

There were several seconds when none of us seemed able to think of anything to say. Then Faith headed for the door, her movements decisive. She paused before she went out, picking up my jacket and pulling my wallet from it. She helped herself to a few scruffy notes and put them down her cleavage for safekeeping. She said, "I'm hungry. I'm off for food. Anyone feel like Chinese?"

"Bring back a selection," I said, pretty sure nothing would go to waste with her around.

2.7 Chapter 7

I heard her footsteps on the floor above us and the front door slam as she left. I turned my attention back to Wesley, who was sighing and tutting and shaking his head.

"She's certainly her own person," I observed.

"She's impossible."

"Yeah, well." I smirked; couldn't help myself. "Ten impossible things before breakfast, and all that."

He glowered. I got the impression he didn't appreciate frivolity of any kind, and disapproved of me deeply. Must be a real fun guy for a gal like Faith to work with, I thought. But on the other hand, it worked the opposite way around too. He must have a real hard time trying to get her to do anything. I couldn't see any way the pair might possibly connect to each other.

Whatever bright spark had decided to put the two of them together had to have been seriously tripping.

"She can't stay here. You must realise that." He leaned forward, insofar as he was able, to address me. "She can't avoid her destiny. She's the Chosen One, the only one with the strength and skill to take on the Master. She's the only one that can put a stop to all this horror."

"Or she can die. But then you'll have another shot at him, right?"

He nodded, completely serious, totally missing the edge in my voice.

"I don't buy that," I snarled. "She's not just a game piece, a dart, a bullet, whatever. You and your precious council, you're lining these girls up like they're interchangeable - one dies, the next is picked, yeah? Well, get this; she's a person. She has a right to live."

He blinked at me, but stood up to the onslaught better than I'd expected, wrapping a big blanket of Duty around himself and calmly staring me down. He said, in that soft voice of his, "She has a job to do. A higher purpose. How many of us can say that? Yet she's turning her back upon it."

Remembering his hint of affection for Faith earlier, I knew the only way to get past the duty and appeal to the man was to fight dirty and use the fact he cared to twist him around.

But then maybe, I thought with a spark of hope, it wouldn't be necessary to even consider employing the kind of methods of coercion or imprisonment which Faith had suggested earlier.

"Look, I get where the girl's coming from, man. I fight these creatures, it's my purpose too. But I'm not about to go commit suicide trying to fight a battle I can't win. Better to stay here and fight the fights I can make a difference in. Maybe someday I'll get the urge to take on greater things - and maybe so will she. Give her time. At least grant her a couple of years of life. An experienced slayer is a better slayer, right? If you send 'em out soon as they're picked and barely trained, it's no wonder they're gonna fail."

I was getting to him. He was nodding slowly, his expression slightly sickened. I wondered idly if he'd worked with either of the other two who'd gone to their deaths, before.

2 *City of Doyle*

"And maybe someday, if she survives, she'll be strong enough to take down the Master and set the world to rights," I finished quietly. "But you know that just now, she isn't." I let that sink in for a moment, before driving in the final nail. "Do you really want to give up on her and move on to the next option in line already?"

Wesley, speechless, shook his head.

2.8 Chapter 8

There wasn't much conversation at first while Faith and I chowed down on the Chinese food, which was already mostly cold by the time she arrived.

Wesley didn't eat much. Just getting him from the couch to the table was a struggle. Between the drugs and the pain, I wasn't too surprised that he didn't have a lot of appetite, and the awkwardness with Faith certainly didn't help. He drank all the tea that Faith had brought in, grimacing a little, but apparently preferring this feeble excuse for Chinese tea to any other beverage that we had in the refrigerator.

Faith wouldn't look at Wesley as she disposed of her food and a cold beer or two with exaggerated relish, ignoring the plastic cutlery that remained wrapped in little plastic bags and conspicuously using her fingers instead. When she spoke at all, it was only to me, and she kept on making a point of calling me either "boss" or "lover," usually with her mouth full. I wouldn't have minded being called either one, except that she made it so obvious that the entire exercise was solely to annoy Wesley.

I'm not much for small talk myself, but if I didn't do or say something to break the tension, I figured that between the phony sweetness that Faith was putting on and the half-congealed Chinese food I was choking down, I might be getting a close and personal look at my dinner more than once this evening.

"So, Wes, what can you tell us about what happened to the last two slayers? Seems to me, it would be useful to know."

Wesley shot me a glance that was halfway between irritation and relief.

"According to our contact in Sunnydale, the Master killed one of them personally. The other fell victim to one of his more unusual minions, or so I'm told."

"You've got a contact on the Hellmouth? And still alive?"

"As far as I know, yes, although it would not surprise me if that situation changed." Faith looked bored, as Wesley elaborated: "We do have a man in Sunnydale who was trained as a Watcher."

"And so now he sits around and watches slayers die. Yippee ki yay," Faith muttered.

Ignoring Faith, Wesley went on: "For whatever it's worth, the first slayer who was sent to Sunnydale, Buffy - "

I nearly choked on my rice. "Buffy? What - ?"

Misunderstanding, Wesley huffed: "It would be against Watcher's Council policy to disclose the full name of any slayer, even after her death. For the protection of their families. Surely you understand."

I wasn't sure if that was an intentional reference to my personal history, or if Wesley just had an uncanny talent for putting his foot in his mouth, even with his leg in a cast. "I wasn't asking for the rest of her name. Buffy? What kind of name is that for a slayer?"

"With a name like that, maybe she actually died of embarrassment," Faith put in, snickering through a mouthful of egg roll.

"The Master broke her neck, as you already know," Wesley responded coldly. "I fail to see any cause for amusement in that. However, she was able to slay two of his most effective minions before she herself died. Unfortunately, by the time the next slayer, Kendra, arrived, the Master had already brought reinforcements in to bolster his ranks."

"Yeah, I'd guess that'd be what reinforcements do," I concurred dryly. "Speaking of reinforcements, why hasn't the Council tried to provide the slayers with some backup against the Master?"

"Until Buffy, the Council's policy toward the Master was one of containment. His activities have been primarily confined to Sunnydale, so far. However, we recognize the inevitability of expansion of the scope of his sphere of influence if it is not checked. Communities elsewhere are feeling the repercussions as word of the Master spreads among the worldwide vampire population."

Faith yawned, and then shoved another egg roll into her open mouth. Wesley looked irritated, but kept on talking. I had the feeling they'd played out this scene so many times that they could have done it in their sleep.

2 *City of Doyle*

"Kendra was sent to Sunnydale with the intention of maintaining a holding action, in order to block any further expansion by the Master until other forces could be brought into play. Sadly, she did not survive long enough to accomplish that purpose. It appears that one of the Master's new minions has some type of hypnotic power."

"Like some of those old tales about vampires?"

Wesley nodded. "While most vampires lack any such ability, from time to time a vampire does manifest the ability to hypnotize victims. From what our contact reports, the Master has apparently found one with this particular skill, and that was sufficient to overcome Kendra."

For the first time during the meal, Faith spoke directly to Wesley. "And you were going to tell me about this when? After Hypno-Vamp had already made it two for two?"

"As it happens, I was already planning to add resistance to that sort of psychic attack to your training regimen, Faith. You made yourself scarce before I had the opportunity to do so."

Faith's glare could've struck him dead. From the way she was flexing her fingers, I was a little concerned that her fist might.

"Did you ever consider sharing that sort of information with the girl?" I cut in. "Seems to me, you're givin' out the orders and leavin' her guessing. She may have jumped to the wrong conclusions, but you didn't give her much help as to findin' the right ones. There's this little thing called communication, guys. Y'know? Sharing information, that sort of thing."

"Oh great," Faith said sarcastically. "When did you pick up the psych degree, Doyle?"

Wesley cleared his throat irritably. "In any case," he continued, "The need for a holding action still exists. I can't reveal the details, but there are already discussions underway with others, both inside and outside Sunnydale, to build a coalition of sorts against the Master. This will take some time, however, and the Master only grows stronger as time passes."

"Well, stallin' the Master is all well and good, but I'd suggest we figure out a non-fatal way to accomplish it. Do give Faith some credit, man, she came here looking for some trainin' that might actually give her a decent shot at survival, and I'm personally in favor of keepin' this particular slayer around and kicking vampire butt for as long as possible."

At that, Faith flashed a smile at me that promised mischief enough to melt me right where I sat. I had to swallow and catch my breath a moment before I could go on.

"So," I went on, watching Wesley's face, "Y'think maybe the Council could be persuaded that expandin' the trainin' program might be of some benefit?"

Wesley nodded slowly, thoughtfully, and turned slightly to include Faith as he spoke. "We do have a common interest in this matter, whatever you may think of me personally, Faith, and whether you choose to believe it or not." He gave her a long, straight look which made it clear that he knew perfectly well what she thought of him. "Each Watcher is customarily assigned only to a single slayer, although exceptions have been made on occasion. A successful Watcher is one who keeps the slayer both alive and active for as long as possible. So, if you choose to give me no credit for anything else, you might accept that it is in my self-interest to maintain you in that status."

Faith, with her mouth full of sesame chicken and a dollop of sauce escaping to her chin, had the good grace to look slightly abashed at that.

"For so long as you are fulfilling your responsibility as a slayer, I can justify your remaining here for a reasonable time to diversify your training. I know of no reason why you cannot continue to function as a slayer while you assist Mr. Doyle, provided, however, that you continue training with me as well. Given my current condition," and Wesley made a deprecating gesture towards himself and his makeshift leg cast, "I would expect my own input will likely be limited to the non-physical aspects of your training for the next few months, which will include resistance to hypnotism and other forms of psychic attack."

His eyes settled on me speculatively, and I groaned inwardly as I anticipated what was coming next. "Of course, while I am unable to spar with you, I am certain Mr. Doyle will have no objections to assisting in that respect."

I was sure that was smug humour I could see sitting just behind his eyes. Sparring with Faith, even in training, sounded a lot less than fun. I winced at even the idea of it. "Thanks a lot, man," I muttered.

"Anyway," Wesley swept on swiftly. "I'm sure working with Mr. Doyle will be quite useful for honing your fighting skills and maintaining combat readiness while I am out of commission. Beyond my recovery, I make no promises."

Before Faith could speak, I cut in quickly. "We'll take it a day at a time then. Faith works with both of us, until Faith herself decides otherwise. Fair enough?"

2 *City of Doyle*

"For the moment. It seems to me to be an acceptable interim arrangement," Wesley agreed, even as Faith began to splutter indignantly.

"Wait a minute. You mean he has to be here? Like, every day?"

I shrugged. "Does anybody have a better idea?" Getting no response from Faith beyond a sullen look, I turned back to Wesley. "So, have your Watcher studies been limited to vampires, or are you fairly familiar with the different types of demons, too?" It occurred to me that it might be wise to find out whether my second unexpected houseguest would know enough to be able to classify a Brachen in the non-threatening category.

Wesley straightened slightly in his chair, wincing as he did. "I'll have you know that I am noted for my skill at research. I am fluent in numerous languages, both human and demon. Oh, and by the way.."

"Yeah?"

Staring at the scattered containers of Chinese food on the table with distaste, he added: "Also, I can cook. If you could bring in some groceries, and perhaps some sort of crutch to give me some limited mobility around your kitchen, perhaps we could have something fit for human consumption around here. If we all die of food poisoning, that would tend to make the issue of the fulfillment of Faith's responsibilities entirely a moot point. "

Faith laughed. "That one was a fair shot, boss-man o' mine." Again, her grin and the mocking tone in her voice told me that she knew perfectly well who was really in charge around here, and had been since the moment she walked in the door. "S'all right then, I'm game to give it a try for awhile."

"Truce, then?"

She nodded. "Truce for now." She glanced briefly at Wesley, then back to me. "If you can put up with keeping him around, I guess I can too, just as long as he stays out of the way."

"Sounds like we have a deal, then," I said, wondering what I was getting myself into, but extending a hand across the littered table to Wesley anyway. He took it, responding with a surprisingly firm handshake, and Faith put her hand over mine, her fingers still sticky with sauce.

"So, we're five by five then. Cool. Anybody want dessert?"

3 Deceiver and Deceived

by Roseveare and Mike Dewar

3.1 Chapter 1

The office building seemed quiet, when I cautiously stuck my head around the front door, but that was no guarantee.

I closed the door behind me silently, with the utmost of caution, and debated my options, lookin' at the stairs.

Up or down? Where was the danger most likely to lurk?

Hardly daring to breathe for fear of being heard, I began to ascend the stairs. I was halfway up when a step creaked as I transferred my weight onto it.

"Mr. Doyle? Is that you?" Immediately, the oh-so-polite, British voice floated up from downstairs. "Could you please come down here a moment?"

I spat out a stream of obscenities under my breath, and called back, "Be right there, man." Then I trudged back down the steps to the basement apartment.

My basement apartment...

...which I'd never had any intention of sharing with some pompous, tight-assed Watcher with his leg in a cast...

...was a chaos of books and papers.

"Can you pass me the Encyclopaedia Diabolica from over there?" Wesley's disembodied voice emerged from somewhere in all the mess.

I was too busy staring around in utter disbelief. I didn't know where all this stuff had come from, especially in the space of ten hours since I'd left the office that morning to meet up with Kate. I was certain I'd had nowhere near this amount of texts in my small library of demonology research.

3 Deceiver and Deceived

"What the hell's goin' on?" I spluttered.

"I am attempting to properly reference your research library." His voice was emanating from behind the enormous pile of books on the table. *My table*. It was bowed in the middle from all the weight on it, and if I craned my neck, I could just about see Wesley's cast sticking out from beneath. "Not to mention ordering some essential editions to fill the truly lamentable gaps in your collection. It's disgraceful, Mr. Doyle, and I don't know how a seasoned fighter of the forces of darkness such as yourself can stand to work from this paltry collection. Furthermore, it's beyond me how you ever find anything amongst what you do have, considering your haphazard shelving system."

"Well 'scuse me," I snapped. "But the last time any of these here tomes came in useful in a case, the perpetrator had broken into the office and the book happened to be the heaviest item on hand to brain him with."

I edged around the overloaded table as Wesley's laughter rose from the other side of it. He looked up at me disparagingly, and said, "I'm not at all surprised. Mr. Doyle, you're not an unintelligent man, and surely you can see you're wasting a resource here with this criminal lack of organisation. Nevertheless, do not fear. I shall have it all sorted out and properly catalogued in a matter of days."

"Days?" I repeated, running my eyes once again over the horrendous mess. I could see the piles of torn off wrapping and delivery notes, now. The bastard had waited 'til I'd gone out for a day, then ordered everything delivered. He'd better not have put it all on the office tab, I fumed, with the distinct feeling that he had.

"Maybe a week or two," he amended.

I restrained my temper. He was extremely close to gettin' a demon-powered fist in his smugly smiling face. And since I hadn't yet gotten around to explaining about my demon side to him, it wouldn't really be the punch which came as the major shock.

I kicked a pile of books instead and stomped off to the kitchen to make a coffee, ignoring his berating voice trailing after me.

3.2 Chapter 2

Now, when Faith turned up at my office, having invited herself to join forces with me, I admit I didn't put up a whole lot of resistance to the concept. Especially after the sexual acrobatics - it has to be said, the girl sure knows how to twist a guy around to her point of view.

But I hardly expected the girl would make herself scarce within a week, leaving me to baby-sit her incapacitated Watcher.

I ventured from the kitchen a few minutes later, by which time Wesley had abandoned his work at the table and was hopping around on his crutches. He pointedly waved the book he held in his hand - "Encyclopaedia Diabolica", the elaborate letters on the dust-jacket said.

Faith had brought in the crutches. I didn't know where she'd got them from and I didn't want to know. Largely because I had a strong suspicion that somewhere, on some LA street corner, there was a very pissed off one-legged war vet.

"I must say," Wesley remarked casually, poking through the contents of a large, opened package which retaliated by spilling polystyrene pieces over the floor. "I don't entirely understand why you do what you do. Fighting the forces of evil seems a... peculiar career choice."

"You chose to become a Watcher," I pointed out.

"Ah. Yes, well... That's... sort of a family tradition," he said, flustered. "Besides which, the Watcher's Council is a respectable, if secret, institution. I do wonder how it was you came to do this sort of thing... alone."

The query in his voice was obvious. But I didn't respond to his clumsy digging. After a moment's silence, he prompted, hopefully, "Faith said you used to be in the police force."

"That's true enough." I wondered if he'd believe me if I told him what I used to do before that, and didn't bother trying.

Wesley gave up and changed the subject, to one only slightly less uncomfortable. "Erm, speaking of Faith, I don't suppose you know where she is?"

He looked up from his box for the first time and his eyes, suddenly distracted, fixed on the mug in my hand. "You couldn't get me a cup of tea, could you?"

"No, I couldn't. There isn't any left. You drank it all."

"Coffee, then?"

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Grumbling under my breath, I thrust my untouched cup at him and went back through the kitchen to fix myself another. I got some entertainment from the manner in which he was forced to juggle the cup, almost overbalancing on his crutches in the process.

"Faith," he reminded, after a pause, his voice carrying through to the kitchen, slightly muffled.

"She's around," I growled evasively.

"I don't seem to have seen her in a while."

"Yeah? Well, in theory at least, she - like some other people I could mention - doesn't actually live here. Plus you aren't exactly her favourite person. And the slayin' work has been a little thin on the ground this past week."

"She's avoiding me?" he asked, slightly pained.

"Don't worry 'bout it. I'm sure she'll turn up when she's hungry."

He laughed, briefly.

I picked up my second attempt at a soothing fix of caffeine and sipped it as I headed back into the mess which was my apartment. That was when the vision hit.

They sure pick their moments. My hand spasmed on the cup and it exploded into pieces, splashing me with its hot contents. I guess I just wasn't destined to get that coffee anytime soon.

The images slammed through me in seconds and left me standing there shakily with splinters of cup sticking out of my palm and Wesley staring at me with a truly annoying interest.

"That was one of your visions?" He hadn't actually seen me experience one before, although Faith had told him about it. It was something he seemed to find quite fascinating. I'm pretty certain he'd have another view entirely if it was his brain the Powers had chosen to regularly assault with mind-numbingly painful visions.

Cursing, I hastily pulled the splinters of broken pottery out of my hand and crossed to the weapons cabinet, tripping over piles of books. I slammed open the doors and wondered what the hell I had that might kill the thing I'd just seen.

"Any books in that lot that you can use to look up some information on a demon for me real quick?" I asked.

"Certainly." He sounded puzzled. "What kind of a demon?"

"A *really big* one. I don't know and I don't have time to describe it. You'll know when you see it. Just grab some books you think will be useful and head for the car."

I snatched up the biggest axe from the weapons cabinet, and discovered it looked a lot smaller than I remembered in view of what I'd just seen. "Shit." I grabbed a broadsword as well, and a crossbow for Wesley.

Wesley, books under his arm, was clumping towards the door on his crutches. "Faith would be useful," he remarked, the sarcasm dripping from his voice. "A little supernatural strength wouldn't go amiss."

"I've been doin' this for years," I snapped, offended by the implication. "I don't bloody need Faith... I'll leave a note."

I dropped the weapons on the floor and scrawled a few sentences on a piece of paper.

I left it pinned to the elevator doors as we hurried out through the hallway.

3.3 Chapter 3

"Could you... possibly... go a little slower!" Wesley choked out. In the mirror, I could see him sprawled across the back seat and trying to stay in place. His hands were gripped white-knuckled on handholds on ceiling and door, and crutches, leg cast, books and cell phone were all bouncing merrily around the upholstery.

"Sorry, pal. But this demon's about to make a meal of a real nice little blonde, and I kinda think we should be hurryin'." I took a sharp left down a dark, narrow street, approaching the area I'd seen in my vision.

He withdrew into silence, for all of a few seconds. "I hope Faith gets your note. What you've mentioned about this creature sounds less than encouraging."

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I didn't reply. Faith wasn't going to come back until she was ready to, and I sincerely doubted that was going to be in the next hour or so. Besides, I had other things to think about. I could see the demon from my vision up ahead, outlined by a street light. It looked even bigger in the flesh; had to be about nine feet tall. A crumpled human figure lay on the ground at its feet, a splay of bright hair glittering in an incandescent pool on the ground around the girl's head.

"Good grief," Wesley said as he caught his first sight of the demon. "Mr. Doyle, I really think... Doyle!"

His yelp, almost a shriek, came as he evidently caught on to the fact I wasn't slowing down, and wasn't going to.

I drove straight up onto the sidewalk and ploughed into the demon, missing the girl by what I hoped was a margin of a few inches. I only hit the brakes after I'd hit the creature, when it was already too late to slow down completely to avoid impact with the imminent wall.

The car shook horrendously, but the demon sandwiched between it and the brickwork absorbed most of the impact, and it wasn't actually as bad as I'd been expecting.

Wesley, from the back of the car, whimpered incoherently.

I reached down and pulled the crossbow from where it lay among the other weapons, wrapped in protective cloth - mostly to protect from public view - at the foot of the front passenger seat. I tossed it over into the back to Wesley.

"If things get desperate, use that. If I look like I'm about to get dead, use the 'cell to phone the cops. For the moment, get your nose into those books and find out what it is I'm fightin' and how the hell I'm meant to kill it."

"I should think a much wiser plan of action would be to get the young lady into the car and drive away from here as quickly as humanly possible," he objected.

"Just do it!" I snapped, angrily because that sounded sorta good to me, too, looking at the demon I had to take on. But the PTB hadn't sent me a vision of this thing so that I could run away from it.

"Right," Wesley said, looking put out.

No more time for gabbing; the demon was starting to stir, its struggles actually moving the car as it shifted. I grabbed the sword and climbed out to face it.

"Good luck," Wesley muttered. From his tone of voice I gathered he already considered me a walking dead man. Then he yelped in fear as, with a sudden heave, the creature threw off the car and sent it sliding back several feet. I watched it once again just miss the girl, going so close this time that a wheel actually ran over her flowing blonde hair. She let out a soft cry and flinched away. Not dead then, I thought with some relief.

I raised the sword and ran at the creature while it was still dizzily shaking itself and climbing unsteadily to its feet. A swing of the blade opened up a broad slash across its midsection... which proceeded to heal up instantly before my eyes.

"Oh, hell." If it had that sort of regenerative ability, I didn't think I had brought anything with me that could really hurt it.

Curses and the rustling noise of pages being frantically turned abruptly began to emanate from the back of the car.

The demon appeared to notice me for the first time. It peered down its nose at me - a long way down, it's gotta be said - and sniffed. "Brachen," it croaked, in what was barely recognisable as a voice. Its throat seemed to form the words out of a series of clicking sounds.

"What did it say?" Wesley yelled, kicking the back door open with his undamaged leg so his voice reached me more clearly through the body of the car.

"Nothin' important. Just tell me how to kill it." This was not the time to provide him with a belated explanation of my demon half.

I swung the sword again, aiming to try a different tactic. It had its head on one side and was looking sorta confused, perhaps wondering why another demon would choose to attack it. Anyway, it was distracted, and I managed to sever one of its arms just below the elbow joint.

I'd see how its regenerative abilities dealt with that one.

Well, its reflexes were definitely recovered - its immediate response was to tear the sword from my hands with an ease that came as a real jolt to my confidence. Then it simply picked me up before I could dodge and hurled me several yards through the air.

I landed, face-down, in a sprawl on the roof of the car.

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My demon form, dragged out just prior to the impact, protected me somewhat. But I still lay there for several seconds, feeling the shuddering protests drawn out of the metal by my heavy landing reverberating through my body.

"Doyle! Doyle!" Wesley's frustrated yells from inside the car drew me back to the less-than-wonderful situation on hand. A moment later, I heard him talking frantically into the cell-phone.

Groaning, I sat up, shaking off my demon form before I unsteadily jumped down from the car. I just managed to keep my legs from buckling beneath me when I landed.

The demon was reattaching its arm, a fairly disgusting process which nonetheless afforded me a few necessary moments' grace.

I looked around for the sword and, not seeing it anywhere, staggered over to the front passenger door to retrieve the axe instead.

"You're all right," Wesley said, sounding surprisingly relieved, as I opened the door. "It's a Torunak Demon. I've discovered that much. Unfortunately the Encyclopaedia Diabolica doesn't have much more than an illustration and a name. I'll see if Rowther's Demonology Index can do any better."

"Yeah. Great. You called the cops?" Didn't like to think what they'd make of this, but I didn't think I could handle it on my own and a distraction might at least let us get out of there alive.

"No. I tried. Your battery went dead."

I cursed. "Keep lookin'." I hefted the axe and headed back into the fight, intercepting the now-recovered demon just in time to prevent it from seeing how far it could throw the car complete with Wesley inside it.

I hacked at its arms, breaking its grip on the car. Its claws left streaks in my paintwork. It shoved me aside even as the cuts I'd made with the axe healed themselves.

Trying to stay on my feet, I reeled, off-balance, bounced off the front of the car, and ended up in a shabby heap on the ground. My head spun. I heard Wesley cry out in fear and realised, damn it, that the demon wasn't much interested in me. It was after human prey.

I struggled up again. The demon was reaching inside the car, through the opened door. I wasn't going to be in time -

The demon staggered back from the car with a crossbow bolt sticking out of its eye.

Wesley could actually shoot straight...? Nah, it *must've* been a lucky shot...

The demon wrenched at the bolt, pulling it out. The instant it was out, the wound healed over.

"Here it is," Wesley called, shakily, as I embedded the axe in the demon's head and got thrown against the brick wall for my troubles. The axe hit the wall after and above me and I just managed to roll out of the way in time to avoid getting brained by it. "The Torunak Demon. A fearsome beast, possessed of fantastic regenerative properties. Clans were once plentiful in warmer parts of the world. Believed it originates from the mating of a..."

"Bloody hell, Wesley, I don't wanna know its mating habits, just tell me how to kill it!" I yelled, as the creature's foot came down hard in the spot where my head had been a fraction of a second earlier.

I snatched up the axe again, ducked beneath a swipe of the demon's claws, scrambled inside its reach on hands and knees and sank the axe into its foot. I didn't have the leverage I needed to cut right the way through. The massive demon's other foot came down in a hard stamp on top of my own leg and I had no choice but to switch to my demon form, otherwise it would've splintered my bones worse off than Wesley's.

Something twisted and dislocated in my right leg, and I yelled in pain. I wondered what the hell Wesley was delaying over. Knowing my luck, all the book contained about Torunak Demons was an essay on their mating habits.

With an effort I managed to lift the axe up for another blow, bring it down hard as I could, and cut off the creature's bloody foot.

This time I thrust the disgusting severed demon-part as far as I could away from it, and with satisfaction watched it keep rolling until it wedged itself in the gutter at the side of the road. The demon, howling, tried to lunge after it and fell with a crash that shook the ground.

I hunched over and wrenched my knee joint back into place with an audible snap, and switched back to human. In demon form I could take the damage; it didn't make it hurt any less, though.

If Wesley had seen, I was gonna have some serious explaining to do. Although, in the dark, with the demon obscuring his view, I doubted he had seen.

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As for the Torunak Demon... I lifted the axe and staggered over to where it still floundered on the ground trying to get up. As I prepared to strike the blade down onto its neck, it said, in its odd, clicking tones, "Others will avenge me, little man-demon."

"Yeah, pal. You believe that if it makes you feel better."

Once it was in enough pieces to satisfy me that it wasn't about to pull itself together anytime soon - although the option of chopping it up into dogmeat and burying it piecemeal definitely seemed wise - I headed back to the car.

Wesley blinked at me nervously; I guess I must've looked a sight, covered in the demon's yellow blood. He thrust a book at me. I took it from his hand and stared at it. "What's this?"

"It's one of those useless old tomes," he mocked, in what was presumably meant to be an imitation of my accent. After a moment, he extended a finger to tap a small line drawing on the opened page, and added the curt explanation, "This symbol. The Mark of Nammohn. Protective rune. Scares the stuffing out of them. Or... you can just chop them up into puree, that works too."

3.4 Chapter 4

We got the girl to a hospital and the demon-bits to various sealed boxes dumped throughout the city. Then I drove the two of us back to the office.

My note was still there. Faith, predictably, wasn't.

Wesley had been unusually quiet and withdrawn in the aftermath of the fight. "You all right?" I asked, as he stood contemplating Faith's note while I locked the door of the office building behind us.

He actually flinched slightly at my voice. I studied him, noticing how pale he looked. "Your leg hurting? Banged it in the fight, huh?"

He stuttered a moment, then nodded, "Y-yes. It aches somewhat." He changed the subject, indicating the note, "Wonder what she's doing, eh? Crazy girl, always running around. Gone on walkabout again, yes?" He tutted and laughed uneasily.

I frowned, wondering if he hadn't got his medication mixed up with something Faith had brought in. I said, warily, "She'll be back. Does it all the time, right? Isn't that what you said?"

"Indeed, indeed. To me, to any number of her, um, male acquaintances..."

I glared at him sourly. I didn't really want to share with him exactly how I felt about that; despite his tales of her wildness, not to mention said acquaintances, I'd kind of hoped... well. "I get what the girl's like," I snapped. "And now, if you don't mind, I think we have more important business to sort out. Like locating the rest of those Torunak things."

He spluttered and choked, and almost fell off his crutches. The hand I shot out to steady him was the only thing that kept him upright. "The rest of them?" he managed finally, appalled.

"Yeah." I sighed, and helped him into the elevator; we descended to the basement apartment. "When you were readin', you said they came in clans, right? And before it died, it told me others would come to avenge it."

"Good grief."

"Yeah." One of the things had been very nearly too much for me. "So - we gotta sort out some crossbow bolts with that Mark of Gammon on them or somethin'. Not to mention findin' where the hell these things are hidin' out. Must be some place good. After all, you wouldn't think they'd be easy to miss."

3.5 Chapter 5

I guess it's in moments like these that Watchers really shine. I have to hand it to Wes, within five minutes of us getting back to the office, he was rocketing around on crutches, reading as he went. Of course, when you move at speed on crutches while reading books, disaster is almost guaranteed.

"Ouch!" Wesley's distressed voice came from the main body of the apartment, accompanied by a teeth-rattling crunch. I stared longingly at the pork sandwich I was making, and then, with a sigh of surrender, I went to help the beleaguered Watcher. So much for my late-night research snack-fest.

Fortunately for Wesley, he'd managed to land on one of the cardboard boxes of assorted research stuff he'd had brought in earlier. The books inside were probably a bit worse for wear, but Wesley's skull was still intact. As I reached down to lend his feeble figure a hand, a crutch nearly took my head off.

"Hey, watch it!" I yelled. "Save the stunning blows to the head for the bad guys!"

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" Oh, um, sorry," Wesley apologised, giving me a distressed look. Grabbing hold of his arm, I heaved him to his feet. " Thank you, I... um... slipped."

" I never would have guessed," I answered dryly, glancing at the flattened box Wesley had landed on. The Watcher, following my gaze, gave a little yelp of dismay and began to prod gingerly at his precious research supplies.

" Oh dear... " he said, inspecting the label. "That had quite an interesting set of tomes on fire demons in it... " From the scholarly look on his face, I could just tell a lecture on how useful knowing about fire demons would be to our operation was approaching. "Because after all, fire demons are surprisingly common and remarkably perilous... "

Who says you need to get mind-numbing visions to see the future?

I broke in. " As intriguing as this is, man, don't you think we should focus on the big, angry demons we're supposed to kill?"

Wesley nodded as if I had made a very radical, yet interesting, point. "Yes, of course. They'll be time enough for fire demons later."

" Can't wait," I told him, laying on the irony with a big trowel.

" Anyway, back to the matter at hand... " Wesley sniffed eagerly. "Do I smell pork?"

" I'll make you a sandwich," I said, praying for strength. "You get with the research, I'll start buttering."

" Thank you very much," Wesley replied, pottering towards my table. I turned and headed for the kitchen. "Could you add some lettuc -" I ignored the rest.

I spent the next fifteen minutes in a happy little world of my own, slicing pork and spreading mayonnaise, ignoring the constant muttering and occasional thuds coming from the rest of the apartment.

Unfortunately, I finally reached the point at which I had made as many pork sandwiches as was humanly possible. Plus, I ran out of mayonnaise. As I wandered out of the kitchen, carrying two plates with badly constructed sandwiches stacked high, I saw Wesley over by my table speaking urgently into the phone.

" Yes, I understand that!" he said sharply. "Yes, resources are limited... that's all very well, but I have a serious situation here...no, there's no other way... Watchers aren't exactly common in California, you know! Well, Rupert Giles lives on a Hellmouth and I can't very well get to him with a broken leg, can I? I'm doing the best I can... you have to contact them, I -"

" Wes?"

Wesley started violently, dropping the phone. As the receiver banged against the side of my table, I heard an irate British voice say tinnily, "Hello? Are you there, Wyndham-Pryce?" There was the click of a disconnecting line.

Wesley shook with adrenalin. "You gave me a terrible start," he said nervously. "I nearly lost control of my bowel movements!"

" Well, we can all be thankful you didn't," I said easily. "Who was on the phone?"

" The, um, Watcher's Council," Wesley said, taking a step back, like he expected me to clobber him for consorting with his Watcher pals.

" Oh? Anything interesting to say about our friends the Torunaks?" I asked, plonking the sandwiches down on the table, which seemed weighted with a few too many books just for researching one species. I guess Wes was still trying to order my collection at the same time.

Wesley seemed quite surprised at my reaction, as if he'd expected something quite different. He obviously thought that I agreed with Faith about the usefulness of Watchers. To be honest, I'd never thought about it much. "Uh, no, not really."

Looked like Faith had a point.

I shrugged and clapped him on the shoulder. "Well, nice try anyway." Wesley flinched; obviously he was still shook up from the fight. "Sorry," I apologised.

" No, no problem really," he said, bending over the sandwiches and prodding at them.

" What's the matter?" I asked cheerfully, trying to boost the mood a little. "Don't you like my cooking?"

3 Deceiver and Deceived

Wesley stared at the curling sandwiches in vague horror. While he gingerly nibbled at one staring into the distance, I let my eyes roam over the table. Lying shoved off to one side, left over from Wes's filing, was a book with a cursory drawing of a Brachen. I hastily slammed it shut, hoping Wes hadn't seen it. "So, what do we have on our new bestest pals?" I asked, sitting casually down on the corner of the already creaking table, circumspectly pushing the book off the edge as I did so.

Wesley's eyes refocused on me. "What? Oh, yes. Torunaks...there really doesn't seem to be anything of interest beyond what we already know. They like darkness and tunnels, but you'd be hard-pressed to find a demon who doesn't. They're also very in favour of vengeance. Wrong one, and the entire clan comes calling."

"Wonderful. Do you think chopping one of them up into chicken nuggets qualifies as 'wronging'?" An entire clan of those things. I really missed Faith about then.

"I see your point," Wesley said soberly. He perked up a little. "I could probably simulate their mating call with some accuracy, though."

"Great," I said. "If I can't get a date on a Saturday night, you'll be the first man I call." Wesley shot me a sharp look. "Kidding."

I bit into one of my own sandwiches with a mixture of displeasure and resignation.

I can't cook, I know this. However, over the years, I've learnt to shut down my taste buds when necessary, so as to make it through a full meal when I can't afford takeout. From the fact that Wesley hadn't made it halfway through his sandwich, I guessed Watcher training hadn't taught him this valuable skill. "So what now?" I asked through a mouthful of pork.

Wesley shrugged, daintily placing the rejected sandwich down on its plate. "I could ask you the same question. I'm drawing a bit of a blank."

"Well, let me lend a hand. Double the brainpower and all." I picked up a book at random and something white and thin slid off the table from beneath it. I bent down to scoop it up and froze.

It was a faded picture of Harry and me at a picnic. I'd finished my classes early that day, so we went to go and pick up some lunch, to eat on the beach...I felt sick to the pit of my stomach.

"Where did you get this?" I asked Wesley quietly, holding the photo cupped in my hand.

"I...um...I..."

"Where did you *get* this, Wesley?" I demanded furiously. "Have you been poking around my stuff?" I could feel the tingling on my skin - I was on the edge of the change, but I was so angry I didn't care.

"No," he answered with quiet dignity, but there a hint of fear in his eyes. "I went to fetch a book from your bedroom. I bent over to pick it up off the bed, rather too hastily, I fear, and lost my balance. I grabbed onto your bedside table for support and pulled a drawer all the way out, spilled everything. The photo must have slid inside the book without my noticing."

I deflated slowly, the urgent tingling reducing somewhat. "I...sorry, man. Didn't mean to jump down your throat like that."

Wesley peered at the picture. "Who is she?" he asked gently.

I stared at Harry's curly hair and her pleasant smile. "Who *was* she, Wes. That's Harry Doyle."

"Your sister," Wesley guessed.

My throat burnt as I spoke. "No, Wesley. My wife."

3.6 Chapter 6

I realise it was probably irrational to storm out the office and slam the door on Wesley. After all, the guy didn't really know me at all, and couldn't have any clue as to the memories he'd inadvertently stirred up.

Harry...

It had been over three years now, but her memory still cut.

I don't know how it can work like that - that you can spend so many years of happiness with somebody, but in the end, looking back, never be able to get beyond that one last day where it all fell apart.

That day casts its shadow back, to colour everything that happened before it. It's shaped everything I've done since.

3 Deceiver and Deceived

I had the photographs developed later; a long time after, because for a long time I didn't want to be reminded. Most of them came out marred, or didn't come out at all, after being abandoned for so long in a camera no longer ever used because I wasn't making any memories I wanted to remember.

There is only that one perfect picture, the one carelessly scattered from the pages of Wesley's book.

3.7 Chapter 7

Since I might as well be doing something to give my inappropriate tantrum some form of excuse, I took the opportunity to visit a few of my less savoury non-human contacts in the city. I could at least attempt to help Wesley's researching by finding out anything they might know about the Torunak demons.

Can't precisely say I much liked what I heard.

By the sound of it, these guys were pretty bad even by demon standards.

The morning came and slunk by as I visited various demon hangouts. I felt the lack of the sleep I hadn't had more keenly as the day dragged on, with every hour I let slip past.

The afternoon was beginning to draw to a close when I finally decided it was time to return to the office. Time to face Wesley again, as little as I liked the idea after the way I'd behaved, and share the discouraging news with him... not that he hadn't probably found out lots more on his own from his book-work, I admitted to myself, somewhat sourly.

I began to work my way back, still trying to psych myself up to an apology for the way I'd behaved before.

I reluctantly made one last stop, calling by a small demon bar on-route back to the office.

The place was owned by Eddie, a human-looking demon whose precise species I wasn't too sure of, who seemed to have a knack for collecting information. I hadn't wanted to approach the guy because, well, let's just say he tended to hang out with a less-than-friendly crowd. But nobody I'd questioned so far seemed to know where the Torunak demons might be hiding in the city and if anyone did, it would be Eddie.

The bar-room was dingy and none of the regulars seemed to be around - in fact, the place seemed empty apart from the guy behind the bar. Which suited me just fine.

Eddie looked up as I walked over, and frowned. "Told you not to come in here now you don't have that badge to wave around any more," he said sourly. "I know what you're doing these days, and a lot of my regulars know too and they aren't exactly happy. Vamps was okay - I mean, who gives a shit about them anyway? Snotty bunch, think they're better than us just 'cause they've got their own hellmouth - but you've been targeting anyone who occasionally likes a bite of Human as an appetiser since you started this PI crap. You keep coming in here, you're going to get yourself killed. And that reflects poorly on me and my business."

"Well, I don't see any of your guys here right now, so what say you give me ten minutes," I responded, indicating the empty room. "And after that I won't stick around any longer to blacken your reputation."

His eyes darted around, but he reluctantly nodded. Alone, he didn't have much in the way of choice. "What do you want to know?" he asked resignedly.

"Torunaks. Hear of any recently?" I leaned on the bar, and absently reached over to snag the bottle of whisky he'd been pouring from. I sniffed at it. Lousy stuff, but I knocked back a gulp anyway and winced.

"You're paying for that, right?" he asked uncertainly. I gave him a look, and he sighed and said, "Torunaks, huh? Aren't you taking on a bit much there, for some Brachen halfbreed? I once saw a pair of them in a brawl with a whole clan of Ano-Movics... the result was not pretty, and the Torunaks walked out without a scratch on them. Those guys have some serious muscle."

"Yeah, I know. And grateful as I am for your overwhelming and touching concern, can you just tell me where the hell they are?"

"There's this old warehouse downtown... access to the sewers and the rail system. Actually, it's funny you should mention Torunaks, 'cause there's been a few of them asking around after you."

I froze, midway through another draw on the whisky; choked and spluttered the foul stuff all over the bar. "Tell me you're shitting me."

He shook his head. I could have sworn the trace of a grin touched the edges of his mouth.

3 Deceiver and Deceived

I slammed the bottle down on the bar and wondered frantically what to do now.

"Hey, calm down, Doyle." I could tell the bastard was just loving every minute. "You've time yet to get the hell out of the city... well, maybe an hour or two, at any rate. They won't be doing anything 'til after dark. They don't precisely pass. You ever seen a Torunak?"

"That's sorta the problem, Eddie."

"Well, so long as you didn't off these guys' cousin or anything."

"For all I know they might be his brothers," I snapped.

Eddie went abruptly pale. I'd barely blinked but suddenly a gun had appeared in his hand. He must've had it under the bar there. I was slipping, and less than six months off the force... "You're out of here, Doyle. I don't know you, I never spoke to you. Shit, what the hell did you think you were doing? Offing Torunaks... those guys are serious trouble."

"Great. That's just great. Thanks, man. Its real good to know I got friends."

"I'm not your friend, Doyle. Considering your line of work and charming personal skills, I'd be surprised if you had any. Get out of here."

"Hang on," I said, ignoring the gun and the insult with an effort. "They were asking about me, you said. You mean they asked *you* about me, don't you? You *didn't* tell them what they wanted to know?"

Eddie looked me calmly in the eye. "I said I hadn't seen you in weeks. Now, go. I mean it."

Lying bastard... I shot out a hand to bash the gun aside and it went off, the bullet scraping the inside of my wrist and leaving a red trail before it continued on its way to splinter the mirror on the wall behind me. I gripped and twisted his arm with my other hand, feeling the strain of the muscles and bones under my grasp starting to give way.

I wasn't sure whether he'd meant to shoot me or not, but the graze stung and it certainly didn't improve my mood any.

I grabbed his collar awkwardly, my wrist protesting at the rough movement. "You wanna argue with someone who offed a Torunak? Go ahead," I growled. "What did you tell them?"

"I didn't tell them anything," he choked.

In a quick motion I bounced his face off the bar. Dragged him back up with his nose bloody and one hell of a bruise starting on his forehead.

"Okay, okay! Hell, Doyle... I told them you were a PI, and a good one. I said you used to be a cop. I said you had an office. Told them to use the phone directory. That's all, I swear! What was I supposed to do? If you've met these guys before, you know what they're like... My advice? Don't go back to your office. Just get clean out of this city."

I didn't believe him. But he was probably more scared that telling me he'd sung like a canary would get him killed than he was that keepin' to his current assertion would, and I seriously didn't have the time to waste on him. I punched him out and left him slumped over the bar. Let his regulars find him later.

It occurred to me someone else might be in danger, if the Torunaks were checking around. "Mind if I use your phone, man?" I asked Eddie's unconscious figure, vaulting the bar and snatching up the receiver. Spikes got in the way when I raised it to my face, which came as a surprise 'cause I hadn't even realised I was in demon form. I switched back to human, cursing.

That'd better not happen too often. Out on the street in broad daylight... in front of Wesley in the office... *Hell.*

I couldn't remember the extension number the nurse at the hospital had given me last night, but found it scrawled on a scrap of paper in my jacket pocket after some searching, and dialled.

"Hello? Francis Doyle here." I heard my own voice, quick and breathless and panicky. Tried to calm down without much success. "I'm a PI; brought in a young woman last night. A mugging - broken ribs and left arm - Anna Spence, I think the name was. Is she okay? She could be in danger - the individuals who attacked her could come after her again - have you had any other visitors, or callers?"

After some double checking on my own story which took about two minutes but felt like an intolerable delay, the nurse came back to the phone. "Her family took her home this afternoon. I'll have to check with them before I give you their address."

3 Deceiver and Deceived

"Uh... that's okay. They all check out all right? She was conscious, she knew them?"

"Yes. I'll thank you to at least pretend we know how to do our business here, Mr. Doyle."

"Sorry... sorry." I almost put the phone down before I heard her voice buzz shrilly out of the speaker again and set it back to my ear. "What was that?"

"I said, did that journalist manage to get in touch with you all right?"

"Journalist?"

"He hasn't been in touch or left any messages? You'd remember him, he had this weird kind of speech impediment. I'm surprised - he seemed very keen to interview you about what you did for the young lady when he phoned earlier; heroic rescues of damsels in distress and all that. I gave him the number you left. Thought it would be good publicity for your firm. It's not a problem, is it?"

"Uh... thanks." I put the phone down. And launched into a stream of curses.

It was a pretty fair bet that, by now, they knew where the offices were. That Wesley and myself were no longer the hunters, but the hunted.

Wesley...

I dialled the number of the office. It was engaged.

He must be chewing over the Torunak research with his pals at the Watcher's Council again, damn it.

Outside, it was just beginning to get dark. Grabbing the whisky bottle and throwing a few notes back at Eddie's crumpled form, I sprinted out to the car.

I vaulted over the door into the driver's seat and broke about twenty traffic laws on my way back to the office.

3.8 Chapter 8

I crashed through the door of my apartment, praying that I'd find everything in order and Wesley sitting quietly pouring over his books at the table as usual.

Everything looked as it had when I'd left. Except I couldn't see Wesley anywhere. And considering he wasn't particularly mobile with his leg in that cast, that unnerved me a great deal.

He'd probably just gone to the bathroom, I told myself, trying to suppress panic. Still in one piece - still his normal, irritating self. Not lying in a broken, bloody heap somewhere...

Aw, hell...

Okay, so we weren't exactly the best of friends, but he was a decent guy, and with Faith's attitude of indifference to whether the poor sod lived or died, that made me feel kind of responsible for him.

"Wesley!" I yelled, to no reply. The amount of noise I'd made coming in, I could hardly take any intruders by surprise now. I snatched up a sword from the weapons cabinet, and dashed around the apartment, pulling open doors and yelling... finding nothing.

What the hell was going on? There was no Wesley, but no demons either. Could he have gone up to the office...?

I turned to leave at the same moment the figure began to inch out from behind the door. I automatically raised the sword, but froze when I saw who it was.

He looked like I'd scared the hell outta him, too. He staggered, frantically snatching for a better grip on his crutches, and almost fell over before he managed to catch his balance against the wall.

"*Hell, Wesley!*" I choked out with relief, breathing heavily through the aftermath of sheer panic. It had been a while since I'd actually managed to get anyone killed, and I kinda liked to avoid those eventualities. "What d'you think you're - aw, crap, never mind that. Come on, we gotta -"

I didn't get any further. While I was speaking, he'd shakily raised one hand. I could see he was holding something in it, but I didn't realise what it was until it had already left his grasp.

Until the dart he'd thrown was already embedded in my neck.

"What the...?" I reached up and pulled it out. Squinted at it, baffled. An ordinary dart. The kind you throw about in pubs, at dartboards and irritating clientele.

3 Deceiver and Deceived

Upon closer inspection, I noticed it had something other than my blood staining the point.

Everything felt very odd. My body felt like it belonged to somebody else, sensation going all fuzzy and far away.

Drugged...?

I dropped the dart and lunged towards Wesley. I didn't know what the hell was going on. Maybe the Torunaks had got there before me and made some sort of a deal... although that didn't sound much like their style.

Whatever had been on that dart, it sure worked fast. I managed one step before collapsing as though someone had cut my strings.

My forehead bashed painfully hard against the floor tiles as I landed and, once down, I found I couldn't move at all, not even to turn my face from the tiles to look at Wesley, or move my lips to ask *why*.

3.9 Chapter 9

I blinked - about the only movement I was still free to make with any ease. Even my breathing felt heavy and difficult. All I could see were the floor tiles in front of my nose, but I could hear Wesley's own breathing - harsh, sharp, as though he couldn't quite believe what he'd done.

Well, I was with him on that one.

Several seconds passed before I heard cautious footfalls and, through the hazy mess his drugged dart had made of my nervous system, felt a finger hesitantly prod my shoulder. "Doyle?" His breath caught in concern. "Doyle! Are you dead?"

Like I was gonna say, *yeah...*

Hands urgently grabbed my shoulders and he managed with all-too-evident difficulty to roll me onto my back. I blinked angrily up at him. I was still working on speech. Aside from not really knowing what to say, my jaw felt as paralysed as the rest of me.

"Alive," he said with some relief. "My word. For a second there I thought..." He looked genuinely appalled, until he abruptly seemed to remember he'd switched sides. He pulled back and awkwardly hauled himself up on his retrieved crutches. "Of course, the Watchers' Council will want you brought back alive, after what you've tried to do..."

What I'd tried to do? What *had* I tried to do? I managed to half form an indignant protest. It came out as little more than a pissed-off sounding gurgle.

"Yes," Wesley said smugly, gathering confidence. "Thought you could fool the Watchers' Council, did you, demon? Well, fiend, here's one Watcher who wasn't taken in. I *will* find out what you have done with Faith, and destroy whatever demonic influence it is you have over her."

Shit.

I knew I should've explained about my demon side earlier. But then, as awkward conversation-stoppers go, "By the way, I'm a demon" tended to be a doozy, and the time had never seemed right to get confessional. And I'd hardly expected any commando attempts from quiet, civilised, harmless Wesley.

A lot of things I'd found strange about his behaviour since the encounter with the Torunak now fell into place. He must've seen my demon form, after all, in the darkness and the confusion of the fight - and rather than confronting me about it he'd jumped to all the wrong conclusions.

"Wesley..." I managed to snarl. I forced the word out, though it sounded kind of odd, and the fury there probably didn't do too much for my case.

"Don't bother to plead." He cut me off. "Interfering with the duties of the slayer... a serious crime. Whatever did you hope to gain by it?"

I wanted very badly to hit him. I tried hard to move, but nothing happened. I tried switching to demon form but all that achieved was that I was paralysed in demon form. Wesley drew in a breath and stepped back, but regained his courage somewhat when he saw whatever drug he'd shot me with was still holding. I gave up and returned to human.

"You thought I didn't see you change, before, didn't you?" he said. "But I did - granted, not clearly, and only for a second, but that was enough."

3 Deceiver and Deceived

"Wesley, you're an *idiot!*" I snapped, with some effort. "And, much as I'd love to elaborate on that thought for a few hours, we really don't have time. The Torunak demons know where I am, and they're probably already on their way. Even if you don't trust me, you *saw* me chop up that demon last night and you yourself told me about their appetite for vengeance."

He nervously shifted his feet, looking around as though he expected to see the Torunaks bursting through the doors, but when he looked back to me his face was determined. "You're trying to distract me," he said. "For all I know that business last night was all a - a show for my benefit."

"Oh, great. When the clan of very angry demons turns up, you'll believe me. 'Course, by then it'll be too late to do anything about it but die. Come on, Wes! I saved your life when Faith would have left you to get fanged, would I do that if I were evil?"

He frowned at me, and I remembered that was something else I hadn't told him about; that Faith had run off and left him to die, and had only come back because of me.

"How about we get out of here?" I said, desperately.

He remained hesitant. "You lied to me before, and I don't see why I should believe you now..."

"Because we're both dead if you don't."

"Tell me whose blood that is," he said, quietly accusing, indicating the mess daubed all over my hands and wrists. "It looks human to me."

"It's my blood. And it is human... well, mostly. Aw, damn it, *half* then. Left wrist. Look at it if you don't believe me. One of my contacts got a bit jittery."

As if he were still half expecting a trap, he cautiously knelt down and turned over my wrist. "This is a bullet wound," he said, sounding shocked. "What - what do you mean, human... mostly, half?"

"Wesley, *later*. For now, just get the antidote to whatever this crap you shot me full of is, and let's get out of here... and what the hell *did* you shoot me with, anyway?"

"It's a paralytic specially designed by the Watchers' Council. It works on some demons... including, apparently, Brachens - which, by the way, my research sources are lamentably lacking information about, so I imagine they'll be quite pleased to get their hands on a specimen - and it was apparently the best help those b... well, the best help the Council could offer." He sounded less than pleased with his Watcher pals there. "However, there is no antidote. It just has to wear off."

Oh, bloody hell...

"We can't wait." I groaned in horror, staring at his crutches. He'd never be able to carry me down to the car, he could hardly get that far on his own.

I closed my eyes. My head ached dully. Wesley... was a decent guy, for all his clumsiness and his aptitude for truly astonishing blunders. For all that he'd pretty much sealed my demise. "Get out," I said heavily.

"What?" He stood there, incredulous.

"Get out of here. They're coming. There's nothing else to do. Either they get both of us or they get just me. Think about it."

He spluttered indignantly. "I am not leaving you here. For all I know you're lying. Again. And if you're not... well, I'm still not leaving you here!"

"Hey!" I snapped. "I'm an evil slayer-napping demon, remember? Take the car and get the hell out of here while you still can."

"Oh, sod it. This is ridiculous." Wesley awkwardly bent down and grabbed my arms, wedging the crutches somewhat unstably between his elbows and sides. "I don't know what's true and what isn't, but we're both getting out of here. I'll deal with the rest later. Elsewhere." He managed to drag me a few feet before he fell over backwards with a thud. I landed helplessly on top of his cast, causing him to yelp in pain.

A second later he was back on his feet and trying again. I opened my mouth to once again attempt to persuade him it was futile. And a familiar sound echoed through the apartment - the sound of someone or something trying to break down the front door.

"Too late," I muttered.

"Oh, my word," Wesley said.

3 Deceiver and Deceived

"The bedroom. We - you - can lock and barricade the door. Hurry! The front door won't hold them up for long..."

"Yes... yes," Wesley stammered. He made clumsy progress dragging me back towards the bedroom, falling over his crutches every so often. By the time he managed to drag me through the door, I'd collected more bruises than I'd acquired in the encounter with the Torunak.

And just when I thought we were both safe - well, for a few extra minutes at least, until the demons broke down the bedroom door and killed us - what did he do but let out a brief exclamation and hop back into the main room of the apartment at what passed, on crutches, for around about warp speed.

"Wesley!" I yelled. I could hear them at the door of the basement apartment now. There were sounds of splitting wood in amongst the crashes.

Unable to move an inch, I felt futile, and ridiculous, and more helpless than I had in years.

"I'm here!" He shot back through the door, skidded to a halt, and overbalanced. The book and chalk he held bounced across the floorboards, the chalk splitting into bits. Wesley desperately heaved himself up onto hands and knees, slammed the door and shot the bolt into place.

He fell face-flat on the floor, breathing heavily, but didn't allow himself more than a few seconds before he was struggling up again, crawling after the book and the largest of the chalk pieces. Once he'd gathered them together he set his back against the bed, braced his hands and his good leg against the floor, and shoved the bed aside, clearing a large area of floor space.

By that time, his skin was pale and drenched and the veins stood out in his forehead. His breath came in short gasps. His leg must've been hurting a hell of a lot from all the exertion.

"What're you doin'?" I asked.

"A circle," he gasped, opening the book and flicking through the pages with trembling hands. He found what he was evidently looking for and held the book up so I could see the opened pages. "The Mark of Nammohn, remember?"

Heavy footsteps sounded outside the apartment. I flinched, mentally if not physically, as the door was shaken by a loud, heavy blow.

"Draw it in front of the door first," I suggested.

He glanced up, looking surprised. "Yes... good idea."

"Not that they won't break through the walls to get at us, but it'll take 'em just that bit longer," I added in a mutter. He looked unhappy.

Wesley, his hands shaking ridiculously, chalked the symbol onto the floorboards in front of the door, then began to mark out a circle of them around the two of us. When he'd finished he flopped onto his back in the middle of it, as immobile as I was - 'cept for the shudders that ran through him every time the Torunaks bashed on the door.

"Whatever you are and whatever your purposes, Mr. Doyle, I apologise for my appalling timing," he groaned, without looking at me.

"Thanks a lot, man," I responded a trace acidly. I sighed, watching the door shudder on its hinges and the wood near the bolt starting to splinter. I supposed the explanation was long overdue. "I am human. After a fashion. My mother... was human. My dad was the demon."

For some reason, that made him laugh in a bitter, not-funny way.

"I never knew him. Never knew what I was until my wife and I were attacked by vamps, just under four years ago. I survived... they wouldn't drink my blood. And I discovered why. It was... kind of a rough awakening."

"Yes." Wesley turned around and sat up awkwardly, his eyes searching my face for signs of another lie. "I can imagine that it would be."

"Faith is exactly where I said she is - which is to say, I haven't the faintest clue," I added belligerently. "And as for why I didn't tell you sooner... well, just look at your reaction."

Wesley fell back with a thud. "I'm an idiot," he moaned. "I've got us both killed."

I couldn't really disagree.

A few seconds later, the door burst inwards. Pieces of splintered wood flew everywhere, a large section clobbering Wesley on the shoulder and several small splinters sinking into the side of his face. He yelped.

3 Deceiver and Deceived

There were three demons outside, each as big and ugly as the one I'd fought the previous night. One of them tried to cross the threshold. As it set its foot down on the symbol Wesley had drawn, there was a sizzling noise and smoke rose up from it. The creature jumped back. It growled an instruction in its clicking voice, using a language I didn't recognise, and the other two demons immediately set to work pulling down the wall. The one which had spoken disappeared back into the apartment.

We watched the remaining Torunaks attack the wall.

Wesley had begun to grin nervously, despite the pain which also marked his face. He said, with that same smug tone he'd used on me, "I don't know what good you think that will do, hellspawn. You can't pass the circle."

The wall finally gave up the fight, disintegrating into a crumbling mass for a section about four feet left of the door - enough space to allow the demons to pass.

The demon which had spoken before ducked through the gap last, after the others. It was grinning much more confidently than Wesley.

And in its clawed hands, it was holding a bottle of my more expensive whiskey... and a box of matches.

3.10 Chapter 10

It was pretty ironic, actually. People had always told me drinking was bad for my health.

I doubt they were thinking 'bout the risk of a huge demon settin' me on fire with my own booze, though.

The strong scent of the whiskey rammed its way up my nostrils as the demon sloshed the brown liquid over the floor, liberally spraying me and Wesley.

"Hey!" I yelled. "That stuff was supposed to last me the whole week!"

"I hardly think this is the appropriate time to discuss the economical use of alcohol," Wesley said bitterly. "You could try and lick it off the floor before we're incinerated if you're really distressed about the waste."

The demon paused in his work, taking a swig from the bottle and passing it to his pals. And great, he backwashed too. "You have good taste in your drinks, half-man," the Torunak told me amiably, extracting a match from the matchbox.

" Yes, it is rather nice, isn't it?" Wesley said with desperate enthusiasm. "Tell you what, if you let me and Mr Doyle go, he'll get you more whiskey. All the whiskey you could want, forever and ever..."

I stared at him. The Torunak stared at him. "You could at least try and die with dignity, Wes," I advised as the demon just went back to dousing us with whiskey.

Wesley bit his lip in an embarrassed sort of way. "I don't do well in hostage situations. Sorry."

As the last of the whiskey dripped out of the brown bottle, the demon gave an ugly gurgling chuckle. "Listen pal," I said. "Are you sure we really need to do this whole death-by-inferno thing? I mean, what did I ever do to you?"

The Torunak's eyes gleamed red as the whiskey bottle shattered on the floor. "You killed my sister, half-man."

Yikes, she'd had a mean left hook for a girl. "Oh. Right. That. But you smashed up my wall and door, so can't we just call it quits?"

The demon growled. "Vengeance demands your slow and painful death. You should be thankful your companion's sorcery prevents me from taking my time with you. Flame will have to suffice." It lit a match and waved the flame teasingly in front of us.

Wesley shuddered. "Any last ideas, Mr Doyle?"

" Well, you could dive out of the circle and try to get the match away from him," I suggested dryly.

Wesley swallowed but managed to reply, equally dryly, "But then he would rip my spine out and beat me to death with it."

I tried to shrug, or at least flop in a shruggy way. "It'd be faster than the flames."

" I'll keep it in mind." I have to admit I was pretty proud of Wes. The man didn't lack for guts when it came to the crunch, no matter how wet he looked. Of course, it was a pity I would only learn this as a result of being incinerated.

One of the other demons turned and stuck its head through the hole in my wall. "Thought I heard something, Boss," it grunted to my match-wieldin' friend.

3 Deceiver and Deceived

"Anything there?" the leader asked.

The other Torunak squealed as something yanked it through the hole. There was a sharp cracking sound.

"Guess so," I muttered.

The leader snarled and snapped a command in its own language and the second Torunak strode towards the hole, rumbling threateningly. When it was about half a meter from the hole, its stride faltered and it began to back up hastily.

Faith hurled herself through the hole and into the demon, fists hammering in a brutal barrage.

I'd never been so glad to see anyone in my whole life.

"It appears she finally got hungry," Wesley noted shakily, as the Slayer laid into the demon with savage speed.

The off-balance Torunak took a left hook to the jaw which flung it up against the circle's wards. The demon's face seemed comically flattened, like a kid pressing his nose against a shop window. That is until Faith grabbed it by the shoulder and spun it round. The Torunak turned just in time to receive a hard elbow in the belly. As the demon folded up, Faith ran her hands through her hair and gave me a sweaty grin across the circle.

"That was fun," she said eagerly. "Any more?"

I tried to point, but I don't think Faith noticed the feeble flop of my hand which resulted. "Only him."

The lead Torunak swelled with rage, the flickering match forgotten in his thick hand. "A Slayer..."

"A butt-faced demon..." Faith shot back, smirking. "We done with the introductions?"

She stepped forward cockily, raising her fists. Behind her, her first victim stepped back through the hole in the wall, fully healed and very angry.

"Faith!" I screamed, as the demon closed on her.

"What?" she snapped irritably. The demon brought its fists down hard on the back of her neck. "Oh. That," she grunted, staggering and dropping to one knee. Faith flung her legs backwards, knocking the Torunak to the floor, and she pounced on it with an almost exultant battle cry.

The leader stepped towards me and Wesley as Slayer and demon struggled together on the floor. The match in his hand flared as he raised it.

Wesley dove clumsily at the demon, gasping in pain and exertion as he crashed into its abdomen. The Torunak took a single step back, seeming to assess the situation, then it threw the Watcher aside and kept going for me. For the object of its vengeance. Lucky ol' me.

It made it one more step before its companion slammed into it, propelled by a lightning-fast kick from Faith. The two demons tumbled onto the floor together, crushing the matches beneath their weight. I allowed myself to breathe again.

"They can regenerate," I warned Faith.

"Tell me something I don't know," she retorted, stomping on the head of the demon she'd already put down. It growled and tried to pull itself upright, wounds sealing themselves as it moved. Faith hit it a few times and it fell over again.

Across the room, the leader and his friend untangled themselves and rose from the floor like they were pulled by strings.

I spoke quickly. "There's an axe under the bed... a wooden case..."

"And most people just have dirty laundry," Faith commented, diving for the bed. She slid part of the way under the bed as the demons crossed the room. Each grabbed a hold of one of her legs and pulled, like they were trying to use her as a wishbone. Faith kicked furiously, and I heard her gasp in pain. My fists twitched in impotent fury as they pulled her out.

But we'd all forgotten about Wesley. Standing on one leg, the Watcher brought both his crutches smashing down on the leader's head. The demon roared dully and fell forward onto my bed, long splinters protruding from its skull. Real messy. Faith slid halfway back under the bed as the other demon whirled 'round and gave the Watcher a head butt.

3 Deceiver and Deceived

The demon had horns, Wes didn't. He fell backwards, his eyes glazed and his cheeks bleeding. Clicking victoriously, the demon seized hold of Faith's legs again and pulled her out from under the bed. The Torunak saw the axe in her hands and its triumphant grin slipped.

A second later, its head hit the floor beside Wesley's unconscious form.

Faith gave the demon a couple more chops for good measure, decapitated the dazed leader on my bed - spraying demon blood all across my sheets - and then waltzed over to the last luckless demon that was gettin' to its feet for the third time. Poor fella.

After she was absolutely certain it wasn't getting up for awhile either, she turned to me, hands on her hips. "Okay, lover. What the hell have you been up to while I was away?"

Lying flat on the floor, I smiled as best I could with half my facial muscles paralysed.

" Long story."

3.11 Chapter 11

After Faith had heard the whole sordid little tale, well, it was all I could do to stop her using the axe on Wesley as well.

She eventually cleared out after a lot of threatening noises in Wesley's direction, carryin' Torunak chunks in a sack over her shoulder like an NC-17 version of Santa Claus. She could have taken the time to help me up into a more dignified position, but apparently she thought I deserved punishment as well for my little part in the fiasco.

A man's back can get really stiff when he lies on a wooden floor for two hours, unable to move.

Needless to say, neither Wes or I was in much of a mood to talk by the time I regained use of my basic motor functions and he stopped seeing double.

When my legs stopped tingling, I staggered up the stairs and into my office. Then I closed the door and treated myself to a glass of very strong brandy I kept in the bottom drawer of my desk. And to a second one.

After the third glass, I leaned back comfortably in my chair and propped my feet up the desk, luxuriatin' in the simple freedom of movement. I heard Wesley moving around the office once or twice, but unsurprisingly he didn't seem to want to disturb me. I folded my hands behind my head and allowed myself to catch up on some much-needed shuteye.

3.12 Chapter 12

A gentle tapping at the door roused me from a confused dream in which Faith poured brandy down my shirt while Wesley handcuffed me to a pole and waved a flaming torch at me, accusing me of being a deceitful, murderous demon.

I blinked sleep from my eyes and shook off the feeling that my chest hair was singed. "Yeah?"

Wesley entered slowly, his crutches thumping on the floor. He eased himself into a chair and glanced guiltily at me. "How are you... feeling?"

"Fine. And how are you?" I asked, staring pointedly at the band-aids on his face. The man looked like a bruise with arms and legs attached.

"Fine, fine," he laughed weakly. "More cosmetic damage than anything else."

"That's good."

"Yes. Ah... there shouldn't be any major side effects from the toxin to speak of, but you may feel the occasional dizzy spell for the next day or so."

"Okay."

Wesley fidgeted with his crutches, his face flushed. "Mr Doyle, I must repeat my most profound apologies..."

I waved my hand dismissively. "It's fine."

Wesley shook his head. "No. No, it is *not* fine. You've shown me nothing but good intentions, given me a place to stay and medical attention... and I repaid your kindness by drugging you and nearly getting you burnt alive." I could see he was windin' himself up for some serious catharsis, and quite frankly, I wasn't up for that. Besides which, it wasn't really like he'd done anything I wouldn't have.

3 Deceiver and Deceived

" You were doing what you thought was the right thing ta do, Wes. I respect that."

" Y-you do?" Wesley looked like I'd just told him I was part chimpanzee as well as demon.

" Yup. I would have preferred it if you'd done *slightly* more research before going all commando, but, hell, nothing's perfect."

" So you're not going to throw me out on the street or kill me?" Wesley said disbelievingly. Okay, so I was a little bit tempted. To throw him out, not kill him.

" Nah. Too much effort. There is one thing we need to clear up if you want to stay, though," I told him sternly.

Wesley slumped in his chair. "Oh."

" Darts."

Wesley frowned. "Excuse me?"

" Darts. That drugged dart you chucked at me... that was a really nice shot," I said speculatively. An interesting little idea for how to afford the repairs to my bedroom wall was tapping its way into my skull...

Wesley smiled self-consciously. "Uh... thank you. It's all in the wrist motion."

" Right. Say, Wes, have you ever thought of tryin' that for money?"

" Money? You mean in a competition?"

I rose to my feet and put my hand on Wesley's shoulder. "Sort of, sort of. You see, Wesley ol' bud, there's this bar on 3rd Avenue which serves a great double-decker sandwich and they have these little bets..."

Slinging my arm around the Watcher's shoulders, I helped him limp towards the door.

" Consider it like payin' your rent..."

4 Third Time Unlucky

by Mike Dewar and Roseveare

4.1 Chapter 1

Bright flashing lights smashed into my skull, while a throbbing sensation pounded against the sides of my head. Through the intense disorientation, I fought to gain a single image from the surreal whirl of light. Faith... twisting... writhing...

"Could we get them to turn the bloody music down?" I yelled to Wesley.

"What?" the Watcher screamed back.

"I said, could someone turn the bloody music down!"

His reply was lost in the pulsing rhythm of the song.

I should have known letting Faith take me out for a good time was a bad idea. So far, her idea of fun seemed to involve strobe lights and the loudest rave music I have ever heard. Wes and I were on the fringes of the crowd, but it was still almost unbearable. Faith, on the other hand, looked like she was having a wonderful time, swinging her body like her bones were connected with elastic, and dancing with five... no, eight guys. All of who weren't me. To say that I felt a little neglected would be an understatement.

Wesley shoved his way through the crowd to reach me, thrusting one crutch ahead like a knight's lance. The frantically hopping man finally made it to my side and collapsed into a chair. An expression of faint disgust crossed his face as he reached behind himself and carefully removed a very squashed looking pizza box.

"Classy joint," I muttered. Oh, look, now Faith had slung her arms around the one guy's neck and was whirling him around and around... his clothes were a hell of a lot nicer than mine. And he was taller and built like a football player.

Wesley broke in on my jealous musings. "I don't mean to be picky, Mr. Doyle, but do you really think this is appropriate behaviour for a Slayer on a Saturday night? I must say I feel it is part of my duty to reprimand Faith..."

4 Third Time Unlucky

I waited. "...only my knee is aching abominably, and I fear that I would not survive another trip across the dance floor..." Wesley gave a weak little smile. "Perhaps you could lend a hand?"

"And have Faith break every bone in my body for interferin' with her little orgy over there?" I said sarcastically. "No thanks."

Wesley snorted. "Oh come now, Doyle. I'm sure Faith wouldn't break **every** bone..." He paused. "I realise that may not be exactly the most confidence-inspiring thing I could have said, but someone has to discipline that girl. And I am currently incapable of doing so, as you are aware..."

I let go a snort of my own. "Wesley, you couldn't 'discipline' Faith if you had both good legs, a chainsaw and a variety of sedatives!"

Was that creep groping Faith? Was he? Just let me see one hand in a no-fly zone, pal, just one... it was then that I noticed that Faith's hands were in places **definitely** considered no-fly zones, at least by this air traffic controller.

Wesley hemmed and hawed for several seconds, unwilling to interrupt my seething silence. I ignored him and focused on dreaming up happy little tortures for grope-guy. Acid featured. So did huge demons with slime and antlers.

Eventually Faith pulled herself free of Casanova and oiled her way through the crowd of dancing bodies towards us. "Hey, lover," she said, squirming on to my lap. "Having fun?"

"Not as much as you were," I said bitterly.

Faith glanced back at her erstwhile dancing partner. "Hell, I was just flirting. No harm, no foul, right?" She smiled impishly. "Besides which, you're cuter."

I refused to smile back. "Faith, flirtin' is flutterin' your eyelids at a guy. What you were doin' back there is probably considered illegal in five countries."

Faith looked down at me, a funny little smile playing around her lips. I was uncomfortably reminded that I was trying to scold a girl who could go bowling with my skull without working up a sweat. "I think you're jealous..." she said teasingly, the smile widening.

"Am not. I'm just... protective. It's a guy thing."

"He's jealous!" she announced to the world in general.

"I have to admit, she does have a point," Wesley said, adding his unwanted two cents. "You do seem rather possessive - "

"Fine," I said grumpily. "I'm just an obsessive, jealous control freak. Whatever." I would have thrown my hands in the air, but they were uncomfortably full of Faith.

"Relax, Doyle," Faith said easily. "I was just winding you up a bit. Checking to see if you actually had any balls to speak of."

I tightened my arms around her. "And did I pass?"

"I'm not sure," she said, a wicked smile crossing her face. "I think some additional testing is required. Up close and all." I think I felt my spine fuse together at that.

"Faith!" Wesley spluttered, turning bright red.

Faith glanced over at him, her face hardening. "What?" she asked challengingly.

"Um, I, well..."

"Good," she said firmly, looking down at me again. "Now, let's lose the cripple and get out on that dance floor!"

I glanced at the gyrating mass of human flesh she was indicating. "Couldn't we go and nearly get killed by a pack of demons instead? Please?"

"The demons can wait," Faith told me firmly. "Tonight is fun night."

"For who?" I muttered as she dragged me onto the dance floor.

As the crowd closed around us, the last thing I saw was Wesley, poking glumly through his squashed pizza box.

4.2 Chapter 2

I hurt. In lots of places, and for lots of reasons.

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Firstly, Faith had tricked me into drinking enough energy drinks to poison a small country. Secondly, while dancing at a rave looks like just moving your arms to a beat, it's actually a lot more tiring. Particularly with an energetic Slayer as your dancer partner. Thirdly... let's just say Faith still had lots of energy to burn by the time we arrived at my place. Wesley slept up in the office that night.

And now it was morning and I was an aching wreck. I think if I have to choose between Faith's idea of a good time and my idea of a good time, which generally involves getting legless and throwing up in people's pot plants, I'll have to stick to the liquor. Hangovers are bad, but at least they only really bother the head. The aftermath of Faith's rave was a whole-body purgatory.

Speaking of the lady herself, she was up the office, wandering around and diminishing my instant coffee supply by the bucket-load.

And while she recovered with the assistance of caffeine, I was stuck down here with Wesley, doing what?

Sharpening weapons. As if there is anything more boring. You can only watch a grindstone go around so many times before you start to lose it. And of course, by the time the grindstone drives you into a psychotic rampage, you have all those nice sharp weapons so close at hand...

Speaking of the grindstone, I have no idea where Wes dug it up. I mean dug it up literally; it looked like it came from an archaeological dig, one of those ones out in some desert somewhere. It was a pathetic little pedal-operated number, which shook more when operated than I did when a vision hit. I wouldn't have trusted it to sharpen a penknife.

While I tried to coax life out of the stone-age grindstone, Wesley sat carefully adjusting the string on one of my crossbows with a screwdriver. I could hear the cord creaking with strain as the idiot just wound it tighter and tighter.

"Wesley, I think that's quite tight enough," I told him, eyeing the trembling bow.

"I assure you, I received excellent training in all weapons before assuming my post as Watcher," he said, smiling condescendingly as he levelled the crossbow at the target he had hung on my wall and fired. The bolt blurred as it leapt from the bow.

I watched with interest. "Nice, Wes. Very nice. If a vampire was sneakin' up behind you, I'm sure that would have really come in handy."

Wesley eyed the vibrating bolt embedded in the wall in the opposite direction from the target. "Yes... uh, yes. I meant to do that," he said unconvincingly.

The bolt was buried in the wall to the feathers. "Sure you did," I said soothingly. "Sure you did."

" Maybe I should just whittle some stakes," Wesley said in surrender.

" Good idea."

" So, how's the sharpening going, my brave frontiersman?" Faith called mockingly, as she made her way down the stairs.

I rolled my eyes. "Funny girl."

Faith yanked the crossbow bolt out of the wall and tossed it on a table. "I should go and do stand-up if the slaying doesn't work out."

" Really, Faith," Wesley said primly, "I hardly think your calling is something to treat so flippantly."

Faith didn't respond. Since Wes's little commando attempt last week, she hardly even acknowledged his presence at all anymore. Instead she just sauntered over to the table where our pitifully few successfully sharpened weapons lay. "Beats me why you waste so much time fixing these things up. What's the big deal, anyway?"

Wesley drew himself up. "A Slayer must always be able to trust her weaponry. If the worst comes to the worst, she can always rely on her weapons, if nothing else."

" Like her Watcher?" Faith shot back. "I rely on me, Wesley. I don't need anything - or anyone - else."

She turned away. For a second, the plastic little Watcher's mask Wesley wore for a face dropped away and I could see real pain and humiliation there. I have to admit, I felt sorry for the guy. At the time he started his little revolution, he'd probably thought he was doing the right thing.

Wesley noticed me staring at him and the smug little mask slid back in place. "Be that as it may, Faith, you may find yourself in dire circumstances if your weapons are not up to standard."

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"Huh?" she said blankly. I could tell she had understood what he said, she was just playing dumb to provoke him. Time for an intervention.

"He means that if you're tryin' to decapitate a demon usin' an axe that can't cut old cheese, you look like a bit of a fool," I translated. "Speakin' of which, there's an axe in the back of the cupboard that needs demon's blood cleaned off it. Wes, could you toss it here?"

Faith shrugged dismissively. "Whatever. Anyway, it's not like anything exciting is going on. I haven't gotten in a good staking for days."

Apparently, even the Powers That Be have a sense of irony, because that's when the vision threw me out of my chair and onto the floor.

4.3 Chapter 3

The vision was of a purple, horned demon severely in need of some underarm deodorant.

Yes, he was ugly. Yes, he was evil. Yes, he smelt like a pile of garbage.

But despite all that, he really didn't deserve what Faith was doing to him.

Wesley was standing a careful distance down the street, well out of harm's way. I was a little closer to the fray, one of my sharper axes at the ready. But really, Faith didn't need either of us.

The demon hollered as Faith smashed its head into a telephone pole, bending one of his horns into a u-shape. She hit the staggering, bloody demon three times in the jaw for good measure and then swept her knee up in a blow that made me look away with watering eyes.

From the occasional snarled phrase escaping from her teeth, I had a sneaking suspicion she was pretending the demon was Wesley.

"And that's for making me do those stupid hypnotism exercises!" she growled, as the demon staggered backwards and fell through a doorway.

"She does seem rather... enthusiastic today," Wesley noted placidly, as Faith strode through the doorway like a petite, leather-clad avenging angel.

"Yeah, enthusiastic," I muttered, hastening towards the broken remains of the door. 'Pat's Bar,' it read. I doubted Pat was going to be very happy about this.

Fortunately, the bar was almost customer-free, as Faith picked the demon up and began to drive his head repeatedly into a pool table, sending coloured balls everywhere.

The man standing next to the pool table with a cue in his hand stared at her with a mixture of confusion and annoyance. "Are you quite bloody finished?" he asked, his harsh English accent jarring my ears. "People do want to play pool, you know."

"Our apologies," Wesley said politely, his more educated voice raised over the demon's stunned grunts and Faith's snarls. "We'll be out of here soon, won't we, Doyle?"

The guy had white-blond hair and was wearing a long black leather duster. He looked like a cross between Billy Idol and Sid Vicious. I sniffed the air. Vampire. Wonderful. Another half-an-hour of watching Faith pummel her frustrations out loomed before me. "My advice to you, pal," I advised the vamp, "run away while you still can. When that Slayer over there has finished with Horny, she'll start up on you."

The vamp looked over at Faith with more interest, folding his arms casually. "Slayer. How about that." He smiled slightly, clearly sizing her up. "A bit more leather than usual for one of them. I like it, very alternative. My kinda girl."

Faith let her foe slide slowly off the pool table and onto the floor, leaving a trail of greenish blood on the felt. "And who the hell are you?"

"Spike," he said simply, as if that was all we should need to hear. He ran a finger over the table and casually inspected the greenish residue left on the tip. "You've pretty much wrecked that table, you know."

"Tell someone who cares," Faith bit out, pulling a stake from her belt. "Let's get this done."

"Hang on a bit, will you?" Spike said easily. "I haven't even heard your name yet. I want to know what to put on your tombstone."

"Faith, just kill him and then let's go," Wesley ordered. "This bantering serves no good purpose."

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Spike glanced over at him. "Let's see... suit... glasses... nancy-boy accent... so this would be the Watcher, right? I always like to eat the Watchers first, like an appetizer before the main event." Wesley swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing.

"A little cocky, aren't we?" I shot back. "Three against one, in case you hadn't noticed."

Spike walked past Faith, raising his eyebrows. "And who's this then? Not a Watcher, unless their standards are *really* slipping."

"Doyle," I growled. His little 'slipping standards' crack hadn't gone down well.

"Well, Doyley, old son, the Watcher's a wimp on crutches and I could flatten you with one hand tied behind my back. So no fear here, I'm afraid." Spike smirked.

I went demon, feeling the strength spread through my body as my spines sprouted. "Really."

Spike didn't flinch. "Really."

"Screw this," I heard Faith mutter behind me and then I heard her step forward. Spike spun, whipping the cue across to keep her back, presenting me with a lovely target for my axe. I stepped in, raising the weapon high, and Spike slammed the butt of the pool cue back into my unprotected stomach.

I doubled up, retching my meagre breakfast on the floor. Spike chuckled as he stepped aside, nodding to Faith in a casual way. "I'll see you round, Slayer. Then we'll finish this."

As I bent over the floor, my breath rasping in my throat, I heard the back door of the bar slam shut.

"That could have gone better," Wesley announced.

4.4 Chapter 4

The office elevator rattled slowly downwards.

"Wimp."

"I was caught off-guard!"

" Sure you were. . . wuss"

" Listen, you'd wheeze too if you were hit in the belly with a pool cue, I can tell you!"

Faith snorted. "I'd have the brains to dodge."

" Faith, as grateful as we are to hear your perspective," Wesley said snippily, cramped in a corner of the lift, crutches at his side, "might I suggest we focus on angry, dangerous vampires first and criticizing Mr Doyle's fighting capabilities second." He paused, as the lift clunked into place. "Though I must say, his defeat was truly epic."

I snarled in response, yanking the lift door open, feeling a flash of pain in my side as I did so. That Spike sure did swing a mean cue. " For the last time, he surprised me, hit me while I was vulnerable, that's all! Now, Wesley, find out who he is so we can kill him."

" Don't you mean until *I* can kill him, lover?" Faith called over her shoulder as she sauntered for my kitchen. "We won't need you or Wes, unless you want him to laugh to death or something."

I glared at Faith's leather-wrapped back. Cute as she was, the girl sure knew how to get under a guy's skin - with an axe or with words. Slamming the lift door back into place, I stomped off in the direction of the first aid kit. There was a sharp wooden sound.

" Uh...Doyle?" Wes called pitifully.

I closed my eyes and prayed for patience. "You got your crutches caught in the door again, didn't you, Wesley?"

" Uh...yes. Terribly sorry."

From the kitchen, Faith called, "Hey, you're all out of peanut butter -" There was a sound of glass breaking. "And now you're out of jelly, too. Whoops."

This was the crack team of vampire hunters that Spike was facing?

" Help?" Wesley called quietly from the lift.

4.5 Chapter 5

By the time I'd swept the glass fragments into the garbage, Wesley was hunched over my desk with his collection of Watcher's Journals and Faith was sprawled on my sofa, eating toast and spraying crumbs over the carpet as she watched TV.

The TV chattered quietly to itself, as I walked over to Wes, brushing glass splinters from my hands. "Anything?"

Wesley licked his finger delicately and turned a thin page in one of the older Journals. "Well, I've found more than half-a-dozen arrogant vampire posers who've renamed themselves to Blade or the like..."

"But no Spike," I finished. I wasn't really that surprised - and hell, I figured, no news is good news, right?

"Not as of yet," he allowed. "But with the accumulated knowledge of dozens of Watchers of past and present at our fingertips, I'm sure the answers shall come to us."

I was less confident. Wesley may have thought of himself as possessing the knowledge of hundreds of Watchers, but on a practical level all I had to work with was one young Watcher, and not a particularly impressive one at that.

"I once dated a guy named Spike," Faith offered from the sofa, as she messed with the TV remote. "But he wasn't a vamp."

"Nice to see you're on board with the issue," I told her.

She shrugged, still not turning to face me. "You wanna know why he was called Spike?"

"By all means, share," I said, peering over Wesley's shoulder.

Faith snickered. "Well, he had a really big -"

"As fascinating as tales of your former liaisons are, Faith, I may have found something." Wesley interrupted smugly, much to my relief. I really didn't want to hear the end of the sentence.

"Yeah?" I said, forcing myself to pay attention to the words in the Journal Wesley was waving in front of me.

" This report tells of an encounter between a Slayer and a vampire known as William the Bloody -"

" I think you're getting a bit distracted here, Watcher-boy. The vamp's not called Bloody William, is he?" Faith interrupted nastily.

" ...also known as Spike," Wesley continued, a triumphant smirk on his face. "So named because of his rather charming habit of torturing his victims with rusty railway spikes."

" Friendly guy," I noted. Vampires and their entertainments didn't often make for All-Ages viewing.

The Watcher stopped waving the blasted book around and planted it solemnly in his lap, turning a page and assuming a contemplative expression. "Indeed. I haven't got very far into the entry, it's rather long and boring - unless of course, you have an interest in the fine art of forcing metal spikes in people's eyeballs - ah, here we go. The Watcher concerned and his Slayer went off to face Spike, and the Slayer -" His brow crinkled as he practically pressed his nose to the page. "Sorry, can't read this bit very clearly... think the ink has smudged."

Faith turned around, showing real interest for the first time. "...she what? Kicked his ass? Won the olden-times version of the National Lottery?"

" No," Wesley said sombrely, removing his spectacles and gazing at her thoughtfully. "She died."

" Died?" I asked disbelievingly. "As in, was killed? By him?"

" Yes," he said grimly.

Faith snorted. "Probably just a lucky hit or something. Girl had her back turned."

" No, no, I'm afraid it wasn't like that," Wesley said slowly, his eyes scanning the entry.

" How do you know?" she asked, her tone making the question into a challenge. "You weren't there."

" Because he went and did it again."

4 *Third Time Unlucky*

I held up a hand. "Hold it. You're tellin' us the guy we met in the bar this morning, that very guy, did in not one, but *two* Slayers?" The very thought was making me nervous. I'd seen Faith in battle and her speed and strength was well beyond what I could achieve, demon strength or no demon strength. And to think of someone who'd survived a fight with someone like that - more than that, had won - it sent shivers up my spine.

"Unfortunately, that's exactly what I'm telling you," Wesley replied, his serious eyes clear of all the usual pomposity and dithering. "He's killed two Slayers, and my guess is he'd be happy to try for a hat trick."

"That's really not good," I said quietly.

"It really isn't," Wesley agreed.

"Oh, come on!" Faith's laughter broke the grim silence. "You're acting like this guy is all indestructo-vamp all of a sudden. So he killed two butter-wouldn't-melt-in-their-mouths Slayers back three hundred years ago - big deal. I can take him. Spike meet stake, end of story."

"We're not saying you can't beat him," Wesley said condescendingly, "merely that, considering the evidence, it doesn't bode well for your chances."

"Is that right?" Faith said, pulling herself off my sofa and walking over to face her Watcher. There was a glint in her eye that I really didn't like the look of, but Wesley seemed to have gone blind and deaf to the danger signs.

"Yes. I simply feel that, as your Watcher, I should formulate a carefully constructed plan of battle for you before sending you into combat with this Spike. I have only your best interests at heart, Faith."

Faith put her hands on her hips. "You know what, Wes? Screw. You."

"Faith!" Wesley spluttered, taken aback. "I tolerate a certain amount of disrespect from you as a matter of course, but -"

"Yeah, well I *tolerate* a certain amount of gutless British bullshit from you too, Wesley, but if you think you can tell what I'm going to do, or how I'm going to fight, well then you've got some serious pain coming."

"Was that a threat?" Wesley said, his face pinched and pale.

"Damn straight! What are you going to do about it, spank me?" Faith asked mockingly.

This was going to get real ugly, real soon. A neutral party was needed, and considering I was the only person in the room who wasn't a Slayer or a Watcher, that meant it was me. Plus, I was the only person in this room who owned this apartment, and if Faith really got pissed I could see my furniture turning into splinters very quickly. "Guys, cool it. Wesley, dial it down a little, and Faith, back off!" I ordered curtly.

"Or what?" Faith asked me aggressively. Great. I was in for a cold, lonely bed that night for sure.

"Listen, love, we're just tryin' to make sure you don't get hurt..." I tried. "This Spike guy sounds a bit on the hostile side, so we should be prepared..."

She glared at me. "I was taking care of myself a long time before you or the Pansy stepped in here, Doyle. I can handle myself just fine. You want a demonstration?"

I gave her a weak grin. "Hey, Faith, calm down -"

"Are we interrupting?" The voice was English and well-modulated, and it took me a second to realise it wasn't Wesley's.

Speaking of Wesley, the Watcher looked like he'd swallowed a landmine.

The voice's owner was standing on the stairs, flanked by two harsh-faced men, smiling at us. That smile said a lot. It spoke of a calm confidence, a sense of surety that no matter what happened, no matter when, that smile wouldn't even slip slightly. It showed a complete absence of nervousness or apprehension, a complete relaxation that came from being in total control of every situation. It was an expressive smile.

"Just a little inter-office discussion," I said lightly. "Not a big thing."

The man nodded. "Ah. Hello, Wesley."

"I... I... what are you doing here?" Wesley managed to get out.

One of the other men raised an eyebrow. "You called us, remember? 'Emergency'? 'Demon on rampage'?"

4 Third Time Unlucky

" Oh," Wesley said weakly, looking like the landmine had exploded. He glanced guiltily in my direction, and my heart sank.

" Sorry to bust in on the English tea party," Faith interrupted, "but who the hell are these guys?"

Wesley swallowed. "Faith, Doyle, I would like you to meet Collins, Weatherby and Smith. The Council's Special Operations Team."

" Basically," the one named Weatherby said with an unpleasant smile, "we're the ones the Council calls in when their little research drones get into trouble they can't read their way out of."

My palms were moist with perspiration as I managed a sickly smile at the three. I'd heard about guys like these. According to rumour, the Council's Special Operations units are usually made up of people who shoot first and then say over your decomposing corpse, 'I hope he was evil.' Not exactly the types who'd be sympathetic to a half-breed like myself. I silently prayed that Wesley's reports hadn't been overly detailed.

" Well, no demons here," I told them, spreading my hands innocently. "Thanks for comin' and all."

The big talker, Collins, raised an eyebrow. "Wesley? Are you about to tell me we flew across a very large ocean for no reason at all?"

Wesley's eyes flicked in my direction again. "Uh, I'm afraid so. But I have, um... a... perfectly reasonable explanation... which I will be happy to explain to you over a cup of nice hot tea."

" We're out of tea," I hissed to him.

He opened his mouth.

" We're out of coffee, too."

" Nice hot milk," Wesley said, without missing a beat.

Weatherby glared at us. He was very good at glaring. "Wesley, you called us on a level 5 security warning... and when we come to fight the great threat to your Slayer, you offer us heated dairy products. Is it just me or is this a little strange?"

"It's probably you," Faith muttered beneath her breath.

The last man, the quiet one, Smith spoke. "Slayer's got a nasty tongue on her."

Faith smiled unpleasantly at him. "That's not all I've got. Wanna see?"

"Faith!" Wesley snapped sharply. "Er, gentleman, if you would take a seat... we'll return with your milk shortly."

Wesley and I took hold of Faith on either side and propelled her into the kitchen. The second we were out of sight, she spun on us both, eyes flaring.

"Great! As if we didn't have enough annoying people from the United Kingdom, now we've got the Three Stooges too!" she snapped at me. "I came to you because I thought we could do some damage without Tweed-a-holics Anonymous, and now I find even more of them than before!"

"Faith!" Wesley said harshly. "Now is really not the time for you to share your oft-expressed distaste for the Council!"

"Why?" Faith sneered back. "Because I'll embarrass you and make you look bad in front of your Watcher buddies?"

Wesley leaned forward, lowering his voice to a sharp whisper. "No, Faith. Because your idiotic pride might get us all killed!" he bit out, his jaw shaking with the force of his agitation. "As you may have surmised, I contacted the Team when I discovered Doyle's less-than-human ancestry." He glanced apologetically at me. "I didn't have time to give them any details, thank God, but they were going to take him back to England for interrogation and eventual execution."

"Gettin' that," I told him, "but first off, 'rampage'? When did I rampage?"

Wesley gave me a weak half-smile. "I was somewhat overwrought at the time. I may have exaggerated a little."

"Exaggerated? Wesley, that wasn't exaggeration, that was... was... some big new word that means really exaggerated!" Okay, not the most logical sentence, but hell, I was 'overwrought' myself.

4 Third Time Unlucky

"Okay," Faith said. "So all we do is tell the Stooges to go home, and then we get back to planning to kick Spike's ass." She smiled wickedly. "And on the plus side, Wesley gets his wrist slapped for being a naughty boy."

"It's not that simple," Wesley explained. "Those gentlemen are known for having a particularly... aggressive attitude towards demon-related issues as a whole."

"What does that mean, in short words?" I asked impatiently.

"They'll probably kill you, shoot me in the head for being a traitor, and drag Faith off to spend five years in a Council training house being rehabilitated."

"Oh. That *is* aggressive." There didn't seem to be much else to say.

"Wesley?" I heard Collins call.

Wesley steeled his jaw and clunked his way awkwardly out of the kitchen on his crutches. But he did so with resolve. Faith shot me a half-amused, half-annoyed glance, as we followed.

"Where's the milk?" I heard Smith ask as we entered.

"Excuse me?" Wesley said.

"Our warm milk," the man repeated.

"It was rotten," I said quickly. "Yuck."

"Oh," Smith said, disappointed. "I like milk."

Collins was seated casually at my desk and Weatherby had stretched himself out lengthwise on my sofa, while Wesley buzzed around them like a distressed bumblebee. "So," Collins said. "Your explanation."

Wesley cleared his throat. "Ah. Right." He glanced in my direction again, and inwardly I swore. If the killers were paying attention, Wesley's eye movements alone could have told them something was up. "The demon is, uh... dead."

"Dead?" Weatherby asked. "It was rampaging a second ago, wasn't it?"

" Yes, well, now it's dead. Faith killed it."

Faith smiled lazily. "That's right. I stuck a knife in it, twisted it around real slow. It bled and screamed quite a lot, but eventually it died," she said with disturbing relish.

Wesley glanced nervously at her. "Uh, yes. It died."

" Messily. With blood and screamin'," I added.

Collins shrugged. "Ah, well. All that for nothing. Still, at least the demon's dead."

" Yes," I said quickly. "Very, very dead. As in not alive."

He sighed. "Such is life. What breed was it, by the way?"

" Excuse me?" Wesley asked.

" What breed of demon was it?" Collins said, frowning. "You did research it, I assume."

Wesley laughed edgily. "Oh, yes, of course. It was a... Ke'rmth demon. Rather nasty one, too."

" Aren't Ke'rmths extinct?" Smith asked quietly.

Wes's smile slipped. "Oh... yes, well..."

" We found a living one," I lied. "It had been sealed in amber. And then the amber broke, and it got out. So we killed it. Now Ke'rmths are definitely extinct." I smiled brightly.

" Amber?" Weatherby said dubiously.

" Yes," Wesley said, chuckling nervously. "What were the odds? But now it's dead. So you can go. Back to England."

Collins looked like he was about to say something, but then he caught sight of Wesley's old Watcher's Journal lying open on my desk. "Hello... Spike, I see," he said studying the picture. "Seen him recently?"

4 Third Time Unlucky

"Uh, yes," Wesley said. "Just this morning in fact."

"Hmm. The Council's rated him Class-A, you know."

"Hang on a bit," I said. "What's Class-A?" Sounded like a type of quality fruit to me.

"Very, very bad," Wesley said shortly.

"And you couldn't have said that in plain English because?" Faith asked sarcastically.

Weatherby looked speculatively at Collins. "Class-A, huh?"

"That's what the man said," Smith confirmed.

"Sounds like he might be worth our time," Collins said, a touch of professional interest entering his voice. "Got a location, Wesley?"

"Uh, no, but he was last seen at a demon bar on 5th and East," Wes said.

"Why don't you go there?" I suggested in a helpful tone. Anywhere that wasn't here was fine by me.

"I think we just might..." Collins said. "Come on, gents, we're moving out. Nice catching up, Wesley. Doyle, Faith."

"Nice seeing you," Wesley said politely.

"Don't forget to write," Faith added, waving at them while smiling nastily.

4.6 Chapter 6

When I finally heard the front door to my office click shut, I felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. "I thought they'd never leave. Who wants coff - hot milk?"

"Well, thank God that's over," Wesley agreed. "Oh, and a cup for me, please."

"Got you, Wes. Faith?"

"Nah," she replied. "And by the way, Doyle..."

" Yeah?"

" Amber?"

" Hey, they did it in Jurassic Park," I said defensively.

" Actually, I believe that was just DNA," Wesley said helpfully.

" Thanks, Wes," I said dryly. I nodded to him. "And by the way - good work back there."

" Yeah, nice going, Watcher-boy," Faith said mockingly. "Practically every second word out of your mouth was a lie. You should be called Weasely instead of Wesley, doncha' think? How did it feel lying to the big bad bookworms in the sky?"

Wesley stiffened. "Faith, I did what I did for a very good reason. It was in no way a laughing matter."

" Jeez," Faith muttered. "I don't get the big deal, anyway. I could have taken out those guys, easy, if they'd tried anything stupid."

Wesley turned on her, his eyes burning hot. "Faith, I am terribly sorry to disrupt your image of your own invincibility, but just because you're a Slayer doesn't mean you cannot lose a fight! How exactly would you have fought them with knives and crossbows, if they came after you with submachine guns and grenades? And that's how those people fight, Faith. They don't wander up to you and try and punch your lights out; they come up behind you in the middle of the night and put a bullet in your head! And if you stop those three, more will come! You don't want to get into a war with the Council, Faith - because you will lose. You will lose and you will die. Now, I'm trying to keep you out of trouble -"

Faith sneered. "Yeah, Wes. You're really good at that. Seems Watchers are just great at getting people out of the trouble only Watchers can get them into, doesn't it? Well, screw that and screw you, Weasely." She tucked a stake into her belt. "I'm going to go find Spike and work off a little tension."

" Faith - " Wesley began sternly, stepping in front of her.

" Wes, get out of my way or I'll work off my tension on you," Faith told him coldly. Her Watcher held her gaze for a second or two, and then stepped slowly aside.

4 *Third Time Unlucky*

The apartment side door slammed shut as Faith stormed out.

Holding a bottle of milk in one hand, I stared at Wesley, as he slumped down into a chair.

"You didn't get this job for your people skills, did you, Wes?"

4.7 Chapter 7

"Yes, I get the point, but I really don't think now is the time to discuss my tab! Okay, so I'm banned. Great. There are other bars in LA. Cleaner ones, too. Now, can we get back to the vamp probl -" The click of a disconnecting line cut me off. I slammed the phone down and glared at it.

Wesley frowned at me with heavy disapproval. "Your search seems to be digging up more problems than it's solving," he pointed out. "Just how many people *do* you owe money to?"

"I don't owe him nothin'," I snarled. "He's... uh, mistaken."

"And the other half dozen, are they 'mistaken' too?"

"That's right, Wes, you're gettin' it." I looked at the next name in my book, cursed, and decided to give that one a miss. It wasn't as though there was any shortage of other names to try. And I'd already been at this for two hours. I winced at the thought of my impending phone bill. "Anyway, we gotta find Spike before she does. These guys are my best shot."

"I do feel I must point out, Doyle - if Faith cannot handle him I fail to see precisely what the two of us will be able to achieve."

I muttered something uncomplimentary and hopefully unintelligible. I'd been mulling that one over myself, with some concern. Considering Spike had taken out two Slayers, much as it hurt my pride to admit it, I probably wouldn't pose that much of a threat. And as for Wesley... But we couldn't very well sit around and do nothing. The three of us working together had maybe stood a decent chance against him... Faith's temper had splintered that.

Wesley sighed. He'd been sitting hunched over the table, moping over that one same page in his books, ever since Faith had stalked out. I'd been trying to avoid looking at the stylised depiction of Spike snapping the neck of a young girl which adorned the opened pages.

"Don't worry, man," I said, attempting to reassure. "We'll find her. Hey, maybe those council guys will get to Spike first and save us the trouble?"

Wesley ignored me, staring at his book.

"Maybe they'll kill each other," I added hopefully.

He nodded distractedly. "Yes. I'm sure. Very nice. What did you say?"

"Nothing." I watched him subside back into book-moping mode. "Look, I'm sure Faith's all right," I said firmly. It's understandable you're worried, but..."

"If I lose my Slayer because of an argument... the Council will be furious! It'll be back to the dusty research shelves..."

My pity evaporated. I stared at him incredulously. "Really in charge of your priorities, there, Wes," I snapped in disgust. "My Faith's out there facing a guy who's already killed two slayers, and you're worried about your *job*?"

He stuttered. "That wasn't... I didn't... I..." His voice dried up and he frowned at me, looking thoughtful, for a long moment. "'Your Faith'?" he repeated. "My, we really are getting possessive, aren't we?"

"'S just an expression," I growled, sensing a lecture headed my way and cursing that slip of the tongue.

"Doyle, I realise you don't have a very high opinion of me, and after last week I can't say I really blame you. But, considering you saved my life, I feel I owe you some warning nonetheless. About Faith... I really wouldn't get too attached. I've seen her idea of relationships before. I've seen them end. You know what she's like."

"Wes." I shut my eyes and took a deep, calming breath.

"Yes?"

"Shut up." I picked up the phone again.

The next guy in my book, Phil, ran a late night corner shop with an extensive stock catering for the needs of the demon community. Stuff like different vintages of bottled blood - y'know; French, German, Italian... He also kept a decent stock of whisky, which was how I came to know him.

4 Third Time Unlucky

Phil was one of the contacts I was on more amenable terms with, not that he was actually on bad terms with anyone so far as I knew. Also, I was pretty sure I didn't owe him any money.

The phone was picked up after only a couple of rings. "Hey, Phil," I said.

"Hey, Doyle man. Been a while... when was it, that poker game at Ben's in March, yeah? Heard you finally quit the pigs. Heard you got your own agency now. How's that going?"

"Tickin' over, thanks. Fact, I thought you might be able to help me with somethin'."

"Scotch? Or something else?"

I laughed, but my laughter dried up abruptly. Something was wrong... I heard a noise on the line that sounded a lot like somebody choking. "Phil? Phil!"

A familiar, harsh, could-be-British voice answered in his stead. "So it is you again, Doyley. Funniest thing, there I was buying some booze, and what should I hear Sunny Jim say into the phone? 'Doyle'. Just piqued my interest, you know, after earlier. Kind of a distinctive name, isn't it?"

I could still hear the choking in the background, but it was getting weaker. "You let him go, you piece of shit..." I growled.

Spike carried on as though he hadn't heard. "I'm guessing you were looking for me anyway. Didn't get enough the first time, huh? You don't give up, do you, mate?"

Wesley, obviously detecting the danger signs from my half of the conversation, was looking on in alarm. He mouthed 'Spike?' soundlessly and I spared him a brief nod.

"Tell your Slayer girlfriend three's the charm, for me, eh? I'll be seeing you."

Before I could reply, the line went dead.

"Shit!" I slammed the phone down and shot to my feet. A fierce twinge from my bruised stomach slammed through me and almost knocked me back down again, a reminder I didn't need of just how well our previous encounter had gone. "We got him... or he's got us. Not sure on that one. C'mon, Wes."

I grabbed a handful of stakes from the table and picked up Wesley's crossbow. The guy was a handy shot with projectile weapons, if nothing else, as last week had proven.

"We're off to face Spike?" He looked less than enchanted by the concept.

"Yeah. The good news is, he and Faith have yet to cross paths."

"And the bad news?"

"Think I just got someone killed."

4.8 Chapter 8

Fifteen minutes later I drew the car up outside Phil's shop. I was out before the engine had even finished winding down, stake in hand, leaving Wesley still struggling with his crutches in the back seat.

I think I knew, really, there was no cause for hurry; we were already too late.

The door was hanging off its hinges. When I pushed it open, the whole thing collapsed to the floor. Well... I guess there went any chance of a quiet entrance. I stepped cautiously over it.

The store was dingy inside. One of the fluorescent lighting strips in the ceiling wasn't working - not necessarily Spike's doing. I could see enough of the place, though. It was a real mess.

From what I'd heard on the phone, Phil hadn't had chance to put up much of a fight, so Spike must've just kicked over the shelf units for the hell of it. The floor was awash.

Edging forward, picking my way through the broken glass and splintered wood, I found Phil himself behind the counter. He was slumped on the floor by the phone, two familiar holes in his neck. I turned away.

I drew on my demon senses for a moment. Among the other smells, the scent of vampire wasn't strong enough to be current, and it only confirmed what I'd suspected anyway. Spike had gone.

4 *Third Time Unlucky*

As I was turning to leave, Wesley staggered through the door, crossbow in hand and a fierce expression on his face which might've been funny in other circumstances. He stopped abruptly, gagging at the sight and scent as it hit him. "My God... how many people died in here?"

"One," I reassured. "All this blood came from bottles."

"Bottles...?" He blanched. "Have I mentioned you know the oddest people, Doyle?"

"Our pal Spike isn't gonna be too popular with the demon community, that's for sure. Phil - or, more accurately, this place and the service it provided - was well liked."

Wesley still looked ill, and I hustled him out of the door before he could throw up all over the crime scene.

We were about to get back into the car when the police arrived.

A couple of youthful uniforms leaped out of a squad car and started brandishing weapons and handcuffs in our direction. I'd started trying to explain when, rather to my surprise, an unmarked car pulled up behind the squad car. A familiar figure topped with blonde hair got out, slammed the door loudly, and strutted over.

"This is Doyle. He's a PI. Used to be one of us. Why don't you two go find some criminals to arrest?" Kate turned to me as they backed off, her gaze both sour and amused in that unique way of hers. "I guess I shouldn't really be surprised to find you here," she remarked.

"Thanks, Kate," I greeted. I noticed that Wesley, who'd been just about dying from embarrassment at the prospect of arrest a moment before, was now staring, transfixed, at my erstwhile partner. "I'm afraid poor old Phil's not gonna be treading all over the importation laws any more."

She sighed. "Let me guess. Bite marks in neck? Drained of blood?"

I nodded.

"Figures."

"She - she *knows*?" Wesley spluttered.

I glanced at him. "C'mon, now. Most of the LAPD have some inkling. Hard to maintain the disbelief, with so many corpses showin' up all over the city with the same MO."

"Who's your friend?" Kate asked archly, her eyes travelling coolly over Wesley's form and coming up Unimpressed.

"Wesley - Kate," I introduced.

"Wesley Wyndham-Pryce," Wesley corrected stuffily, juggling his crutches in order to extend a hand which Kate ignored.

"He's helpin' around the office. In a research capacity," I said.

"Research. Right. Is he a demon, too?"

Wesley looked aghast at that one, staring between Kate and myself with incredulity and a hint of annoyance.

"Nah. Just English."

Wesley started spluttering incoherently and I pointedly took his arm and 'helped' him back towards the car. "Anyway, be seein' you."

"Wait. You haven't told me what you're doing here with a corpse," Kate said. "Are you working on a case?"

I shook my head, opening the back door of the car and shoving Wesley inside. "I was on the phone to Phil when the vamp came in. Got here soon as I could. Wasn't soon enough."

She made an unconvinced noise. "Let me know when you catch the bloodsucker, Doyle, okay?"

"Right."

"Will I see you next week?"

"Uh... I'll be in touch." *If I'm still alive.*

4 *Third Time Unlucky*

I slammed the door after Wesley, hopped into the driver's seat, and pulled out carefully. It wouldn't be beyond Kate to arrest me for driving offences.

"What a delightful young woman," Wesley remarked, glancing back over his shoulder at the diminishing figures and squad cars - where a tall, thin blonde was yelling and gesticulating aggressively at her uniformed subordinates.

"Uh, yeah." I wondered whether I should mention a few of the nicknames Kate had earned from the guys in the police department.

"Old flame?"

"Nah. She likes 'em human. Partner. For three years. We still help each other out."

"Oh..." Wesley looked oddly happy. "I'll likely be seeing her around, then. May I ask why you didn't tell her about Spike? It isn't as though we couldn't use some extra help."

"Matter of keepin' down his list of possible targets, Wes. She's a good cop, but she's only human. I'm not bringin' her into this, too."

"Mm. Pity."

Save me, I thought in exasperation. Well... let him think happy thoughts about Kate. We'd probably both be dead from a fatal case of Spike before she had chance to disillusion him.

4.9 Chapter 9

"Maybe Faith will have got hungry and come back," I suggested hopefully as we fell back through the door of the office building.

Wesley nodded, looking unconvinced. "She usually has to kill something to throw off a mood like that."

Ouch. And this was the gal I was dating... I *must* have a death wish.

The lights were on in my apartment. "See, Wes? What'd I tell you? Faith? Faith!"

Then I saw who was sprawled on the couch with a bottle of blood in one hand. Needless to say, it wasn't Faith, despite the taste for black leather gear and the big muddy boots rested carelessly on my furniture.

I swore, as a chill of fear crept through me. My stakes, Wesley's crossbow... we had left them in the car. And he was between me and the rest of the weapons still in the apartment. I remembered how quickly he could move. "How the *hell* did you get in here?"

He'd doubled around behind us. We'd gone to the shop, he'd come here. Caught us off-guard. *Clever bastard...*

"Nobody lives in this building but you, mate," Spike said smoothly, unfolding himself from the couch. "And you're not human." I gaped at him. He strutted a few feet across the floor, still blocking me from the weapons. "Let that slip your mind, did you, Doyley? You're passing nicely for human, here, aren't you? Human business, human friends. You can try to forget it all you want, but it doesn't matter. You can walk like a man, but you're not one."

He laughed, and knocked back a gulp from the bottle.

"Wesley, go," I said, quietly, not taking my eyes off Spike.

"I'm not -" he began stubbornly, despite the fear in his voice.

"You're on crutches, and you're unarmed. What the hell use do you think you'd be?" I said harshly. "Now, get the hell out of here and fetch Faith, or we're both dead!"

After a brief silence I heard him start to make his awkward, halting progress back towards the elevator.

Spike set the bottle down on my table, freeing his hands to give me a brief, mocking applause. "Just you and me, then, mate," he said.

Drawing on my demon form, I prepared to face Spike.

4.10 Chapter 10

Spike kept his hands down casually at his sides, smiling in a relaxed fashion. "So, where's your Slayer girlfriend then? She run out on you or something?"

4 Third Time Unlucky

"She's just unloadin' the car," I said, returning his smile. "She'll be right down."

Spike laughed, shaking his head. "Nice try, mate. She didn't arrive with you; I was watching from the window. Good front you put up, though, wouldn't want to play poker with you."

I shrugged. "Can't blame a guy for tryin'. Anyway, I don't need Faith's help to take you apart."

Spike smirked at that, taking a single measured step towards me but still staying just out of my reach. Bluffing aside, I wasn't really in the best situation. My only advantage was that Spike obviously had little respect for my combat skills after that fiasco at the bar. With any luck I could play on that, let him get cocky and then take him down. Then again, it could turn out that he hadn't really been trying very hard at the bar, and that when he went full-out he'd knock me down with one punch.

But if that was true, then I was already a dead man. All the bluffing was done and it was time to lay out my hand and hope the cards were on my side.

Spike moved suddenly forward, interrupting my thoughts with a brutal punch for my face. I couldn't get my hands up to block in time, but I managed to twist my head with the punch, absorbing the impact. I ducked under his second strike and smashed my elbow into his ribs.

Spike grunted in pain and surprise, and I rose out of my low stance, shooting a rising uppercut for his jaw. Spike blocked the blow before it got near his face and drove a hard left into my nose.

This time, I wasn't able to twist with the impact.

My head snapped back hard, my eyes half-closing in pain. Out of the corner of my slitted left eye, I saw Spike aiming a powerful right cross.

I flung myself with the blow, crashing hard on to the floor and rolling away. I ended up lying flat on my back, dizzy and confused, one hand clutching my throbbing nose while I stared at the roof and tried to concentrate.

I heard Spike laugh a meter or so away. "Yeah, mate. You're really beating me down here. What ever can I do against your ruthless attack of falling flat on your arse?" I heard his boots moving towards me.

As I had hoped, Spike had let over-confidence get the better of him. My plan was working perfectly. I had him right where I wanted him.

Yeah, I was lying on the floor with a bloody nose and him standing over me, but everything was going according to plan. Sure.

Spike spoke again, sounding almost disappointed as he moved right up beside me. "Is that all you got, Doyley? I would have expected more of a fight from your hobbling Watcher chum!"

I let my head loll about, eyes half-closed, like I could barely hear him. Spike drove a boot hard into my ribs and it took all my self-control not to roll away and block.

My moan of pain wasn't entirely staged as he kicked me again. I folded up around his outstretched leg, clinging on to it weakly.

"Here!" Spike said disgustedly. "Leggo! You're gonna bleed all over my boots!"

I rolled on to my stomach, still holding tenaciously onto Spike's foot.

He groaned. "This is getting really pathetic..."

I felt his leg tense to pull himself free and allowed myself a bloody smile. Then I moved.

Now, if you look at the situation here, bruises and battle aside, Spike was effectively standing with all his weight on his back leg and with me holding on to his front foot. So when I rose from the floor and yanked his leg upwards with every inch of demon-enhanced strength I possessed, Spike was thrown over so hard and fast he practically did a somersault.

As the vampire hit the ground, I rushed forward, picking him up off the floor and hurling him into a wall with both arms. Spike smacked hard into my apartment wall, gasping in shock and pain as he tried to regain his shaky balance.

He took a single, hesitant step forward and walked straight into my right cross. Blood sprayed and I jabbed hard with my left, pummelling his chest and then snapping my fist up for another blow to his face. My right arm shot in again, snapping his head round a second time.

4 *Third Time Unlucky*

"Pathetic, huh?" I spat through gritted teeth as I threw punch after punch. Spike was dazed, in pain and off-balance, and growing more punch-drunk by the second.

I have to hand it to him. Usually, in a fight where one fighter gains such a clear and decisive advantage, well, the rest of the combat is basically a formality. The defender is too busy covering up and blocking to get a blow in, and the attacker is on such an adrenaline high that nothing short of being hit by a truck will stop him punching.

But Spike actually *stopped* blocking. In the midst of a web of pain, taking the nastiest blows I could throw and then some, he was actually able to think rationally and wait for an opening.

I could see this new tactic and I didn't like it, so I took a single step back and kicked hard for his chest, hoping to knock him down.

Unfortunately, that turned out to be exactly the wrong thing to do.

Spike blocked my kick, grabbed my foot and shoved backwards. The push was pretty flimsy, all things considered, but I had to stagger backwards a few steps to regain my balance, my eyes on the floor instead of my opponent.

And when I looked up again, I wasn't looking at a bloody, battered Spike who was swaying on his feet.

The Spike *I* was looking at was, to put it bluntly, extremely pissed off. He was wearing his vampire face and his yellow eyes veritably glowed with pain and anger.

He spat a dollop of blood on my floor and grinned with feral amusement. "Not bloody bad," he said with grudging admiration. "You suckered me very nicely, mate. And that little tip-me-over move? Bleedin' brilliant. I *am* impressed."

"So glad to have won your appreciation," I shot back.

"Yeah, well don't be. I killed the last ten people whose fighting impressed me. Constructive criticism."

"I'm sure they'll be very grateful in their next lives."

Spike smiled, balling his fists. "I underestimated you, Doyley. Let myself get too cocky." His voice turned dangerous. "But don't think the same trick'll work twice. Amateur hour's over, time to play for the money."

Spike's advance was more cautious and slow this time, partly because of his new respect for me, and partly because, all his bluffing aside, he was fairly beat-up.

But then again, in the state I was in, a sloth would have seemed like a dangerously quick opponent. We began to circle.

I made the first move this time, punching high. Spike slapped the blow aside but didn't retaliate. I punched low. Again, blocked but with no response.

A quick sequence of punches aimed at his face yielded similar results, though Spike sent a few slow, easily-blocked strikes at my stomach.

I was starting to get nervous and I was sure Spike could see it. With him taking such a defensive stance, there was really nothing I could do to get to him and with every blow I made, the chances increased that I would slip up and leave him an opening.

I built up the pace of punches until, finally, Spike did retaliate.

It was like a Chess Grandmaster who distracts you by moving pieces down one end of the board, until finally you leave yourself vulnerable to a single move of his queen that gets checkmate.

As the exchange of punches had gained momentum, I had shifted my feet so as to easily defend from Spike's occasional return blows by bobbing my head or blocking. Even my hands were up high like a boxer's stance.

So Spike just hooked his front foot around mine and tugged. It was a simple bloody trip, something even Wesley could have pulled off - if his leg wasn't broken, of course - but it caught me totally by surprise and pulled my legs right out from under me.

I hit the ground hard and rolled. No chance to play dead here. I heard Spike rushing in as I came to my feet and I knew there was no way I could stay out of the coming assault of blows long enough to regain my balance and focus.

So I didn't. Instead, I shrugged out of my jacket and threw it straight into Spike's face.

"Hey! No fair!" I heard him yelp, muffled by the coat. I punched him hard in the stomach and then grabbed his jacket-wrapped head and smashed it into my knee. I threw him aside as he snatched the coat off his face and flung it away, tearing it in several places.

4 Third Time Unlucky

I winced. Explaining those marks to a tailor would be interesting.

"All right!" Spike snapped. "Enough is enough. I'm gonna grind your bones into a mushy paste and hand your heart to your Slayer slut."

"You know what, 'mate'?" I snarled. "You're all talk."

Considering the mood Spike was in, there was no way I was letting him swing the first punch. I charged him, hands to the sides, my guard totally down.

No, I wasn't suicidal.

When I was a step or so away from him I flung my torso backwards and kicked both my legs off the floor. Now what would normally happen next is that I would fall flat and feel like an idiot.

And yes, I did fall flat. But thanks to my momentum, my feet went up high and hard and smashed into Spike's face. *Then* I fell flat, but so did he.

A nice little flying kick, if not as pretty as the ones Jackie Chan and them do all the time.

Of course, now I was flat on my back. Again. But fortunately Spike was down as well and after having received both my feet in the jaw, he was considerably less ready to get up again.

As Spike lay stunned on my floor, I staggered to my weapons cabinet and snatched at the first weapon I saw.

A double-headed axe in hand, I turned and threw myself onto Spike, pinning him to the floor.

His hands grappled with mine for the axe, but I tugged it from his weakened grasp and raised it up high.

"An' by the way, Faith's not a slut. The girl just likes to party."

The axe swept down.

I might as well have hit Spike with an axe-shaped hammer. He grunted in pain as it rebounded off his shoulder.

Betrayed, I stared at my weapon. The bloody thing was blunt! I was so surprised I lost hold of my demon form.

Then I looked down into Spike's grinning face and swallowed.

4.11 Chapter 11

I felt like someone had glued my eyelids together with treacle and then an octopus had wrapped itself around me.

"Come on, sissy boy," I heard Spike mutter. A hand slapped my face, none too gently.

I opened my eyes just in time to receive another slap.

"Hey!"

Spike chuckled. "Nice to see you're back with us, Sleeping Beauty."

The 'octopus' of my semi-conscious musings was in fact quite a lot of tight rope that Spike had wrapped around my upper body, tying me into a chair in the centre of my apartment. I struggled with the bonds as my captor stepped away from me, admiring his handiwork as he took a swig from his bottle of blood. He was human again, and the bruises and marks from our fight had nearly vanished from his face.

"I should have been a Boy Scout," he said cheerily, watching my efforts with amusement.

"You cut off my bloody circulation," I muttered, tugging futilely at the ropes as my fingers tingled unpleasantly. The chair was borrowed from upstairs and it shifted slightly on its castors in response to my movement.

"I'm sobbing with guilt, I am," Spike laughed, sprawling down casually on my sofa. "That was quite a fun little affair we had back there, wasn't it?"

"I don't really call fightin' for my life 'fun'," I said sarcastically. "But maybe that's just me."

Spike snorted. "Liar. Why else do you spend your time fighting all us nasty, non-productive and unpleasant types, then?"

4 *Third Time Unlucky*

"It might be 'cause your charmin' habit of killin' people offends me," I said, finally giving up on my ropes. Spike sure did know how to tie knots.

"Really. So you're just the big Dark Avenger, huh? Well, okay, short, badly-dressed Irish Avenger, then." Spike sat up and smiled unpleasantly, poking me in the chest. "I've got news for you, mate. You're part demon, same as me. Just because you tramp around with a Slayer and can walk in daylight doesn't mean you're any better."

I glared at the vampire, filled with loathing. "I don't kill people."

Spike folded his hands behind his head and leaned back casually. "Well that all depends, don't it? After all, you've killed lots of people, if you consider demons people, that is. And if you don't, then you're not a person, are you? Quite the moral dilemma."

"Spike, you don't have any morals, much less dilemmas," I retorted.

Spike seemed immensely pleased at that. "Yeah. I don't. It's so much more fun my way." He took another pull from the bottle. "But you're letting me get off topic, Doyley. I didn't leave you alive just to blab about ethics all day long."

"So why did you? Not that I'm not happy to still be counted among the breathin' or anything."

That had been eating at me. Spike had every reason to kill me and judging from Wes's research, he didn't seem like the mercy-giving type. Whatever his reason was, I didn't think I was going to like it.

Sure enough, I didn't. "Your girlfriend. Faith. When's she coming back, then?"

"You called it right the first time, Spike. We had a fight; she took off. She could be gone for days."

Spike frowned. "Bloody hell! Girl doesn't even have the decency to stay put so I can kill her. Now I call that inconsiderate, don't you? She got any other place to run to besides this joint?"

Something else had been preying on my mind. "How'd you find us, Spike? We couldn't find you, so how did *you* track *us*?"

Spike laughed. "Well I'm not in the phone book, am I? You, on the other hand... Doyle Investigations. Real subtle. 'Course I visited a Doyle Plumbing and a Doyle's Pet Store first, but I was hungry anyway."

"Lovely." Poor bastards. Just having the same name as me had got them killed.

Spike sighed. "All that effort, and she's gone and buggered off somewhere else. Still I suppose she'll come running back when Crutches finds her. Got to save her dear little Doyley-snookums, hasn't she?"

"Uh-huh. An' then she'll stake you an' I'll set Wesley to work washin' your dust out of my carpet," I told him.

"We'll just have to wait and see about that, won't we?" Spike said smoothly. "I hope she gets here soon. I'm getting bored."

"Poor you."

Spike smiled suddenly. "But why should I be bored when I have such a perfect way to while away the hours? I mean, all these medieval weapons... you, tied to a chair... time flies when you're mercilessly torturing someone."

"Couldn't we just play Scrabble?" I asked as Spike picked up a large knife from my weapons cabinet.

"Nah. I'm not really the literary type. More of a hands-on guy." Spike grinned as he brought the knife to rest against my throat. I closed my eyes in anticipation, trying hard not to swallow.

There was a long pause, and then I heard the knife thud against the floor. "It's just not the same without her!" Spike complained brokenly. I heard him slump back onto my sofa.

When I hesitantly opened my eyes, Spike was lighting a cigarette. He slipped his metal lighter into his pocket and ran a hand through his white-blond hair, taking a long drag on the cigarette.

He smiled sadly. "The torturing was her favorite part, too."

"Okay... an' who was this lovely lady?" I asked nervously, eyeing the gleaming knife lying on the floor.

4 *Third Time Unlucky*

Spike looked up at me as if he'd forgotten I was in the room. "Oh. Drusilla's her name."

"That's a nice name. Very, uh, gothic."

Spike grinned. "Oh yeah, my baby's got style. Great dress sense."

Killer figure too, I imagine. In more ways than one. "Sounds like quite a catch, huh?"

"She's the best," he told me. "Totally bonkers, though. I miss her little spastic fits and the way she used to talk in nonsense words."

Figures. Like a guy called Spike would have a *normal* girlfriend. "That's nice... in a dada-esque kinda way."

Spike chuckled in memory. "Once she went through an entire year thinking she was a daisy."

"I'm sure that was fun." I wonder if she wanted fertilizer?

"Uh-huh. You know, sometimes I used to get annoyed with her rambling and stuff, but now I miss it so much. Sometimes I go and sit in cellars and mutter about dolls and flowerpots to myself, but it just isn't the same."

Great. So now, not only was I trapped in my own apartment with a murderous vampire, but I was with a murderous vampire who had just been dumped and who was probably looking to release a lot of repressed anger.

Woo-hoo.

"So... why'd you two split? You sound like a perfect match," I said with total honesty. Maybe if I could stall Spike with reminiscing, Wes could have enough time to find Faith and save my soon-to-be-tortured butt.

Spike blew a cloud of smoke into my face and sniffed. "It all started because of Prague, you know."

"She left you for a city?" I asked quizzically

Spike rolled his eyes. "No, you bloody pillock. We were vacationing in Prague, and well, we got a little bit over-enthusiastic... there was this mob..."

I nodded wisely. "I've had holidays like that myself."

Spike waved me into silence. "Anyway, Dru got hurt really bad. She was very weak and she kept on getting worse and worse...so we decided to go to Sunnyhell to see if we could get her rejuvenated."

"Where hell?"

"Sunnydale," he said by way of explanation. "We thought maybe the Hellmouth could recharge her, give her system a little 'oomph', if you get my meaning."

"Like a health spa for the undead," I suggested.

"Exactly. So we arrive, and I mean this place is just *unreal*. Crawling with vamps and every other kind of demon to ever ooze its way out of Hell." He chuckled. "Man, that town redefines the words 'lively nightlife'."

"I suppose it all depends on your point of view," I said diplomatically.

Spike didn't appear to hear me. "And slap bang in the middle of it all is this great nightclub called the Bronze. Local kids used to hang there, but then the Master made it his own private hideaway. Much better than the crypts vamps usually meet in. The kids still hang there, but now they hang on meat hooks. Great joint."

"So? Sounds like the perfect honeymoon destination," I said ironically. *This* was the town Wesley had wanted to send Faith to? Idiot.

"Yeah, well, Dru was back on her feet in no time, all those demonic energies worked wonders." A smile creased Spike's face. "She was all excited and happy - it was like she'd been turned for a second time. Only problem was, the Master is very traditional, big on the whole 'obey thy elders' crap. And, I don't know if you've noticed, but I'm a bit of an independent thinker. Not his favorite kind of person. I got into a million arguments with the wrinkled old fart, so one night I finally decide that enough is enough, time to hit the road. Only Dru disagrees, see?"

"She's like all, 'Hellmouth wonderful, the Master wonderful,' and I'm like, 'Hey! He's a shrivelled old prune who hasn't paid attention to the world since the wheel was invented!' So we had a huge fight, but I thought we were going to make up again."

"You obviously didn't," I observed.

4 *Third Time Unlucky*

Spike scrubbed at his eyes with his sleeve and sniffed again. "No. I wake up the next night, there's this big empty space next to me in our bed. Turns out she's just moved into the Bronze with the Master and his chums. She didn't even have the... the decency to tell me to my face! I pitch up at the Bronze, she's flirting with a couple of slimy demons! She told me that 'It was fun while it lasted!'"

"That's harsh," I admitted.

Spike nodded in agreement. "Yeah. Bitch. And it was just so... callous, too. Like I didn't even matter."

"Love is tough."

Spike sighed. "Yeah. So what about you, then?"

I hadn't been expecting that. "Me?"

"You and your Slayer. You are an item, right?"

"Yes. Well, kind of."

Spike nodded wisely. "Ah. She flirts with everyone, doesn't she? Never pays attention to you, but if you say 'Hi' to a pretty skirt then you're being unfaithful. And she's just 'having fun'."

"Uh-huh," I agreed, remembering Faith at the rave. "We were at this dance an' she just ignored me. Like I was a piece of furniture."

"I know, mate. And when you bring someone to eat home, you're expected to share. But when *she* does and you want some, you're 'being mean'."

I remembered the way Faith always appeared just when Wes and I ordered takeaway. "Yeah."

"And she always wants everything her way. Never any compromise."

"An' it doesn't help that she can beat me flat in a fight. Kind of humiliatin', too," I said. "An' what's worse is she'll rub my nose in it! She'll poke me around until I'm close to losin' my rag an' then cross her arms and say, 'Whatcha gonna do? I'm the Slayer, remember?'"

" Women. Who needs 'em."

" Yeah."

Spike stood up and stubbed out his cigarette on the armrest of my chair. "You know, I feel like we've really bonded here, Doyle. You're a nice sort, even if you keep bad company." He smiled pleasantly at me.

" Uh... thanks."

" I'm still going to rip your heart out and hand it to your Slayer lover with a ribbon tied around it, but tell you what, I'll snap your neck first, before I extract the heart. Less painful that way."

He patted me on the head in a friendly fashion.

" Goody."

Spike grabbed the top of my head. "Okay, now hold still..."

A female voice purred, "Hey, boys... starting without me?"

I tried to look behind me and nearly broke my own neck. Faith and Wesley stood by the side door into my apartment. Relationship gripes aside, I could have kissed her.

Spike glanced at his watch in annoyance, stepping back from me. "About bloody time!"

Faith grinned in a predatory fashion. "Getting impatient, were we, Spikey?"

" I like her," Spike told me. "She's got sauce."

" I'm all yours, Spikey," Faith said teasingly, pulling a stake from her belt. "Have you been a bad boy?"

Spike chuckled throatily. "Oh, yes. Want to punish me?"

I looked from Slayer to vampire. "Faith!" I said desperately. "Quit flirting an' start fighting!"

4 Third Time Unlucky

Faith glanced once in my direction. That was a mistake. She really shouldn't have taken her eyes off Spike for a second. The vampire shot past me, crashing straight into her and bearing her to the floor. Wes yelped in surprise, hopping out of the way of the struggling foes.

Hopping while on crutches is not an easy task.

With a bone-rattling crunch, he slammed into the floor, his crutches going flying.

Swearing under my breath, I lifted my feet upwards and pushed hard against my sofa. The chair skidded backwards on its wheels, nearly toppling. Now I was much closer to the fight, but still unable to do anything.

Faith managed to shove Spike off her and she lunged upwards with her stake. The vampire sneered as he batted the weapon out of her hand. Faith, always ready to improvise, stomped on his foot.

Spike snarled and went vamp, smashing her across the face with his forearm. As she reeled backwards, he advanced, flashing me a fanged grin over his shoulder.

I did the only thing I could.

If you push hard enough with your feet, a chair on wheels can pick up quite a turn of speed.

Spike growled as the chair, with me firmly attached, slammed into his side. He staggered for a second, and then grabbed a hold on the back of the chair.

"Piss off, Doyley," he snapped. "I'm busy." With a shove of his hand, he sent my chair careering away from him again.

The chair wobbled and teetered on two wheels as I shot across the room. For a second, it seemed about to right itself.

I tried very hard not to move. Or breathe.

Then the chair toppled over like a falling tree and I crashed to the ground beside the prone Wesley.

"This is not going well," he observed, his bespectacled face inches from my own.

"As always, you're the king of understatement, Wes," I grunted, yanking hard at the ropes. But the damn knots were still tight.

Wesley began to drag himself past me on his hands and good knee, gasping with exertion.

"Useful," I said sarcastically. "What are you goin' to do, gnaw on their ankles?"

Then I saw what he was going for. Spike's dropped knife.

My chair-lunge had given Faith enough time to regain her balance and she was holding her own against Spike. In fact, more than holding her own.

Spike spun away from a sweeping roundhouse kick, dodging and diving furiously. The vampire had obviously been more hurt by our fight than he had seemed, because his movements were infinitesimally slower and less efficient than before.

Against Faith, that kind of margin can get a guy killed.

Inwardly, I cheered as she backed him up against a wall with a violent barrage of punches. Spike was getting hit more than he was blocking. In fact, he hardly seemed to be blocking at all any more.

I recognised the pattern.

As I opened my mouth to warn Faith, Spike made his move. Faith was too fast for him to pull another block-and-shove stunt like he had with me. Instead, he just ducked.

With every ounce of her Slayer-strength behind it, Faith's fist plowed straight into my wall. I heard the pop of her wrist dislocating and her gasp of pain.

But that wasn't enough for Spike. The bastard reached up and *grabbed* her damaged wrist and twisted.

For the first time in my life, I heard Faith scream. She went down on one knee as Spike twisted her already bent hand. His face twisting with victorious glee, he flung her backwards and raised his fists.

"Wesley!" I snapped, glancing at the Watcher. He had the knife in hand and was crawling back as fast as he could, his eyes on the deadly confrontation.

4 Third Time Unlucky

Faith looked up at Spike with pain-dimmed eyes, grabbing her wrist with her good hand. I heard the horrible grinding sound as she forced it back into place, a hiss of pain escaping her lips.

Spike applauded mockingly. "Impressive, Slayer. You've got guts!"

Faith glared at him wordlessly.

Spike smiled. "By the time I'm done with you, you won't have any. At least not inside you. On the walls, mayb -"

Faith hurled herself forward, punching him in the face.

Wesley pulled himself up behind me and began to saw at the ropes. There was a scraping sound and then a pause.

"Uh, Doyle?" he said plaintively.

"Yeah?" I rasped.

"This knife is blunt."

I glanced at him. "You're kidding." He shook his head slowly. "What the hell happened to 'A Slayer must always rely on her weaponry above all else'?"

"There's no need to be snippy."

I ignored him, straining against my ropes. They were a bit frayed, but at this rate, it would take Wesley a year to free me. And it didn't look like Faith had a minute.

Spike swayed out of the way of her weakened blows and grabbed her by the throat.

"Third time's the charm," he remarked, tightening his grip. I heard Faith gurgle as she fought for breath. Spike grinned. "Congratulations, Faith. You're my hat trick."

Not if I could help it.

I probably should have warned Wesley beforehand.

The change came slowly and with difficulty as I gritted my teeth and used every inch of the control it had taken me three years to learn.

I heard Wes yelp and draw back from my spines as they sliced into the weakened ropes around my hands. But the ropes still held

Doyle the human couldn't have busted them. But for Doyle the demon, it was no trick at all.

I tore myself free of the chair and hit Spike with the first thing that came to hand.

His glass bottle of blood shattered as it collided with his forehead. Blood, both his own and the bottled, ran down his face in a hideous river as he threw Faith to the ground and spun on me.

Spike's fist shot into my jaw and the world seemed to spin around me as I fell, my momentary burst of demon-boosted adrenaline fading. Spike grinned as he bent down over me.

There was an explosion of noise by my ear and something invisible seemed to pick Spike up by the shoulder and toss him backwards. He staggered and nearly fell, clutching at his bleeding arm.

On the stairs behind me, Collins carefully levelled the slim-barrelled pistol in his hand for another shot. Behind him, Weatherby and Smith raised bottles of holy water to throw.

I hastily shook off the demon, hoping they hadn't noticed my spikes in the shadows. But they didn't seem to be paying attention to me at all.

Collins's pistol spoke again and Spike lurched drunkenly, his face reverting to human. He stared at all of us, suddenly seeming weak and faltering, blood running down his black duster.

"Bloody hell," he gasped. "Six on one is getting a bit ridiculous, isn't it?"

Collins smiled cynically. "And you were expecting what? Queensbury rules?"

Spike snarled once, a furious, animal sound. "All right. You win. But I'll be back, and you and yours will be in for a very nasty - "

4 Third Time Unlucky

He hissed in pain as scattered droplets from Smith's holy water hit him. "Can't you even let a man finish a sodding sentence?"

Spike turned and dove for the sewer grate in my apartment floor in a flurry of motion. Collins's pistol spoke four more times, but Spike was through the grate before the bullets found their mark.

The trio of killers moved swiftly for the sewer grate, but I could have told them they were wasting their effort. With someone like Spike, you have to have him right in front of you when you pull the trigger, and even then you have to be lucky.

You see, Spike's a survivor.

But the thing he hadn't allowed for, I realised as I surveyed my wrecked apartment, is that so am I.

4.12 Chapter 12

Wesley said, "Perhaps you should have stayed at the office. You still don't look so good."

He wasn't just saying that. I knew exactly what he meant. I'd got something of a shock myself when I'd got up that morning and looked in the mirror, to discover the bruises that had developed to their full extent during the night. My demon healing could only do so much.

I'd staked a lot of vampires, and Spike had been one of the toughest I'd ever faced. I was less than happy knowing he was still around somewhere, probably plotting revenge. And, irritatingly enough, Spike probably wouldn't even be feeling any of the mementos of our encounter by now.

"I want to see them leave," I said darkly, under my breath.

He nodded and sighed, following my gaze to the three figures. They were currently engaged in a steadily mounting argument with an airport employee, over next to the malfunctioning vending machine which had eaten Collins' cash but failed to deliver anything in return.

Faith was eating a chocolate bar as she watched them with increasing annoyance while the seconds ticked past and the three showed no sign of peeling off to go and catch their imminent flight.

If they delayed much longer, they were going to miss it. Something the three of us would prefer to avoid at all costs.

The thin thread of Faith's patience finally snapped, and she irritably walked over to the vending machine. She delivered a hefty kick to it, so hard the heavy hunk of junk actually rocked from side to side. It spat out a can of soda, settling the debate.

She returned, chomping aggressively on the chocolate, and from her expression I knew she'd rather be kicking her frustration out of the Special Ops Team themselves.

"How long now 'til we can lose the Stooges?" she growled, casting an expression of absolute disgust back at Collins, Weatherby and Smith. I had the feeling that if she'd had to work with them for much longer, someone - possibly several someones - would've ended up hospitalised.

"Three minutes less than when you last asked," Wesley told her, with an unusual degree of patience. A day spent in the company of the Watchers' Council guys had made Wes and Faith allies, at least temporarily.

I suppose she was getting a taster of the fact that her assigned Watcher could have been considerably worse. As for Wesley, he seemed to have some kind of defensive pride thing going on, like he wasn't going to argue with 'his' Slayer in front of these guys.

"Crap. Is that all?" She crossed her arms and continued to scowl at the three men in concentrated hatred.

Her right wrist was encased in a light splint. Slayer healing or no, the damage Spike had caused was going to take a few days to repair itself. The muscles and tendons were all stretched out of shape, the wrist liable to pop out of joint again. It had taken a considerable amount of persuasion on the part of myself and Wesley to get her to wear the damned thing.

Events since we'd seen off Spike had been frustrating in the extreme. The Special Ops Team had crashed in the office that night, drinking my beer and generally making the place untidy. And I'd thought *Faith* was bad...

I'd spent most of the last twenty-four hours praying not to sneeze, while Wesley's Good Little Watcher mask had hardly slipped once - and Faith, in an unusual show of restraint, had kept her biting comments to herself or muttered them, under her breath, to me or Wesley.

4 Third Time Unlucky

The usual argumentative chaos of our working relationship was a happy holiday by comparison.

When they'd started talking about staying in the office with us for a few weeks, to give us the help we 'so obviously needed' to see off Spike if he returned, Wesley had employed honey-tongued diplomacy and a truly astonishing show of manipulative skill to finally coerce them into returning to England this afternoon.

Overall, the guys had made it clear they weren't impressed with our operation, and however much it was going to be a relief to be rid of the smug bastards, I was somewhat concerned about the potential trouble their reports back to the Council could cause us.

We badly needed a victory in the next few weeks, I mused. *Pray for a vision. But not for a few days yet. Easier to fight evil when just standing up doesn't make you dizzy.*

Faith noticed me looking at her and, draping an arm over my shoulders, held up the remainder of the chocolate bar. "Wanna share?"

I didn't particularly but, uncomfortably reminded of the conversation I'd had with Spike, I nodded just to see if she would. She stuck the lot in her mouth. Smirking, she then planted her mouth on mine. The result was messy, but not unpleasant. Even if I did have the distinct feeling she was only doing it to annoy the Special Ops Team, who were walking back to rejoin us. She pulled her lips away as they drew near. I wiped my mouth. She didn't bother.

"Well, I guess we've finally found some more annoying gooseberries than the cri - uh, Wesley here," Faith drawled, just loud enough for them to catch.

I found her hands were abruptly and none-too-subtly all over me. I chased them around, trying to catch and restrain them, finding the setting a little too public for just how frisky she was getting. "Hey!" I hissed into her ear. She broke my grip and very nearly my wrist too, and what she did next made me jump. I slapped her wrist and tried to even out my breathing again.

"Spoilsport," she hissed back.

Wesley, looking thoroughly humiliated at being associated with us as a couple of passers-by made lewd or disgusted comments about the display, stared in fascination at some point on the ceiling.

Weatherby and his pals just leered, amused by the show. They'd stopped a few feet from us while Collins checked their luggage. I wondered how they got their private armoury through customs. Probably some sort of spellcraft. Either that or the Watchers' Council's influence. Not that I'd ever seen Wesley employ said influence to any degree...

I gave up wondering. Faith was making it kind of difficult to think straight.

"Bye, bye," she said, waving pointedly at the Stooges. "Don't you people have a plane to catch?"

Weatherby sneered at her. "That smart mouth of yours didn't appear to be doing you much good when we came in yesterday. Another minute and boyfriend here would've been a corpse."

Collins took up where he left off. "And you not long after, by the look of things, Slayer. Take care of that wrist, won't you? Not to mention that charming overconfidence. Can anyone say 'next'?" He snapped his fingers in front of her nose.

Abruptly grateful for our proximity, I curled an arm tight around Faith's waist. While outwardly a gesture of affection, the move actually disguised the effort it took to hold her back from a lunge which would probably have ended in her stabbing out the guy's eyes with her fingernails.

Quite possibly to be followed by the sharp retorts of his companions' guns - and she unfortunately lacked our new pal Spike's capacity to recover from multiple bullet wounds.

Faith was obviously furious, but she managed to curb her impulsive reaction. Her fingers closed around mine as she stopped struggling.

I was proud of her reserve.

I joined her in glowering at the Special Ops Team. We both could've done without having to be bailed out by these assholes.

Although actually, there was a part of my brain still guiltily a little pleased she was getting to experience what it felt like for me, a lot of the time, with her around.

4 Third Time Unlucky

Faith wasn't used to being bailed out by anyone. I didn't want to try and imagine what had been going through her mind these past twenty-four hours. Still... perhaps she'd learn something from it. I hadn't yet figured out whether her unusually subdued behaviour was a good sign for the future or not.

Smith said, "Slayer's right. Time to board."

"We'll be seeing you, then," Weatherby's tone was neutral, but he still managed to make it sound like a threat. "Pity about the demon. Still, save the next one for us, eh? The Council can always use interesting new study specimens." I winced. "Goodbye Wesley."

Looking exceedingly uncomfortable, Wesley voiced polite, goodbyes, following whatever Watchers' Council decorum there was for these sorts of occasions. Playing the Good Little Watcher again - except I didn't imagine 'lie like a weasel', as Faith had put it, was in any of his manuals.

He was telling that lie for me. Betraying the organisation that seemed to be everything in his life, for my sake. I stayed very quiet throughout those final exchanges.

Until the Special Ops Team walked away from us and vanished among the airport crowds.

4.13 Chapter 13

"Really, Doyle," Wesley said, peering up at me with concern as I balanced tenuously on the chair, hammering a cross to the panel above the door. "I realise you're somewhat upset, but this display of paranoia is rather excessive..."

"Yeah. Right. And you're not the one who isn't human enough to keep the vampires out. Pass me up another nail, will you?"

"Look, I may not know precisely what Spike said to you. But I heard enough before I left to hazard a guess, and..."

"Another nail, Wesley. Please."

He handed one up as requested, sighing. I carefully placed the nail and continued hammering.

It made me cringe to think of all that time I'd spent relying on the protection of a humanity which had never been there. All those times I could have died, because I was vulnerable and never knew it. But then, *I'd* always been hunting the *vampires*, before... A lone Dark Avenger, as Spike might have put it, in that sarcastic Cockney sneer. They hadn't come looking for me.

Anyway, I was going to make damned sure it never happened again.

The only bright point I could think of was that at least it hadn't occurred to the Special Ops Team to question how Spike had been able to get into my apartment.

"How many more of these are you intending to place?" Wesley asked. Out of the corner of my eye I could see him poking wearily through the contents of the box. A cross spilled over the edge and thudded to the floor. He shifted, trying to get the leverage to lean down and pick it up, hampered by cast and crutches. After a moment, he gave in and straightened again. "Well? How many?"

I swung the hammer in time with my words, punctuating aggressively. "As many... as bloody necessary... to cover every... single... possible... way in." I hit my thumb, breaking my rhythm, and cursed. I stopped hammering and climbed down off the chair. Stood back to survey my work. "And then some more, just to be absolutely bloody certain."

I picked up the box and studied the rest of the apartment. "That sewer grate, next."

Wesley sighed and rolled his eyes. He hesitated, but then ventured, "They're not so reliable, you know, that a vampire is incapable of passing them. It wouldn't prevent a really determined fiend from entering. Burn, yes. Slow down, perhaps..."

It wasn't what I wanted to hear, and it wasn't as if I didn't know all of that anyway. I snapped, "Well, what the hell am I supposed to do, when the only other alternative is 'nothing'?"

He shook his head, obviously able to offer only negatives, but limped over to help me haul up the sewer grate and stood on hand to help while I tacked the cross to its underside. After a moment, I apologised for snapping at him.

As I stood and wiped my hands off on my shirt, he said slowly, "I have no conception of how something like this must feel... but, believe me when I say it does not matter to me how much of you is demon."

4 *Third Time Unlucky*

I raised my eyebrows, the memory of last week still all too fresh. He flushed and stammered, "Well, it was something of a shock discovery, yes, but... You've proven your good intentions to me more than adequately, then and since. It's regrettable that I dare not try convince my fellows at the Council to share my understanding. Being that there is too much danger they would *not*... understand." He sighed.

He looked kind of worn and hollow and hopeless. Understandable enough. He'd gone up against his Council, however subtle and well-meaning his treachery, and his loyalties had been shaken.

I could've done without the pep-talk, actually. I didn't particularly want to care and share. But I couldn't just ignore him.

"Thanks, Wes," I said, awkwardly. "I realise what you did wasn't easy."

"I couldn't very well do anything else," he mumbled. "After all, I caused them to come here."

"And if you hadn't, those guys wouldn't have been on hand with the save and we might all be dead," I pointed out. "So, whatever the reasons for callin' them at the time, I reckon I'm kinda glad now that you did."

He smiled, unconvinced, and the door swung open, putting an end to the uncomfortable conversation.

Faith walked in with her arms full of aromatic bags of takeout. "Hey, my guys," she greeted. "Are we done smiting the evil walls yet? 'Cause if you're still busy I'll start without you. Probably won't be much dinner left by the time you get around to it, though." She grinned, setting out the packages on the table.

'To Hell with Spike,' I thought, shaking off the memory of his words. Something I'd been having to do far too often. Evil vampire or not, the guy had a whole lot of insight. *'I know that was a joke.'*

4.14 Chapter 14

Later, Wesley retreated up into the office to continue researching Spike in slightly less chaotic surroundings, leaving Faith and I to my trashed apartment.

I looked around the mess and decided I couldn't really be bothered with finishing the clean-up job right now. I went to dig out some whisky from the kitchen instead.

Faith had been sprawled on the couch when I left. Now, as I walked back through the door into the main body of the apartment, knocking back a large gulp from the bottle, I found her pacing restlessly.

"Seems a while since we had some alone-time," she said, her eyes avoiding meeting mine. She seemed awkward, and sorta nervous. Odd.

"Somethin' wrong?" I asked, reluctantly setting aside the whisky.

Spike had *related* to me, him with his crazy vamp girlfriend. His crazy vamp ex-girlfriend. That was not the most reassuring of things to recall, facing Faith now.

Abruptly, she met my gaze directly. There was something strange in her eyes, something at odds with the customary aggression of her body language. "Aw, shit, I guess what I've been waiting to say is, you saved my butt. I know I wasn't real nice to you the other day. Then you have to go and save me from Spike and all, so there's me feeling kind of stupid. Not to mention you almost dying. Then all that time, not being able to talk properly in front of those Council assholes, stewing over my own thoughts... I guess what I'm saying is I'm, uh, sorry I was so crap to you, Doyle. I, uh..."

She hesitated. I stared, all my nerves on edge waiting for whatever it was that would come next, not quite believing this was happening.

"I need you," she said finally, her voice a rasp, barely more than a whisper.

Astonished, and knowing I ought to say something of comparative significance, I opened my mouth. And stopped. All the things I'd not dared voice because I knew she'd have turned around and laughed at me rushed through my mind. I had to pick one, and quickly, before I missed the opportunity I'd never imagined I'd have...

That was when she shrugged off her leather top over her head, "C'mon, Doyle," she said enthusiastically, "I've been hornier than hell ever since I lost that fight. Got to work off some of that steam, now the cripple's finally out the way and the Stooges have gone home."

I gaped, spluttered incoherently for a moment, then resignedly forced a smile.

It wasn't as if I could complain, really.

Still... for a minute there, it had been nice to think that maybe, just maybe, there was something more staring back at me from those dark-smudged eyes.

5 Faith, the Exotic Dancer

by Mike Dewar and Roseveare

5.1 Chapter 1

I stared grimly at my target, limbs tense, feeling the cool hardness of my weapon between my fingers. Then my arm swept up, and the projectile shot forward from my grasp. I heard it strike the target with a thud as I readied my second missile and threw.

I could see from the moment it left my hand that it was a bad throw, and my third and final projectile was already in the air before the second struck home.

"Ten!" I snarled with disbelief, glaring at the dartboard. The bloody thing was cursed. "Ten lousy points!"

There was no doubting it. My dart-throwing skills were seriously off. I'd always held them in pretty high regard, but after last night it was clear my once-boasted aim was no more.

And of course, Faith had suggested we play for money.

I glared again at my traitorous dartboard, yanking the darts out one by one. It was propped up on top of my desk, tiny little holes riddling its ancient surface. Some of the holes were quite possibly older than I was, but I could recognise the recent ones like they were labelled.

Mine were scattered all around the dartboard with no apparent pattern, and as the whisky had continued to flow, a few of them were in my desk or on the walls.

Wesley's were all clustered neatly on or around the bulls eye. As I had discovered to my misfortune, behind Wesley's wire-rimmed spectacles and aristocratic face lurked the mind of a beer-bellied darts addict.

As for Faith, not a single one of her darts had come near the bull. No, they were all in a tiny little line inside the triple 20 instead. From the ragged look of some of the holes, several darts had landed in exactly the same holes repeatedly. Damn Slayer coordination.

In desperation I had passed around my booze as often as possible, hoping to get them sozzled enough as to give me a fighting chance. But no luck there. Wesley drunk lemonade instead and Faith could take more booze than my Aunt Judy, a woman whose party trick was letting people bruise their hands hitting her in the region of her liver.

So, basically, not only was I letting two people live with me rent-free but they were getting paid for doing so.

I'm getting screwed, big time...

I heard Wes clattering around in the kitchen as I dumped my darts point-up on Faith's favorite spot on my sofa, allowing myself a nasty little grin. Hell, the girl'd probably see them before she sat down, and if she didn't, well she had Slayer-healing didn't she?

I rode the elevator up to the office, still sniggering. As I entered the main office, my snigger choked itself into an irritable splutter.

The crosses I had nailed across every single entrance to my home were almost proving to be more trouble than they were worth. The one on top of the door to my private office had lost its top nails and was now hanging upside down.

Great. The landlord was already giving me strange looks, if he saw that he'd close us down for being a Satanist cult or something.

Sighing, I went to try and find my stepladder.

5.2 Chapter 2

Handyman is really not my desired profession. In fact anything that doesn't involve lounging around drinking beer and gambling isn't my desired profession. Teaching used to be, but now the peaceful innocence of those years seemed a century away.

"Ow!" Melancholy thoughts don't help when you're hammering nails, I decided, eyeing my swelling thumb. The stepladder swayed alarmingly as I retrieved my dropped nail and put it back into position.

5 Faith, the Exotic Dancer

A hand slid up my leg and pinched my thigh, and I nearly jumped out of my skin. And, of course, the thrice-damned nail leapt from my fingers and clattered on the floor.

"Faith!" I yelped, with a mixture of irritation, embarrassment and affection.

She smiled impishly up at me, her hands back in her jeans pockets. "How'd you guess it was me?"

"Well, despite my ample charms, total strangers don't usually walk in off the street and grope me, and I'm fairly sure Wesley harbours none of those kinda feelin's for me," I told her as I carefully made my way down the ladder, keeping a watchful eye on her hands.

"The great detective," Faith teased as I touched solid ground once more. "So, you wanna 'deduce' what I want to do, right now?" she asked softly, pulling me closer.

Hell, the nails could wait.

"Uh, pardon me?"

I pulled away from Faith, flushing. "Wesley, don't sneak up on - you're not Wesley," I told the middle-aged guy standing at the office door.

"No, I'm not," he said, brow furrowing. "Is that a problem?"

"Speaking of total strangers walking in off the street..." Faith muttered behind me, sounding put out.

I shushed her. "Can we help you?"

The man looked around at the messy office, at the crucifixes nailed on the walls and at the two of us and smiled uncertainly. "Um, maybe. Is this Doyle Investigations?" he asked, looking like he really hoped the answer was 'no'.

"Yeah, yeah it is. Did the landlord send you? 'Cause I know we're a little behind on rent, but if he'll just give us a couple more days..."

The man blinked, seeming taken aback. "No... what?"

I stared at him. "What?"

"What?"

I struck out valiantly for higher ground. "So how can we help you?"

The man's face cleared somewhat. "You were, uh, recommended to me by the LAPD... a Detective Lockley? She said you could help me."

"Help you?" Faith asked, confused.

But it was all very clear now. I could hardly believe it, but it was clear. Doyle Investigations had its first, non-vision-related, honest-to-god client in months.

I put on a big shiny grin that would have put a used car salesman to shame. "Come in to my office. Can I get you anything? Coffee? Bagel?"

5.3 Chapter 3

I studied our new client. He was short and squat, but his face was handsome enough in a round, happy kind of way. He had on a nice suit, but it was rumpled and probably hadn't been washed for a couple of days.

He folded his hands together, and I noticed a tell-tale trembling of his fingers. One thing I learned as a cop, always watch a man's hands. People can go on about reading faces and seeing into the soul through the eyes, but that's crap.

A guy trying to keep himself under control always keeps his face still and makes it show what he wants it to. But generally he forgets about his hands, and from the way this man's hands were shaking, I guessed he wasn't hiring us to find a lost cat.

Yeah, like Faith said. The Great Detective.

I leaned forward on my desk. "So, talk to me. What's on your mind?"

I sounded more like a therapist than a PI, and I could tell from the amused glint in Faith's eyes that she was thinking the same. Wesley cast a disapproving glance at both of us and tapped the client, who didn't seem to have heard me, on the shoulder.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

The man's eyes refocused on us. "Yes, yes, sorry. M-my name is Dennis Colridge, I own Colridge Investment. I don't suppose you recognise the name?"

5 *Faith, the Exotic Dancer*

I glanced at Wesley and Faith. No dice. "Sorry, not ringing a bell."

Colridge smiled weakly. "I'd be surprised if it did. We're very small, very exclusive, not really seen on the open market. We deal in stocks and bonds for certain wealthy clients, often with business relationships that go back whole generations. My grandfather started the firm quite some time ago -" Faith cleared her throat loudly and impatiently and put her feet on my desk. Colridge glanced nervously at her and continued. "But you probably don't want to hear about that. I'll just get to the point. In a pressurised job like mine, you don't often have time to make friends." He coughed. "Woman friends."

I could see where this one was leading.

"So... a few times, I uh, hired some."

"Hookers," Faith said, flashing a lascivious grin.

"An escort service," Wesley quickly substituted, tapping his cane like an elderly schoolmaster calling for attention. The cane was silver-topped and had cost a pretty penny. Wesley claimed it was an heirloom, but I had my doubts.

"Um... yes." He stared at my desk, embarrassed.

"Okay," I said. "So you had a few callgirls. What's the bad in that?" Wesley stared at me aghast and Faith snickered. I coughed uncomfortably and shifted in my chair. "I mean, yeah, it is technically illegal and all but I don't really see the need for a PI, is what I meant."

"Well, the problem is with one girl, specifically. Peggie."

Faith laughed. "A hooker named Peggie?"

"Faith," I said warningly. "Please, continue." More therapist-phrases.

"Well, Peg works down at a club called Halo. It's an exclusive nightclub for the elite of LA and it also features some... under-the-counter services. I was one of her regulars, I guess you'd say."

"Is this bird blackmailin' you?" I asked. So far all I'd heard was stuff that would be heard at confession in church.

"No, no," Colridge said firmly, seeming quite horrified at the prospect. "You see, Peg and I grew quite attached to each other, outside of just a... business relationship."

"You mean like romantically attached?"

"Yes," the man said, a quiet joy seeming to flow from him as he said the word.

A joy that Faith quickly snuffed out. "So it wasn't just about the screwing anymore?"

"No, I mean, yes, there was sex but it was..." He lapsed into embarrassed silence.

I shot Wesley a meaningful glance and nodded towards Faith. "Would you like some coffee, Dennis?"

"What? Uh, no thanks..."

"Well, I know I certainly would," I said in a loud voice. "Could you go an' get some, guys?"

"What are we now, secretaries?" Faith said irritably. Wesley stood up, supporting himself on his cane and took her by the shoulder.

"Come along now, Faith," he said firmly. He managed to budge Faith one step with sheer luck and then she just stood still while his arm muscles strained and bulged.

I gave her a stern look. Faith rolled her eyes and let Wes pull her out of my office.

As the door shut, I nodded to Colridge. "You were sayin'?"

"Well, Peg and I grew closer and she told me she was planning to quit at the end of the month. We were going to run away together, you know, to some place with sunlight and daisies, that kind of idea." He smiled sadly. "But then, I came to Halo one evening and she had just... disappeared. The owner didn't want to make a fuss, but I insisted on calling the police, which is how I met Detective Lockley. They checked her apartment out and everything but she'd just vanished. Lockley thought she might have taken off without me, but most of her stuff was still there, so I don't think so. I pestered her about the case all week and eventually she told me that they just couldn't spare the manpower to investigate further. She was very... emphatic about it."

5 *Faith, the Exotic Dancer*

Good ol' Kate. She lacks subtlety, that's for sure. I had a brief moment of pity for Colridge's enduring the verbal lashing that a stressed-out Kate would have unleashed on him.

"Eventually, she directed me to you. So what can you do?"

The sudden question caught me off-guard. "Well, um, we'll have to, like, investigate. And do stuff. Detective stuff."

"Uh-huh," Colridge said, seeming profoundly unimpressed. "Perhaps I should go..."

"No!" I yelped, shooting out of my chair. "Please. We'll handle it, you can rely on us. We're very discreet and professional."

"Really." He glanced around meaningfully at my shabby office.

I smiled weakly. "Yeah. We may not look big and shiny like most outfits you deal with, but we're good at what we do."

Which is killing demons and vampires, hardly the most relevant skill here. Still, I didn't think he needed to know that.

He eyed me for a second and then nodded. "I just want to know what happened to her, Mr Doyle. It's been so long, I've lost all hope of getting her back, I just want to find out what *happened*, I can't believe she just disappeared."

I didn't want to disillusion him. In a city like LA, it's all too easy for someone to disappear. They just vanish. Some nut cuts their throats and dumps them in the sewers, or they get gunned down for the change in their pockets and end up in a morgue as John or Jane Doe. I'd seen it so many times on the force. Nobody watches over them, nobody cares.

Maybe it was time somebody started.

5.4 Chapter 4

"So what do you think of him?"

The car's steering wheel spun in my grasp as Wesley glanced at me expectantly.

"I'm reservin' my judgement 'till we see this 'Halo' joint, Wes," I responded coolly, waving my middle finger as a car in front cut me off. The driver obviously thought he was very cool, with his flashy jacket and mirrored sunglasses. The fact that he was wearing those sunglasses at 8:00pm on a Thursday evening didn't seem to bother him at all. I'll never understand fashion.

Damn American drivers.

I heard a crackling sound behind me, as Faith finished her packet of chips and tossed it casually out of the moving car, ignoring the angry gestures of the drivers around us.

"Personally, I think he's married," she remarked.

"Say what?"

Faith rolled her eyes, tickling the back of my neck with her foot. Considering she was wearing muddy boots, the effect wasn't exactly erotic. "Sure. He was screwing this hooker chick and she threatened to tell his wife unless he paid her off. She's gone to ground, so he needs us to track her down so his hit man can take her out."

I turned around in the seat. "He's got a hit man, now?"

"Course he does," she said, as if I was questioning the obvious.

"Right, no more Magnum PI for you," I said pointedly. "Besides which, we spent the entire day checkin' this guy out. Even Kate confirms he's as clean as -"

"Doyle!" Wesley squealed from beside me.

I turned around just in time to see the truck ploughing towards us. "Shit!"

I spun the steering wheel and yanked on the handbrake, executing a perfect and very illegal U-turn in the road. As drivers around us hammered their hooters, I shot the convertible down a side road, listening for sirens. "See what happens if you distract me?" I told them sharply.

"Yes," Wesley said faintly. "Perhaps we should suspend debate until we reach the nightclub."

"Quit being such a spoilsport," Faith groaned. She patted me on the neck. "Do it again, Doyle!"

5 Faith, the Exotic Dancer

Ignoring her, I focused on driving very carefully and very legally until I was certain there were no police cars pursuing us.

Wesley, looking distinctly green around the gills, raised a finger. I tensed. I knew that pose. Last time Wes had used the finger was when he discovered that Faith was using some of his herbal potions to give herself a scented bath. It wasn't pretty. His reaction, that is, not Faith in the bath. *That* was quite a pleasant sight actually, particularly when she invited me to join her.

"I must say I do have one small point I would like to raise," he said hesitantly.

"Raise away," I growled, dodging a Corvette whose driver was either drunk, dead or both.

"This doesn't exactly seem like our type of job, really."

"How so?"

"Well, it doesn't appear to involve any demons, vampires or agonizingly painful visions. In fact, nothing supernatural at all."

I sighed. "Wes, I'm a PI, not a witch-hunter. I am supposed to have *regular* clients as well. You know, for appearances' sake. An' to pay the rent."

Wesley nodded. "Yes, of course, of course. But still, is it really the best way to apply a Slayer's talents?"

I resisted the urge to shake him until his teeth rattled. "Wesley, it's not like she's got anythin' else demandin' her attention. Tell you what, if we hear about a demon, we'll go do that instead. But until then, I want to earn the *money*. So I can afford the *food*."

Besides which, if *someone* hadn't cleaned me out at darts, maybe I would have more cash to spare for bills...

"Good point. Good point." Finally, thank God, he shut up. And Faith started talking. I swear, I think those two have some kind of schedule for who gets to annoy me with irrelevant questions me when.

"So, what are we going to do when we get there?"

"Um..." All right, maybe not all the questions are so irrelevant. "Look around, I guess," I said without much certainty.

"And why exactly did we have to stop off at that liquor store on the way?" Wesley asked, glancing with distaste at the six-packs of booze clunking together by his feet.

"Patience, children, all will become clear..." I said sardonically.

"Whatever," Faith muttered. I heard a glassy sound.

"Faith, keep your hands away from the bottles," I said sternly. I heard her sigh and slump back on her seat.

I allowed myself a single peaceful breath, which I then expelled in a barrage of expletives as another car swerved across me.

Damn American drivers.

5.5 Chapter 5

From the outside, I had to admit Halo looked pretty damn impressive. The sign over the door was rimmed in shining multicoloured lights, mostly purples and reds. The building itself was long and flat, easily about three times the size of the office.

Faith blew an admiring whistle as Wesley stared at the place with disbelief. "Good grief, what a crush of people!" he remarked.

It certainly was. They had one of those classy velvet ropes at the door, complete with a guy next to it who looked like he had been carved out of rock. A huge press of people crowded around the rope in no apparent order.

"Number 12!" the guy called, and a young couple threaded their way through and past the rope.

Great, you needed a ticket to get inside, and even then you had to wait until the gorilla at the door called you.

Luckily, I had foreseen this.

"Grab the six-packs," I instructed my companions, sticking two packs of bottles under my arms.

5 Faith, the Exotic Dancer

"What now?" Wesley asked sarcastically. "Get the guard drunk so he lets us by?"

"Imaginative, but no," I responded with equal sarcasm.

I led the two of them down a side alley and around to the back. There was only one back door into the club, and a clone of the gorilla at the front stood by it, glowering at us.

"Whaddya want?" he snarled.

"Manager ordered more drinks for the bar," I said cheerfully. "I think they're nearly out."

The gorilla frowned. "I checked the inventory list myself earlier tonight. We've still got tons left over, pal," he said mockingly. "Nice try, now clear off!"

Damn. Not only did these guys have lots of muscle, but it was *smart* muscle.

I backed away, shrugging. "Can't blame a man for tryin'..."

"Well, what now?" Wesley inquired dryly as we moved away from the door.

"Time for plan B," I told him.

Wesley snorted. "I wouldn't even have dignified that last attempt by calling it a plan."

I ignored him, walking towards the guard again and cradling one of the six-packs in my hands like a baby. "Excuse me again, man. Sorry to bother."

"What?" Gorilla snarled.

"I was just wonderin' if you could help me with somethin'. You see -" I pulled a bottle out of the packet and bopped him over the head. The gorilla's eyes crossed and he took a slow step towards me, rumbling. Growling, I tightened my grip on the bottle and brought it down again.

The gorilla buckled at the knees and then his chin bounced on the pavement.

"See, now why didn't we do that *first*?" Faith asked grumpily.

"Shut up an' give me a hand with Meatloaf," I ordered, locking my hands under his chest. "Damn, what does this guy eat for breakfast? Cement?" I gasped.

Once we had safely tucked Gorilla away in a dumpster, we headed inside. Making it through the kitchens was a cinch. No one questions you in a place like Halo if you look like you know what you're doing and you're carrying booze.

Then we hit the dance floor. And that was something else, all right.

Now I'm not exactly unfamiliar with clubbing and strip joints. I've been in places all over Ireland and America, even some where the 'ladies' have scales instead of skin. But this place was to them what the Titanic was to a fishing dingy.

First off, it was just bloody huge. It looked like just about everyone who was anyone, at least everyone who *thought* they were anyone - pretty much the same thing in LA - was crowded in or around the club. Secondly, despite the overcrowding, this place had *class*.

Now, you think about a nightclub/strip joint, you think what? Shady, dark lights and women with flabby, um, parts. Halo wasn't like that.

It even had different shades of light and wall colouring for different clientele. In one corner, there was the 'strictly vanilla' section with pale white walls and women wearing creamy outfits that were revealing without being slutty. In another, there was lots of furry bikinis and dark red lights. Another corner was practically lightless and the dancers definitely had leather fetishes in an extreme sense. Hell, some of those outfits made *Faith's* wardrobe look reserved.

And in the centre, there was the bar. But oh, what a bar! There were enough exotic, classy or just plain strong drinks to reduce a guy to blissful insensibility a hundred times over.

Of course, I probably couldn't afford a glass of water at this place, but it was nice to dream for a second or two.

"Well, this is certainly... different," Wesley muttered. "Hard to imagine Mr Colridge here."

"So, what's the plan, boss?" Faith asked, looking like a kid in a candy store. "Do we mingle?"

5 *Faith, the Exotic Dancer*

"We mingle," I confirmed. Faith shot off and Wesley trailed after her, trying hard not to brush up against anyone in particularly skimpy clothing.

I managed to hammer my way through part of the crowd, using my six-pack like a battering ram. Eventually I found a relatively deserted table. 'Relatively' being a variable term. In this case, it had one very attractive redhead sitting there. I wasn't about to complain.

"Hey there," I said as suavely as I could manage. "How ya doin'?"

"Fine," she said, raising a perfect eyebrow.

"Mind if I sit?"

"It's a free country."

I felt a twinge of guilt as I slid in next to her. But, hell, I was just mingling. This wasn't a Bond film; I wasn't going to have to sleep with every woman in sight just to get information.

Not that it wouldn't be fun if life was like a Bond film...

"So, what's your name?" I asked, proffering a hand.

"Betsy," she answered, shaking.

"Doyle."

"Doyle?" she asked, raising that lovely eyebrow again.

"Just Doyle," I confirmed. "I was wonderin' if we could talk?"

She shrugged. "Talk away."

"You a regular?" I asked her.

She shrugged again. "When I choose to be."

"If I wanted to talk to someone about a missing dancer, who could I contact?"

Wariness entered her eyes. "You a cop?"

"Former," I said, smiling. "PI now."

She began to get up and I caught her hand, noticing the pale mark circling her finger. "Your husband know you're here, Betsy?" I asked, still smiling.

Betsy stared at me for a second and then sat again. "Probably the manager, Barb. She's not in tonight; she usually just deals with the dancers, trains them and stuff."

"Thanks," I said politely, glancing around for Wesley and Faith.

I saw them both over by the bar. Faith was chatting with a brawny guy while Wesley appeared to be in the middle of getting rejected by a leggy blonde. Then the guy tucked a roll of green into Faith's belt.

I tensed. Considering I see her every day, I often forget how provocative Faith's dress sense really is. Besides which, having seen what's under it I can safely say the clothes are her least sexy feature.

But to a total stranger... let's say it wasn't necessarily an unreasonable assumption. And if I got over there very fast maybe he wouldn't have his nose broken for making it.

"It's been fun," I told Betsy. "But I have to get to my friends before somebody gets crippled."

I began to elbow through the crowd, my eyes on Faith. To my surprise, she seemed more amused than annoyed as she pulled the cash out of her belt and leafed through it.

But unfortunately, Wesley had also seen the money and he stepped in front of his Slayer, his chin out and speaking swiftly and angrily. And yes, the finger was raised.

The man swelled with rage, glaring at Wesley. I began to speed up.

"Excuse me, pardon, people about to die... comin' through."

Faith's expression turned from amusement to fury as she counted the money. "Thirty lousy bucks!" I heard her snarl indignantly. She grabbed the guy by the shirt as I burst through the last of the crowd.

The man's friends were crowding up behind him, and I saw our friend Gorilla at the back door with another pal, heading in our direction. Things were turning really nasty really fast.

So I did the only thing I could.

The bottles clunked on the counter as I slammed them down.

"Free beer for everyone!" I yelled, and then I grabbed Faith and Wes and ran like hell for the exit.

5.6 Chapter 6

The back door, left unlocked for the cleaners' access, led me in through the kitchens again and this time I turned off into a dingy private area a far cry from the glitter of Halo's public face. At this time of the morning Halo was occupied largely by cleaning staff. From the glance I caught of the main room of the club, I didn't envy them their task of clearing up after the clientele's nightly excesses. But hopefully their presence there meant I'd come early enough to avoid contact with any of the people who'd been in the club late last night.

"What do you think you're doing in here?" demanded a large woman with her sleeves rolled up to show off enormous biceps, who looked like she could wrestle a slime demon into submission.

I explained about my investigation, and saw her expression soften a little as I talked about my client's situation. "I don't know anything about what happens in this place outside of my shift," she said, a little too meaningfully. "But the offices are upstairs, and I think the assistant manager's in this morning. I don't know that he'll be too pleased to answer your questions, but I suppose you can try for nothing."

"Thanks," I said, and followed her directions up the stairs and along a dingy corridor to the assistant manager's office.

A young guy in an expensive suit answered my tap on the door, as I moved in closer to the wall to allow one of the cleaning staff past. He didn't invite me inside, instead stepping out to join me in the corridor. Obviously he wasn't prepared to give me more than a few minutes of his time, and even that none too confidential, out here in the corridor with his staff walking back and forth between our conversation.

"You want to ask me a few questions," he repeated, his tone flat and unimpressed, eyeing me suspiciously.

"You or anyone you can direct me to who can provide a little information about a missing dancer." I dredged out the paperwork which proved I was legit., which was getting a rare holiday from its usual hangout at the bottom of a drawer in the office. "All I want to do is find this girl. The guy who hired me wants to get in touch with her. He checks out fine, no harm doin'. And you've the paperwork there to prove I do too."

He gave the papers a glance through before handing them back. "I don't think we can help you, Mr. Doyle," he said stiffly. "We've had the police here about this matter already. They didn't find anything, and I see no reason why you should either."

I winced mentally - obviously the low-key approach wasn't fooling him any. "Now, hang on a minute," I protested, "I -"

At that point, the impact of my face against the wall, propelled by the smack of a meaty fist into the back of my head, cut off any further attempts to talk him around.

I lost track of the world for a couple of seconds, and when I managed to focus again, it was on the assistant manager's impeccably polished shoes, an inch from my nose where I lay sprawled on the floor.

"What's this all about?" I dimly heard the guy say to whoever had hit me.

My head hurt, a lot, and I could feel blood on the side of my face. The floor felt curiously comfortable, and I didn't much want to attempt moving.

A voice I recognised rumbled, "He was downstairs last night. He's the guy. The one who started all that shit."

I didn't need to look to know it was the gorilla standing there. And I supposed my ringing head was fair enough return for last night, at that. The guy had only been doing his job, after all.

I managed to gather my legs under me and used the support of the wall to attempt the climb to my feet. I made it half way before I realised it probably wasn't too great an idea just yet; the way everything seemed to be whirling in a circle around me was one clue. I stayed crouched against the wall, feeling dizzy and sick. Even so, the gorilla - who had a bandage on his own head and a less-than-forgiving look in his eye - made a move to put me back on the floor. Fortunately, the assistant manager intervened.

"He's a PI," he said sharply. He crouched down and waved a hand in front of my face, studying my eyes as he did, to make sure I was tracking - I was, just barely. He grunted, satisfied I could hear him, and pointed a finger at me in a manner that reminded me of Wesley. "You assaulted my employee. He assaulted you. As of now, neither of those events happened. I think we understand each other." We did. "Now, Cecil here will escort you to the door. Don't come back. It will not be worth your time. Nobody here is going to answer your questions, not if they value their jobs, because I am going to give them explicit instructions not to. Are we clear?" This time, he waited for an answer.

What, he expected me to string words together? Aside from the current state of my brain, I could hardly feel my jaw. Nodding would be unwise.

I managed to choke out a hiss that sounded vaguely like a 'yes', trying to collect my scattered senses.

I struggled to stand once again and after a few seconds, the gorilla got tired of whatever entertainment he was getting out of watching me and hauled me up with a painfully rough grip under my arms. I stood unsteadily, and his continued hold on my shoulder was probably all that kept me upright.

The gleeful expression on 'Cecil's' grinning face concerned me somewhat. The assistant manager saw it too and frowned. "Cecil - play nice," he said sternly. "Just escort him out of the door and see he leaves."

'As if,' I thought, watching the gorilla's moves very carefully as his handler retreated back inside his office and shut the door firmly after him. I wasn't in much condition to fight, and turning demon was definitely out. This was strictly human territory here.

"Come on, you," he said, sounding only slightly tamed by his employer's instructions. His hand on my shoulder propelled me along the corridor, down the stairs and out the back door into the deserted alley.

That was the part I hadn't been looking forward to. But I'd been gathering my strength, though I hadn't been about to let him know that. So when he shoved me against the brick wall of the club and raised his fist preparatory to using me as a punch-bag, I hooked a foot round his ankles and gave him a shove, tripping him in a very schoolyard manner. The heavy landing drew a pained grunt from his bulk.

I stopped only to kick him vindictively in the ribs, then staggered off down the alley.

His furious shouts chasing after me, I got the hell out of there as fast as I could.

'Well,' I thought, wincing at the pounding in my head which protested every running step, and trying desperately not to pass out. *'That was in no way humiliating...'*

5.7 Chapter 7

As I staggered into the office, two pairs of eyes looked up from papers and computer screen to stare at me.

"It, ah, didn't go well?" Wesley ventured.

"No, it did not go well," I snapped, slamming the door and heading to dig out my supply of aspirin. And my supply of scotch. Given that I might well be concussed, probably neither were a great idea. I swallowed the one with the other, and turned back to my associates to see Faith purposefully getting to her feet, a grim expression on her face. "Stop right there."

"Why? I'm going to go back to that club and kick someone's butt for this."

"The butt's already kicked, darlin'. Not that that'll help our case in the slightest." I sighed and collapsed into a chair, keeping the whisky close to hand. "These guys have already had the police in crawlin' around their not-entirely-legal business, and they're not in the mood to answer questions from independent investigators who don't have the strong arm of the law to back them up. Not to mention ones who caused a riot in their club last night."

She rocked on the balls of her feet, still debating, her hands curled up into tight fists, nails digging into her palms in anger. I added, "Besides, I'm the one with the license - if you went, even if it *wasn't* in a head-breakin' capacity, they'd be entirely within their rights to call the cops on you. Leave it."

She sighed and reluctantly relaxed her fists. "Hell, you're the one with the bruises," she said.

"Too right." Another generous swig from the bottle and a few more of them faded a notch.

Wincing at the recollection of my earlier insistence upon going on my own this time to make polite and businesslike enquiries, I explained what had happened. I caught myself on about the fifth time I used the phrase, *'Took me by surprise'*. Yeah, right. It wasn't fooling even me. I'd screwed up. There had to have been about twenty better ways to handle the situation.

"It all sounds guilty as hell to me," Faith said, when I'd finished. "We found a few other things about that club, researching all this crap you left us with - and by the way, thanks so much for that, Mr I've-got-a-PI-license-and-you-haven't - and this girl isn't the first one to go missing from the place. I bet they did something with her."

It did sound that way, but I wasn't wholly convinced. "They run an illegal prostitution business, of course they're not going to want people crawlin' around. It doesn't necessarily mean they're up to more sinister doings, or that her disappearance has to be connected to the club. We should keep our options open. I'm gonna go take a look at the gal's apartment this afternoon. Maybe I'll get lucky and find somethin' the police didn't."

"Yeah, but the club's still the best lead we've got. Someone there has to know something, whether it's a girl friend or another client."

"Look, this is all beside the point," Wesley interrupted. "Why don't I call Colridge now and put the whole thing behind us? After all, there seems to be nothing we can do. You can hardly go back to Halo, if they're going to resort to this kind of physical violence when you ask a few questions. And they know you now. I imagine the bouncers have the strictest instructions to be on the lookout for short, Irish ruffians."

"Hands off that phone," I growled, not exactly thrilled by his description of me. "We'll think of somethin'."

Faith smirked suddenly. "Maybe we already have."

Wesley and I both stared at her.

She shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot under the astonished scrutiny. "What? So I can't get plans?"

5.8 Chapter 8

"No -"

"Not in a million years would I ever condone such -"

"Not a snowball's chance in -"

"The Council would -"

"Undercover? Not under very much bloody cover, given what those girls were -"

"Will you both just shut the hell up!" We stopped talking over each other and fell into silence. Faith glanced between us. "Guys... this may be a shot in the dark here, but I'm guessing you don't like my plan?"

Wesley opened his mouth again and I glowered him into silence. I already knew what he was going to say, and another argument about the Council and what was appropriate Slayer behaviour and what was not was exactly what my aching head didn't need right now.

"Faith, you don't know what you're suggestin'. Those girls... I..." I spluttered to a halt, unsure of quite where to go and what to admit. Thinking of the times I'd frequented strip clubs and bars... thinking of multitudes of guys looking at Faith the same way I'd looked at those other girls... it actually made me feel physically ill. Unless that was just the concussion.

"Yeah...?" She waved her hand, gesturing for me to go on, her grin telling me she was loving every minute of my discomfort.

I sighed, and chickened out. "We can find another way," I said desperately.

"Like what? You go in and get worked over a few more times by their goons? I'm not buying that, Doyle. You can't use your demon to fight these people. And what if you had to, and they saw..."

I winced at the fairly unpleasant possibilities for my future which that threw up, and was touched by her concern. But still...

"The phone, Wesley," I said resignedly. I supposed we'd just have to tell Colridge we couldn't do it after all. Somehow, I didn't imagine he'd be too surprised. Wesley smiled smugly as he snatched for the receiver, and Faith moved like lightning to slam her hand down on top of it. Wes yelped and shook his squashed fingers, giving her an aggrieved look.

"No," she said. "This is my plan, guys. It's a good plan. Hey, I can do this! Dancing, smutty threads, loadsa guys oogling... where's the danger?"

I sighed, realising that if we didn't do this, she was going to be impossible. "Fine. Then we're goin' in with you," I snapped.

5 Faith, the Exotic Dancer

"And how are you going to manage that?" Wesley inquired. "Somehow I can't see you dancing around a pole wearing a pink thong."

Faith choked and spent the next several seconds having a rather fake-sounding coughing fit, which I took to mean that she *could*. I shot her a glare. "We'll get Colridge to introduce us to some of his buddies under a fancy cover identity."

He remained sceptical. "Well, aside from the fact they're probably passing descriptions of you around their neanderthal staff, you don't exactly convince as one of their type of, uh, clientele..."

"Rich and successful, you mean," Faith put in mockingly, as Wesley faltered on the edge of politeness, not saying it.

He shot me an apologetic glance of confirmation.

I seethed for a moment, but I supposed they were right; I was bound to be recognised. I looked at Wes. "Okay, then you'll have to go in with her. But I'm gonna be on hand as back-up."

Faith smiled broadly at that. I studied her suspiciously. "What're you thinkin'?"

She just shook her head, appearing to be enjoying herself immensely. "You'll see. I guess I better go apply for a job now, huh?"

5.9 Chapter 9

"I can't believe we actually let her talk us into that," Wesley grumbled as we headed for the car. While Faith was getting a foot in the door, so to speak, we were going to Peg's apartment - in the desperate hope we'd find something to give us an area other than the club to concentrate our investigations on. Our progress was somewhat slow, thanks to my headache and his leg. "I am of the firm belief that our current inane 'plan' is nothing more than an excuse for Faith to indulge in even more flirtation than usual *and get paid for it*."

"Wes, if you want nothin' to do with this case, why don't you just stay at home?" I suggested irritably. "Research Spike some more. I mean, we need to be ready, he could still show up again any time. There's something useful you could be doin'. With the extra advantage that it doesn't involve addin' to my already mind-numbingly painful *headache*."

"Yes. Well. I, ah, think I'd better tag along," he said. "Not good to be stuck in an office all day, eh?"

After a few seconds trying to figure out the odd catch to his voice, I realised he was concerned about me... And wasn't that exactly what my bruised ego needed to complete the perfect day?

"Anyway," he continued, "I think we're overindulging that girl obscenely. She's seventeen. She needs guidance... discipline... I'm her Watcher, not her sidekick."

"We're both her bloody sidekicks," I muttered. We reached the car and I leaned against the side of it. My balance felt off. I took deep breaths. "I don't know how she manages to twist me around her little finger like she does."

"Really? I had a notion that the night-time acrobatics played a rather significant role, myself."

I glared at him and he reddened.

He stammered a hasty recovery, "Well, yes, she does seem to have a knack for getting her own way. A useful enough skill for a Slayer, I suppose." He sighed and prodded the ground with his stick, like he was trying to kill some ferocious pavement demons or somethin'. "At least she *listens* to you!" he burst out petulantly. "You can talk her around. She never listens to *me*."

I snorted. "Yeah, she listens to me 'cause I'm the handy supplier of food, board, TV, beer and sex. Everythin' the girl needs to live in comfort." I climbed into the car and waited for Wesley to get in.

The red of his face had intensified so much he could've lit the way for Santa Claus, and I thought he was gonna have a coronary then and there. "Quite," he bit off. Avoiding looking at me, he awkwardly arranged himself in the front seat so that his injured leg was relatively comfortable.

I started up the car and *then* his eyes shot up quickly enough in alarm and abrupt realisation. "Um, Doyle... are you *quite* sure you should be driving?" he asked in quavering tones.

5.10 Chapter 10

By the time we pulled up outside Peg's apartment building, Wesley was at least as pale and shaky as I was.

5 *Faith, the Exotic Dancer*

Colridge had given us his spare key, and Wes unlocked the apartment door while I leaned against the wall fighting off another dizzy spell.

"I'm driving us back," he said pointedly.

"You don't have a valid license. Not to mention the dodgy leg there."

"I don't care. It's still safer. Besides, after that whisky you drank, you wouldn't pass a drink/drugs test right now if we were pulled over anyway."

"Yeah. Right. What is this, national Beat Up on Doyle Day or somethin'?"

Our banter died as we crossed the threshold.

According to Colridge, the police had already searched Peg's apartment thoroughly and if she didn't turn up within the next few days the landlord was going to shift her stuff to rent the place out again. But right now, everything was still there as she must have left it. Echoes of a life, staring back at me from every direction.

There was just the weirdest feeling in there, you know? Like the place knew its occupant wasn't coming back. It was nothing tangible, but all the same I knew we were both of us caught up in it. For the first few minutes that we walked around in there, the only sound but our breathing was the 'click, click' of Wesley's cane on the floor.

It was a neat little apartment. Peg obviously hadn't gone without from what she earned dancing and whoring for Halo. She'd lived comfortably enough, in this place. The rooms were sunny and airy, the feminine decor and accoutrements betraying no sign of how she'd made her living.

Everything was almost supernaturally tidy, and it wasn't from anything the police or Colridge had done, it was how she lived. I could tell. Harry had been like that, and always giving me earache over having to clean up after me.

I sighed. Poor old Colridge. I wished I could believe we were gonna bring her back to him alive.

Wesley was morosely studying the framed photographs on Peg's shelves. They showed a smiling young woman not much older than Faith, very pretty, with blond hair like sunshine. In the photographs, she was generally wearing bright-coloured, cheery, surprisingly modest clothing. A small tattoo in the shape of a crescent moon was visible on the side of her neck in several of the snaps.

There was a slight edge in her eyes, despite her smile, and no innocence in that porcelain face. Halo's employ had not been so lightly worn.

"I apologise," Wesley said slowly, carefully setting down one of the pictures which he'd picked up for closer study. "It occurs to me I may have been less than sensitive, where this case is concerned. It... isn't just about the money."

"No," I sighed. "It isn't. But that's not to say we don't need it. 'Cause we do, Wes. We really could use this one."

He regarded me silently, taking that in.

I returned to the search. In a desk, I found a neatly written letter and called Wesley's attention over to it.

I knew what it was the instant I saw who it was addressed to, but read it through anyway... affirming that Peg hadn't lied when she'd told Colridge she was going to quit Halo to start a new life together with him. I was holding her resignation.

"She didn't run away," Wesley remarked in a hushed voice, skimming through the same simple, quietly emotional sentences I'd just read, as the missing girl explained her reasons to club owner Mr. Harper.

Though we continued to search, we didn't find anything else that seemed of immediate importance - beyond Wesley's conscience. It looked depressingly like all the signs still pointed towards Halo.

When we left, locking up again carefully after us, I took with me the resignation letter, and also a bundle of other letters which I would return to Colridge - I didn't think he'd want them left for the landlord to dismissively throw out when he cleared the apartment. I'd found them beside Peg's bed. Had only glanced at them sufficiently to confirm they were written by Colridge, for her, and from the look of it this really had been an eternal love kind of deal.

I fell out of the door onto the street and turned left, heading back to where I'd parked the car.

"Uh, Doyle..." Wesley said, catching my shoulder.

"What?"

"The car's this way."

"It is?" I glanced around the familiar landmarks. "You're sure?"

"Very. Look, I think you're concussed. You probably need medical attention."

"Wes, I'm half a bloody demon. It's not gonna kill me. Although a blood test or a sneeze at the wrong moment *might*, if you get my drift. I'm fine. Demon healin' an' all that."

"Your demon healing," he repeated, switching to academic mode. "You know, that's a very interesting point. You see, I've noticed that when you're human you seem to be, well, *human*..."

"Oh, shut up." I stamped off in the direction he'd indicated.

I wondered if Faith was having any more luck than we were.

5.11 Chapter 11

We'd been back for a few hours, drinking cups of tea and fretting - me over Faith, and Wesley, I glumly suspected, over me - by the time she finally returned. The door swung back on its hinges with a crash, powered by Slayer enthusiasm, and Faith strode through carrying a bundle in her hands.

"No luck?" she asked. Rhetorically, since apparently the expressions on our faces were answer enough and she forged straight on without waiting for any other reply. She thrust the bundle into my hands. "Present for you. Help you keep up the low-profile surveillance without drawing the attention of the muscle... Come on guys, time to get ready! I'm on in less than two hours."

"I'm guessin' the audition went well, then."

"Are you kidding? Slayer flexibility, and all that. Their eyes nearly popped out of their skulls. And wait'll you see what I'm wearing tonight..." She threw her arms up in the air and twisted athletically in a little move which, aside from looking quite physically impossible, sent Wesley into a coughing fit... and I couldn't *begin* to guess what my own expression must've looked like.

"Faith...!" Wesley choked out, aghast, in between coughs.

"Yeah, yeah. Don't let me turn you on, Wes. 'Cause that'd never do for your precious Watcher/Slayer relations," she snickered.

I unfolded the bundle of cloth. Squinted at it, confused, and after a few seconds realised what I was seeing. "If you think I'm wearin' -"

"Aw, don't be such a spoilsport, Doyle. You know a girl always loves a man in uniform. Oh, hey, here's your little hat too." She flung it to me. I didn't bother to catch it out of the air.

The outfit looked a size too big. It was also rumpled from wear and smelt of somebody else's aftershave. I decided I really didn't want to know how she'd got it.

Wesley saw what it was and blanched. "Oh, bloody marvellous. Faith, he's concussed, he can't -"

"For the last time, Wesley, I'm fine!" I snapped, before I realised that effectively constituted an agreement with Faith's plans.

"Then I guess we're ready to rock. I better get changed." She held up the bundle in her other hand, which I hadn't noticed before. Probably because it was almost small enough to fit in her closed fist. I gulped.

"Wait," I said, as she made for the door. I crossed to the desk and hunted in the bottom drawer. Found what I was looking for and held it out to her. "You'll need to hide this on you somewhere. If possible," I added, eyeing the small bundle sourly.

She took the tiny device from my hand and peered at it. After a moment, comprehension dawned and her grin widened all the more. She leaned over the desk to examine the other contents of the drawer. "Way cool! Hey, where'd you get all this Mission Impossible shit, Doyle?"

"I am a PI," I said, somewhat aggrieved by the surprise in her voice.

"And you've used all this how many times?" Wesley inquired, tapping the side of the drawer illustratively with his cane. It did look a bit dusty, I supposed.

"One or two, actually... but that's beside the point. Here, you'll be needin' one as well."

He took it with a long-suffering look. "Working with you," he said distastefully, "Is certainly... an experience."

5.12 Chapter 12

"Have I mentioned how much I don't want to do this?" Wesley said nervously as we pulled up outside Halo - having dropped off Faith several streets back so as to avoid arousing suspicions of any connection between us.

"You don't wanna do this," I muttered sourly. "At least you get to go in there and mingle with the rich and unethical. Sippin' expensive drinks, gazin' at semi-clad girls..." Gazing at semi-clad Faith. In my distraction, the car lurched forward a few extra feet and the front wheel bumped onto the edge of the kerb and then skidded off again with a crunch of stressed metal.

"Doyle -" Wesley began snappishly.

"Look, just because I'm wearing this bloody stupid uniform, don't think you can start using that tone with me -" I snapped back.

But there were more important things to focus our attention upon. Through the window, I could see five or six of them heading our way. I jerked my head to indicate them to Wesley. "They're here. Remember, only Colridge knows who we really are."

"I know that." His tone was waspish. He was nervous.

"Okay, okay," I sighed. "Look, just relax, Wes, you'll do fine. Just picture everybody naked - helps with stage fright."

Wesley shuddered. "Doyle, most of them are nearly naked already!"

"Fine. So you won't need much imagination, then." I patted him on the shoulder in what I hoped was a reassuring way, then noticed one of Colridge's buddies staring somewhat oddly at us through the window and hastily raised my voice. "There ya go, sir, the mark is totally gone." I swatted at Wesley's shoulder in a dusting motion. "Good luck," I added, under my breath.

I expected him to get out of the car to meet them, but he stayed seated.

"Aren't you going to hold the door for me?" he asked plaintively.

With Colridge's buddies so close by, I didn't dare express my reaction to that as I'd have liked. Besides, he was right, it would look more authentic. I got out of the car, stomped around to the passenger door, and held it open while Wesley manoeuvred himself and his cane out.

Colridge's crowd, dressed up to the nines, collected in a little clump around the open door, watching while Wesley's form unfolded and stood up straight. He looked tall and dignified, and that fancy, black, silver-edged cane he'd been sporting the past few days didn't do any harm to the image. He seemed to make the right impression on Colridge's friends, anyway. Me, they ignored as though I was a piece of furniture... except for Colridge himself, who gave me a brief, amused sideways appraisal as he introduced Wesley.

"Mr. Wyndham-Pryce," he said, grandly. "Of Pryce Holdings International."

"Mr. Pryce," a guy in a fancy silver suit which matched his grey hair acknowledged snobbishly. "Trouble with the car there?"

Wesley straightened impossibly further, becoming his most arrogant. "No trouble. Except that my chauffeur can't drive."

"You just can't get the help these days," the older guy tutted, squinting at me. "Your man there looks as though he's been in a bit of a fight, too. Nothing but ruffians."

I ignored them and got back into the car. Wesley tapped on the window after I'd slammed the door, and I rolled down the glass.

"Be sure to return sharp now, as instructed," he said, waving his finger at me. "I don't pay you to be falling asleep on duty and making me late."

"Right," I said, through clenched teeth, although I suspected there might actually have been a veiled warning about my head injury hidden in there. He waited, flashing a displeased look around his new pals, then pointedly concentrating it on me. "... Sir," I muttered.

Wesley smirked, and nodded, then turned his back to me. I rolled the window up again and just watched, for a few seconds, as Wesley conversed with Colridge and the others as though he'd been born to socialise in their sort of circles.

I should've known Wesley would be good at this.

5 *Faith, the Exotic Dancer*

Dragging my eyes away from the performance, I concentrated on coaxing the car down the street and into what would have to pass for a parking space. From there, I could just see the glitter of Halo's front entrance, a bright Oasis of sin about a hundred yards along the street and about a million miles out of reach so far as the likes of me were concerned. I couldn't see Wesley and his companions among the crowds outside, even through the compact spyglasses I'd brought. Evidently they'd already gone in. I hadn't thought they were the sort the bouncers kept waiting for long.

I dug out the companion device to the bugs Faith and Wesley were wearing and switched it on.

I had to be within a few hundred feet to receive, and I was only just close enough. I wouldn't get any closer, on that busy street. But there was reception and, slowly, I was able to pick out the individual voices from the background music and the static.

"... The name's Faith. You?"

"Sandy."

"Been working here long? I guess you see a few assholes like that, in this job. How about giving a newbie the lowdown, huh?"

A crackle, and the next voice I was able to pick out, after a few seconds of static, was one I didn't recognise, but with the arrogant tones which marked him out as one of Colridge's pals.

"You should come here more often, Pryce, old man. Are you having a drink?"

"Certainly. I'm sure this establishment has some fine vintages."

"I thought you were on medication for your leg," Colridge's voice prompted sourly - sounding none too happy, there, at the idea of his hired help getting drunk on the job at his expense.

I shut my ears to Wesley's conversations, since nothing really seemed to be happening there, and tried to pick out Faith once again. Wesley was only really there as a failsafe. I didn't expect that he'd find anything himself, and in fact had strongly suggested he concentrate on maintaining his cover and not getting kicked out.

Nothing much more interesting seemed to be happening with Faith either, though. She was caught up in a conversation with this Sandy, one of the other dancers employed by the club, a girl with a tiny, shy squeak of a voice I could barely pick out. From what I could gather, Faith had 'helped' her deal with an overenthusiastic customer and was now comforting her. Moments ago, I wouldn't have believed Faith could comfort anything, but I'd never heard her use such understanding, sugary tones before. I guess she was a better actress than I'd expected.

"I mean, not all of us are involved in... that side of the business," Sandy continued. "But a lot of *them* don't see that as the case, often enough."

Faith cautiously attempted a few questions, trying to dig for information, but her new little friend was too wrapped up in her own problems to be much help and the questions largely went unanswered.

My attention drifted, and for a few minutes I listened to Wesley getting complimented on his neat accent instead.

Things continued like that for about half an hour, as I tried to listen to two sets of inconsequential conversations at once without falling asleep

I always did hate surveillance.

A tap on the driver's window diverted my attention. I snorted wide awake and saw through the windscreen that a squad car had pulled up in front of me. Then I turned and saw the face peering in at me through the window, and my spirits sank that little bit lower.

Her expression went through a variety of surprised contortions as she recognised me. Suppressing a groan of dismay, I rolled the window down.

"Now I really have seen everything," Kate remarked. "Love the hat, Doyle. Very fetching. Is PI work just not paying enough anymore?"

"Funny lady."

Her gaze slid past me and fell upon the surveillance equipment. "Ah. Mr. Colridge," she remarked.

"Yeah. Well, you should know, since you sent him to me."

"Poor guy. Not that I approve of the whole hiring prostitutes thing but..." She shrugged. "I wanted to follow it up, but the department shut me down. The club's owner wields a fair amount of influence - watch out for that old bastard, by the way. And the Assistant Manager's almost as bad. That's his son, and not someone you'd want to cross."

"Thanks for the warning," I said wryly.

"Uh-huh. I didn't think those bruises were a fashion statement. Anyway, I'm glad you took on the case. Colridge is a persistent guy, and I figured you could use the business." She hesitated. "Things just haven't been the same since you left, you know, in the department."

"They had to find a new whipping boy?" I saw her hard look which said that wasn't what she meant, and shrugged. "What are you doing here, anyway, if they took you off the case?"

She sighed, and for a minute she looked worn out and worn down. I supposed it must be getting difficult for her, working alone. At least back then there were two of us who really understood what was out there. I hadn't seen her looking so grim in... a long time.

"Homeless deaths," she said. "Bodies just left dumped around. No apparent cause. Too many for it to be a coincidence."

"I take it 'no apparent cause' does include bite marks?" I cut in, fairly rhetorically.

She nodded. "Nothing remotely suspicious, except that they're dead. I guess this is something new."

"I'll keep my eyes open."

"Thanks. This city's turning into a real demon zoo," she remarked, sounding unthrilled. "Of course, the theory of the moment is that someone's poisoning these people with a substance hard to trace in an autopsy. It's been a few months since the last one, but it's funny how the case handily resurfaces when the guys upstairs want me transferred away from missing dancing girls."

"Ah... how many missing dancing girls?" I asked. "Faith turned up a couple from the old news reports but I figured there might well be more."

She nodded slowly. "It goes back about a decade, a handful every year. None of them have turned up again yet, dead or alive. *Something's* happening to them. It's too easy an explanation to say they're running off."

"Right."

"Faith'?" she queried. "I thought your new co-worker was that goofy Pryce guy?"

"Uh... they sort of came as a package." I tried to remember if Kate knew about Watchers and Slayers and decided it was an explanation for another time.

"Okay. I'll send all I have on the missing dancing girls over to you, first thing tomorrow. See you around." She sketched half a wave and straightened up. "Oh, and by the way..." She leaned back down to the window. "You're blocking off that exit. Move your car back two feet or I'll have it impounded."

5.13 Chapter 13

I moved the car and turned the volume back up on the receiver. While I'd been talking to Kate, Faith's turn to dance had come around and interesting noises now emanated from the listening device.

It wasn't much of a surprise to discover where she'd hidden the bug. I listened to her dancing from the perspective of her cleavage, the noises of flesh and spandex in motion interspersed with occasional cheers and wolf-whistles. I alternatively seethed quietly and wished I was there to watch.

Never mind. I could always request a private performance later.

The moaning noises which started to accompany her dancing once she'd got into the swing of it were somewhat distracting, to say the least, and I had to re-evaluate my initial assumption that listening to Faith was nowhere near as interesting as watching her when my imagination kicked into gear unbidden and started to fill in the blanks.

Events on Wesley's side snapped my attention back to more serious business again. He'd been very quiet while Faith was on. I didn't know if it was disapproval. Maybe he'd been elsewhere, hiding in a corner, and hadn't even seen her performance. It had better not have been an appreciative silence, I thought, and then had to wonder why it would annoy me so much if it were.

"No, no, I couldn't possibly..." Wesley was saying.

5 Faith, the Exotic Dancer

"Why not? Come on, you can't turn down one of Alexei's parties. *Nobody* turns down one of Alexei's parties."

Wesley continued to stammer, but the astonishment in that tone trampled all possibilities of disagreement. People came to Halo for a good time. If a better time could famously be had elsewhere, refusal would arouse suspicion.

"I'd be delighted," I heard him answer weakly. "I'll, ah, meet you out at the front shortly. I just have to... visit the bathroom..."

"It's only two minutes' drive, you can visit the bathroom when we get there."

"I, uh, have to let my chauffeur know..."

"Irish? Why? Let him wait, the insolent little upstart. Alexei's people will put you up or take you home."

"Crap," I muttered. Wesley, I imagined, would be thinking much the same thing.

I listened as his new pals dragged him off to this private soiree.

They were right about it being close. It was close enough that I still kept receiving the occasional snippet from the bug. And what I did receive sounded interesting, to say the least.

"Oh, my." Wesley's voice, shocked and scandalised. "*Excuse me, I thought the term you used was 'party' not 'orgy'. My word... I wouldn't have thought it was physically possible for a woman to do that... My word... You wouldn't have anything stronger to drink?*"

The voices sadly faded into static while I was creased over with laughter, and although I spent several minutes desperately trying to coax the reception back, it was to no avail.

My brain kicked in again then, and it guiltily occurred to me I was now Faith's only back-up.

The dancing was over and from the sounds, she was in the dressing rooms again, talking with Sandy. The girl seemed a bit more coherent now and was actually answering her questions.

"Peg? Yes, I know her. I'm surprised you do, she never talked like she had much of a life beyond this place. A nice girl, though."

"I only know her a little. She suggested I try for a job here, a few weeks ago. I haven't seen her in a while, though. I was hoping she might be here tonight."

"Oh, she won't be coming back. She resigned, you know. The manager was furious. She was one of the best dancers working here. He wouldn't accept it, told her she better be back. She told him she'd send it in writing. After that, nobody's seen her at all. We even had the police here about it."

"Imagine that. I guess she'll turn up sometime, yeah? She'll just be lying low for a while."

"I hope so." Sandy's mouse-like voice sounded doubtful. I couldn't blame her. Faith was laying on the cheery innocent act a bit too thick, I felt.

"Get a move on in there!" hollered a loud, abrasive voice which even filtered through the listening device made me jump. I guessed that would have to be Barb. Sounded like a charming woman. "I don't pay you to stand around chatting."

It put a stop to Faith's information-gathering exercise, at any rate. "I better finish getting ready," Sandy said, even quieter than usual. "I'm on again soon. See you tomorrow, I guess."

"Yeah," Faith said. "Tomorrow."

5.14 Chapter 14

I listened as Faith headed out through the corridors of the club, presumably heading towards the back door I'd used for access that morning. I heard heavy footsteps approach her along the corridor, and falter as they drew close.

"Say, you're new here... no, wait, *have* I seen you somewhere before?" said a voice which I recognised with a mounting feeling of dread. My hands clenched involuntarily into fists.

"Don't think so," Faith said chirpily. Only someone who knew her would sense the undercurrent of danger in that innocent reply. I groaned and prayed she wouldn't be recognised.

5 Faith, the Exotic Dancer

And that she wouldn't tear Cecil into soggy little pieces with her bare hands.

"No, I think... I *know* I'd not forget seeing you before..." he hesitated. There was a note of impressed appraisal in his voice now. My opinions abruptly did a U-turn as I started hoping Faith would take him apart. Slowly. And nastily. "You wouldn't want to go out for a drink somewhere? Somewhere else, I mean - not here." There was a slight laugh in his voice at that.

"I have a date," she said, meaningfully. The dark edge to the words convinced me she was gonna thump him any minute.

"Oh," he said, sounding disappointed. "Well, if it doesn't work out - I'm here most nights."

"I'll keep it in mind." I bet she would. And if she took him up on that offer, she'd bring lots of fun sharp implements to liven up the party.

She extricated herself from the conversation without Cecil ending up maimed - a minor miracle, in my opinion - and continued, her footsteps sounding hollow on the polished floor, echoing slightly off the smooth surfaces of the empty corridor. I heard the exterior door open and then slam behind her.

I stayed where I was, wary of bringing the car any closer to pick her up. Even if I was unlikely to be recognised in my current garb, I didn't think many people would buy the concept of a dancing girl having her own chauffeur.

Assorted scuffings and footsteps and static came to my ears, all normal background noise I'd grown accustomed to in the last few hours. The occasional word or grunt floated through from Wesley's bug, and what wouldn't I give to know what was going on *there*...

I allowed myself to speculate amusedly on a few possibilities, enjoying my revenge on the uptight Watcher for his too-enthusiastic embracing of our role-playing earlier. The evening's work was almost over, and I could feel my tiredness after the day's events starting to announce its presence. I was leaning back in the seat and stretching my aching muscles when Faith's yell rang out.

For a moment I sat there, frozen, as an ominous crunch followed the sound. Then I heard nothing but blank static.

"Faith!" I yelled into the receiver, hearing the panic in my voice, before I realised she wouldn't hear me even if the bug had been working.

I kicked myself into action and within seconds, finding an energy I wouldn't have imagined I could muster only moments before, I'd grabbed the flashlight from the seat beside me and was sprinting across the street towards Halo.

5.15 Chapter 15

My heart was hammering in my ears as I made it to the mouth of the alley behind Halo.

"Faith," I called softly, leaning against a wall and trying to recover my scrambled wits. My eyes strained as I peered into the ill-lit alley, my blood congealing. No answer.

I flicked the flashlight on and the white circle of light fell on a crumpled form lying near a dumpster.

I swallowed. "Oh, god, Faith..."

I don't recall covering the distance between us, but suddenly I was on my knees, feeling for a pulse in the hollow of her neck. She stirred beneath my hand and I began to breathe regularly again. Shining the flashlight more fully on her, I could see a deep cut on her brow. Her brown curls were already matted with blood and dirt. I gently prodded the wound, checking for a fracture, and she hissed in pain, her eyes opening slightly.

"Sorry," I said quickly, reassured by the firm feel of her skull.

"Doyle..." she muttered, trying to sit up. I quickly pushed her down again.

"Don't move. Just lie still." I'm not sure if my words convinced her, or if the pain was just too much to stand, but she obediently remained still and closed her eyes. "Stay here," I ordered. "I'm going to go take a look around."

I rose to my feet and took a cautious step forward. There was a metallic sound, just ahead of me. I took a quick step back again. Whatever was there was probably seriously mean, to have brought down Faith with a single strike, and I didn't fancy the thought of sauntering ahead, my flashlight giving away whatever advantage of surprise I might have.

The flashlight was a really old and worn one and I didn't trust it to come on if I switched it off again, so I pressed it against my chest, hiding the light, and slipped forward into the blackness. It was pretty damn petrifying as I crept onwards in the darkness, but I preferred the advantage of stealth to getting my head caved in.

5 Faith, the Exotic Dancer

I heard a scraping sound directly ahead of me and desperately squinted, trying to pick out any shapes. I couldn't see anything, but damn it, I knew the thing was there!

I twisted the flashlight away from my body, hoping to blind it with the light. But there wasn't any light. I swore silently as I realised the ancient batteries had finally given up the ghost.

The *thing* rumbled what sounded like a malignant chuckle and then something struck my chest with the force of a hammer. As I fell, I caught a glimpse of a greyish-green lumpy head and broad muscled shoulders. I hit the ground with a soft groan and heard the beast take a step forward. Again, that rumbling laugh. Now I could make out more features... long, surprisingly slender arms... a large, hulking body, hunched over like an ape... and a blank, featureless face. No nose, just a tiny slit of a mouth and slanted, inhuman eyes. It reached for me with its long arms, chuckling again, and I grabbed the flashlight in both hands and smashed it up into that low-hanging face, just above the slit-mouth.

Laugh that one off, you son of a bitch...

The creature roared and its arms scooped me up and smashed me down onto the pavement again. The demon rose to the fore, absorbing most of the impact, and I was up again faster than the monster had expected. I swept the flashlight up, clubbing its misshapen head a second time. It hissed and long arms dove past my guard with frightening speed, its hands closing on the lapels of my uniform.

With no visible effort, it picked me up, spun me around twice and let me go. I experienced a brief and exhilarating flight, which ended in a considerably less enjoyable collision with a wall. Groaning, I slumped down against the wall. My head was throbbing again, and the ground seemed to be more... fluid than usual.

Faith. Got to get up. Get up, Doyle. Faith's helpless. *Get up!*

In retrospect, it's amazing what fear can make you overcome.

I rose to my feet with a growl of pain and rage, bringing the flashlight around to strike against... nothing? The beast was gone, vanished as if it had never been. I concentrated, but even my sharper demon-senses couldn't pick up its presence.

With a sigh of relief, I let go of the demon and staggered over to Faith again, rubbing my aching head.

"How's it goin' down there?" I asked quietly, looking down at her prone form.

Faith's eyes opened and blinked once. "Doyle. You look like crap," she said weakly.

I glanced down at my torn uniform and smiled painfully. "Got news for you, darlin'. You look worse."

"I'm not arguing," she moaned, rubbing her head. "What did that jerk hit me with?"

I looked to the side and my eyes widened a little. "Looks like a trashcan." I decided not to mention the sizable dent in its side. Faith sat up and swayed slightly. "Are you sure you should be tryin' to get -" Faith slumped down again. "- up," I finished.

"I'm fine," Faith said unconvincingly.

I eyed the dented trashcan. "Sure you are."

"Where's the demon?"

"It ran off, I guess," I told her. At least, I hoped it had. I really didn't feel like a fight to the death with a demon half-again as large as I was. At least, not until I'd caught my breath.

"We gotta get after it... gotta chase it," Faith said thickly.

"Sure we do," I said comfortingly

"Stop it."

"Stop what?"

"Stop... patronising me, just 'cause I got hit in the head."

"I'm not patronisin' you," I protested.

"You are so."

I shrugged, reached down and scooped her up in my arms, not without some difficulty, I might add. "Okay, maybe a little." I waited for the little flashing lights to disappear from my vision and then trudged towards the car.

"Hey! Put me down," she said fuzzily, pushing at my chest. "I can walk."

5 Faith, the Exotic Dancer

"No. You can't," I told her matter-of-factly. "Now quit squirming."

She prodded me ineffectually a few times, and then gave up and lay back. "You know, this is kinda romantic..." she mused in the erratic way of the concussed.

"Really?" I asked her. "One beat-up person carrying another beat-up person along the streets of LA at night, and you call it romantic."

"I said kinda."

I carefully laid Faith down on the back seat of the car. "Okay. Now don't fall asleep," I warned her. "Not with that bang on the head you just had."

"Okay," she murmured, already drifting off. Sterner measures were needed.

I switched on the radio and tuned it to the loudest rock band I could find and then cranked the volume way up.

Faith groaned, covering her ears. "Ow..."

"Sorry, hon," I offered, grabbing a penlight from the glove compartment. "Sit tight."

5.16 Chapter 16

This flashlight seemed in fine working order as I made my way back to the alley. I wasn't really expecting to find anything, but at least if I could pick up the demon's scent, I could judge if it had just been passing through, if it had been hanging around by Halo to pick off customers.

After checking to make sure no interested pedestrians were entering the alley, I brought my demon side forth again. The second the change was complete, I felt better. Maybe there was something to Wes's theories about my healing.

I took a deep sniff of the air, and tried not to retch. As classy as Halo was, this alley smelt like any other in LA, a revolting mix of rotting garbage, urine and dirt. Eau de Los Angeles.

I sniffed the air again, trying to inhale as little of it as possible. My chances of tracking anything through this crap were less than zero. But there was one scent that was unfamiliar.

Well, it was familiar to me, but it wasn't a regular feature on LA streets. The smell of rotting flesh. Human. A week or so past due, I guessed. Grimly, I followed the sickly scent to its source, the dumpster Faith had been lying near. Steeling myself, I flung the lid back on the dumpster.

The smell hit me with more force than the demon's punches had, as rats squeaked and crawled away from the light. An old woman lay face-up on a bed of garbage. She wore a long grey coat and her skin was wrinkled and as grey as the coat.

Her face... well, the rats had been busy. I looked away, breathing hard. Short, sharp gulps of air.

I propped a cigarette between my lips, but didn't light it, my mind working furiously. The feel of the white tube in my mouth calmed me, even unlit.

Stay focused. Don't look at her face. This isn't a person; it's a puzzle. Use logic, analyse the scene... keep perspective. Stay rational, don't let emotions get in the way.

It took every inch of the self-control I had learnt at the LAPD to get me to lean into that dumpster and inspect the body. I kept my eyes low, away from her face. Neat hands, gaudy rings on the fingers. A thick coat, even though it had been pretty warm these past few nights. I gritted my teeth as I unbuttoned the coat, each button at a time. Eight buttons.

The coat fell open. The old woman was wearing a slinky little leather number and her sagging frame filled it like jelly fills a mould. So, another one of Kate's homeless deaths, but dressed very strangely for a homeless person. Stolen clothes?

I slowly forced my gaze to rise, covering every inch of her body, bit by bit. No wounds, just like Kate had said. The only damage had obviously taken place after death. An all-you-can-eat buffet for the rats.

Her neck was unmarked too, so it obviously wasn't vampires. No, not unmarked. My skin chilled. There was an old, faded tattoo of a moon on it.

I had done what Dennis Colridge had hired me to do. I had found Peg.

I turned away from the dumpster and doubled over.

5.17 Chapter 17

The taste of vomit was acidic on my tongue as I walked back to the car, hands jammed in my pockets.

Faith seemed more alert as I got into the car and slammed the driver's door shut. I silenced the noisy radio with a brutal click. I could see her concerned reflection in the rear-view mirror as I stared ahead, unseeing, at the silent road in front of me.

"Doyle? You okay?" She touched my shoulder gently.

"Fine," I rasped. "I'm fine."

Faith sighed. "Okay, I was saying that a few minutes ago, and you're even less convincing than I was. What gives, boss?"

I opened my mouth to reply and felt the words freeze in my throat as I stared at her reflection. Faith had clumsily tried to clean away some of the crusted blood from her hair, and among all the matted dark hair, there was a single strand of grey.

I shifted the mirror so it was angled towards my face.

5.18 Chapter 18

"Youth-stealing demons," Faith said, as I paged slowly through the thick book before me. "I don't know, Doyle. I don't feel any older or anything, you know?"

I rubbed my burning eyes and took a sip from my half-empty mug of coffee. I'd refilled that mug three times already. We hadn't dared go to sleep with our respective head wounds, so the entire night and most of the day had been spent in research. Research which, without Wesley, was fairly futile. Annoyingly, Faith appeared almost totally recovered from her injuries. I, on the other hand, felt like someone had hit me repeatedly with a sledgehammer and then driven over me with a forklift truck. Or maybe a bus.

"It only touched you for a second or two. Could be it needs longer to do some serious agin'," I suggested.

Faith yawned. "A bit of a stretch, doncha think?"

I slammed the book down and glared at her with annoyance. "All right then, Faith, you explain to me how a woman could age eighty or so years in a few weeks."

She raised her hands defensively. "Just saying, just saying. Why are we doing this book stuff anyway?"

"You know why." I glanced meaningfully in the direction of my bedroom. A low groan of pain came from the open door.

"Sounds like he's awake," Faith said, smiling nastily. Okay, I was fairly amused by Wesley's plight too, but she seemed to be taking a positively vindictive glee in it. Of course, my own intense pain was probably dampening my sense of humor a bit.

Wesley staggered groggily from my bedroom, his cane beating out an unsteady rhythm across the floor as he vanished into the kitchen.

"Why good *afternoon*, Wesley!" Faith said winsomely. "And how are you this glorious day?"

The footsteps stopped. "Go to hell, Faith," Wesley said weakly. "You'll probably fit right in."

Faith's smile widened. "Why how *rude*, Wesley! What *would* the Council say?"

"They'd probably agree with me that this comes under the category of 'cruel and unusual torture'," I broke in. "Leave the poor guy be, Faith. Go read a book about murderous demons or somethin'."

I pushed a tome towards her. She pushed it back. "No way, bud. Now Wesley the Wonder Watcher is finally awake, he can do the book-reading."

Wesley dragged himself out of the kitchen, clutching a mug of coffee. He really did look like hell, pale and slightly greenish, and with red rims around his eyes. "Faith, at the moment, I am barely capable of speaking English. You expect me to read *Latin* now?"

"Well, you're the only one who can," I said calmly. "An' most of your damn books are in it."

Wesley closed his eyes and slumped into a chair. "Dear god." He took a swig of coffee. His cheeks bulged and he sprayed it across my desk in a brown deluge.

5 *Faith, the Exotic Dancer*

"Sugar might be a good idea," I advised, pushing the bowl across to him.

"Yes. Thank you," he said faintly, tipping half the contents into his coffee and stirring it hastily with his finger. He flung his head back and drained the mug in one go.

I raised an eyebrow. "Impressive."

He gave me a sickly smile. "I assure you, Doyle, after the things that have passed my lips these past few hours, a cup of hot coffee presents no challenge at all."

"Why'd you drink so much anyway?" I asked, smiling slightly. Hell, I said I wasn't as amused as Faith. I was still pretty damn amused, though.

"It was either that or... or... well, let us just say that Alexei and his friends have some rather... disturbing habits. By remaining inebriated I was able to avoid participating in anything." I was impressed. Oh, not by Wes's plan. I was impressed he could still use a word like 'inebriated' while hung over.

Faith laughed loudly. Both Wesley and I clutched at our heads. "Typical. Wes gets invited to an orgy, practically the only chance he has had in his entire life to get some, and what does he do? Get whacked instead."

Wesley sniffed. "That's because I view sexual relations as something that should only occur between people who love each other, rather than, as you seem to, some kind of hobby."

I cleared my throat, and Wesley winced, looking guiltily in my direction as he realised what he'd said. "I think we're kind of losin' focus here. Our focus is: demons. Big, lumpy ones who age people. Not Wesley's night-time exploits or lack of them. Or Faith's hobbies."

"Demons. Right," Wesley squinted at me. "What are you reading there?"

I glanced at the spine. "Uh... Baucher's Guide to the Occult."

Wesley shook his head. "A waste of time. Baucher was quite fond of opium and it's rather doubted that he ever actually saw any of the demons he wrote about. When he started talking about blood-sucking pink elephants with talons the size of knives, he rapidly lost credibility."

"How quickly drug abuse can ruin careers," I said dryly.

Wesley closed his eyes, as if reading a catalogue off the inside of his eyelids. "Try... um, the Toraskian Scripts. Chapter 8."

I floundered through the pile of old books, found the appropriate one, and flipped it open. Thankfully, it was in English. "Okay...chapter 8. Life-draining beasts an' demons. Check."

Wesley put down his cup, then picked up mine and took a sip. "Read the heading of each of the entries."

" Okay. Let's see... Dethgarian Puff Snake."

" No. Too small."

" Uh... Letorian Pit Spawn."

" Too big."

" Quorian Lasher."

" Extinct."

" Niroswitch."

Wesley blinked. "What? That doesn't drain life, it feeds on the lower intestines of its victims!" He gulped down more of my coffee. "That's the problem with these medieval scholars. Never proof-read their work."

I turned another page. "Yeah. An' if they'd heard of indexes, that would be helpful too. Sithgar Beast."

" Only lairs in extinct volcanoes."

" Which LA is famous for its lack of. Okay...bingo!"

Wesley frowned. "Bingo? What's a Bingo Demon?"

I studied the entry carefully. "No, I think I've found our guy. Faith, come check this fella out. He seem familiar to you?"

5 Faith, the Exotic Dancer

She peered over my shoulder. "That's our boy. Cutie, isn't he?"

I ran my eyes over the illustration. Sure enough, it was a perfect match on our late-night, life-draining pal. Right down to its ugly slanted eyes. "Here we go. An Umbrosh spirit-stealer. It..."

"... walks around in mortal form during the day, but changes form to hunt at night. It steals the youth of its victims, and requires a handful per year to sustain itself. Properly sustained, it can remain ageless indefinitely," Wesley quoted.

I nodded. "Yeah. Know-it-all."

Wesley smiled slightly. "Everyone has their field of expertise. Pass me the book, please." He carefully ran his eyes over the entry. "I can't read this," he announced, squinting. "The words are all blurring together."

"Field of expertise, huh?" I asked pointedly.

"Perhaps I'm not up to full operating potential yet," Wesley admitted sheepishly, passing the book back.

"Uh-huh. Let's see...solitary hunter, ages with its touch, mates once every fifty years..."

"More often than Wesley," Faith said.

Wesley rolled his eyes. "Yes. Ha, ha. I'll have you know, I have a lovely girlfriend."

"You do?" she asked.

I looked up from the book. "You do?"

"I do," Wesley said, flushing slightly. "Unfortunately, she's back in England and has stopped returning my long-distance phone calls."

"Wait a minute," I said sharply. "Long distance phone calls. On *my* phone?"

Wesley flushed even more. "Well, they were quick ones."

"Wesley..." I growled.

"This last couple, she hung up as soon as she heard my voice," he said quickly.

"Wesley..."

"Guys!" Faith interrupted. "Argue over phone bills later. How do I kill this Umbrosh guy?"

Wesley shrugged. "The usual methods. Bludgeoning, neck-breaking, stabbing, decapitation... all or any of the above."

Anywhere else, decapitation would *not* be considered a regular part of conversation.

I rubbed my chin. "Okay, so if the disappearances an' 'homeless deaths' are all around Halo, then our guy's gotta be on the inside. It makes no sense that he'd just keep on huntin' there if he wasn't."

"That's logical," Wesley agreed. "Considering the amount of, ah, physical energy a place like Halo would give off, the demon would be drawn there."

"All right. So what else do we know? How does this thing think? What are its habits?"

Wesley frowned. "Hmm. Umbroshes absorb some of the intellect of their victims, along with their life energy, causing an effect not unlike magical senility before death. If an Umbrosh has killed enough, it could be frighteningly intelligent."

"And if this thing is pulling off an undercover job at Halo, it's gotta be pretty bright or someone would've noticed," Faith said grimly.

"Yeah, 'cause security's sooo tight there. Real hard to fool them." I remarked sarcastically, tapping my little hat for emphasis.

"Aw, you know what I mean," Faith said, squirming. "Any more info, Wonder Watcher?"

Wesley closed his eyes for a second or two. "Um... they follow very distinct life cycles, changing locations every decade and mating every five. Habitual."

"The bodies only started piling up ten years ago," Faith remarked.

5 Faith, the Exotic Dancer

I pushed Wesley's books off the table, ignoring his squeak of protest, and scooped up the manila folder beneath them. I flipped through the white, typewritten pages. "I saw something about ten years in this file Kate brought us, just can't place it..."

"Kate? Who is this 'Kate' person, anyway?" Faith asked.

"Oh, Detective Lockley was here?" Wesley inquired, perking up a little.

"'Detective Lockley'? How come even Wesley knows who this woman is and I don't?" Faith protested.

"She's just an old friend," I said absently, picking through the file.

"An...old...friend," she said slowly.

"Uh-huh. All right, here we are. Halo changed ownership almost exactly ten years ago, it was bought by Jacob Harper and his son, Perry Harper." I smiled. "Ladies and gentlemen, we have a demon."

"Correction," Wesley said. "We have two suspects. Only one of them is a demon."

Faith shrugged. "Why don't we just stab both of them and see which one gets up again?"

"Faith!" Wesley said aghast. I flashed her a disturbed glance, too.

Faith rolled her eyes. "Jeez, it was a joke! What do you think I am, a goddamn psycho?"

"It wasn't very funny," Wesley said, his words clipped. "Slayers are supposed to save life, not take it and -"

"Blah, blah, blah, you're a naughty girl, Faith," I interrupted quickly. "Was that what you were about to say, Wes?"

"Um...the gist, yes."

"Good. Now if we can get back to the demon. Since killin' both of them is *not* an option, we're goin' to need to go back into Halo, see if we can figure out which Harper is the demon."

I really hoped it was the younger. I'd like any excuse to beat the crap out of the smug bastard.

" Which means we're back undercover," Faith said, grinning eagerly.

" No," Wesley said firmly. "Absolutely not. I categorically refuse to - "

" If you don't, I'll tell Kate all about your girlfriend in England," I said.

" - when do we leave?" he asked.

" Soon. We just have one problem to deal with." I gathered up my torn uniform in one hand. "Wesley, can you sew?"

5.19 Chapter 19

Wesley still looked much the worse for wear after I dropped him off at Halo, but that didn't seem to deter the crowd of nouveaux-riches who surrounded him the second he opened the car door.

" Price, old man, good to see you! Quite a party last night, what?"

" Hey Wes-ster! How yo doin'!"

" Ah, Wesley, *wonderful* to see you again! You look simply *adorable* in that outfit!"

The voices nattered away in my ears as I guided the car to a parking space, the receiver crackling merrily. As much as it galled me to admit it, despite all my cop training, Wesley was better at this whole mingling with-the-rich-thing than I would have been. It was probably something to do with breeding. And the accent. A lot of it was the accent.

" Wes, you old stud you!" I heard as the car's engine spluttered into silence and I settled back in my seat.

" Hey, honey, shake that booty!"

I *really* hoped that was said to Faith.

Her sharp retort confirmed it, and a few seconds later, the thud of fist on flesh stopped another salacious comment before it even got started.

5 Faith, the Exotic Dancer

" You shouldn't have done that!" Sandy gasped, her voice sounding about equal parts shocked and amused.

" Hell, he was a jerk. Now he's a concussed jerk. No biggie," Faith said easily.

" I wish I could do that. . ." Sandy said wistfully. "Some of the guys, they get drunk and make trouble, you know. It would be nice to have something more on my side than a can of mace."

" Relax. Any guy comes along with his brain between his legs and I'll lobotomise him." Faith laughed and I heard Sandy's hesitant giggle under the boisterous sound.

Faith and Sandy seemed to be really hitting it off, and I was kinda glad about that. Faith didn't really have much contact with anyone besides me and Wes, in a non-Slaying capacity, that is. It was nice that she had found someone to talk to. Not that they were about to start braiding each other's hair or anything, but it was nice.

As the two young women continued to banter, I tucked a pretty wicked-looking machete under my jacket and slapped my moronic hat on. I carefully rubbed the rear-view mirror with my sleeve and checked out the smudged image. Yup, I looked just like any other respectable servant boy of the rich and famous. Of course, my lack of sleep and lingering bruises made me look like a respectable *zombie* servant boy, but I figured it was the best I was going to get.

I shoved the receiver into my pocket and checked the machete one more time.

I'd tried guile, I'd tried directness, now I was just going for plain old-fashioned sneaky. And if anyone spotted me, I'd chop their bloody heads off.

Maybe I was still feeling a *little* bit testy about the hat.

5.20 Chapter 20

The same unlocked door I had used in the daytime proved to be equally insecure at night. I crept down Halo's back passages, carefully avoiding contact with passing employees. When there was nowhere to duck and hide, I just brazened it out and strode along openly.

" Hey, how'd you do that little hip move?" Faith asked curiously from the vicinity of my trousers. From the numerous distinctly feminine sounds around her, I guessed she was back in the dressing rooms.

"It's easy," Sandy responded modestly. "You just shimmy a little, like this."

"Like this?" Several interesting wobbly noises came from the receiver. I clapped a hand over it and kept walking, ignoring the stares of those passing by.

I should have known Faith and Sandy would have more interesting bonding activities than braiding hair. I turned down a deserted passageway that I recognised from earlier and carefully began to count the doors.

1...2...3...

A loud explosion of laughter made me jump half a foot in the air.

"And so *she* said, 'I've never seen one of those before!'" my trousers commented loudly, chuckling to themselves.

"Yes. Very...amusing," Wesley said weakly. "Especially the bit about the cross-dressing nun."

I went back to the beginning of the passage and began counting doors again.

1...2...

"Come on Price, you've got room for another one in there, old chap!" my trousers bawled.

Faith said casually, "Yeah, I've got a boyfriend. He's a cutie, but he can be so...stiff sometimes." I heard someone murmur something. "No, not that kind of stiff!" she laughed.

I flushed. On second thought, why couldn't she have stuck to hair-braiding?

"Oh yeah, Doyle does have endurance, I'll give him that, and he's quite the nummy-treat, but he's just so boring!"

Boring? *Boring*? If the noises Faith made in our bed were the sounds of boredom, then I doubted I could survive if she ever got worked up! Boring! What was that supposed to mean?

"What do you mean?" Sandy asked. I could have kissed her.

5 *Faith, the Exotic Dancer*

" Oh, just pure vanilla, all the time. It would be nice if the boy had some kinks or something, ya know? Some dirty little fantasy or two. But no, he's just into the good wholesome old-fashioned stuff. He doesn't even use any toys." Toys? I'd never considered Faith a vestigial virgin, but this was starting to get disturbing. I pressed the receiver to my ear, and was rewarded by a burst of static.

Once I finished massaging my aching eardrum, I heard Faith say, "Damn, all this yakking is making me hungry! Anybody want to treat us to something greasy and fattening?"

" I'll get it," Sandy said helpfully. "Just don't tell anymore stories until I get back!" she added hastily.

" Sure thing, girlfriend," Faith said cheerfully.

Eventually, distractions aside, I was able to count the correct number of doors and turn into the passage I was looking for. I inspected the small brass plaque on the door before me.

Perry Harper, Assistant Manager

It looked pretty fancy for a place like this, more like something from a law firm or big corporation. Then again, some of the lawyers I'd met would probably fit right in at Halo.

I tried the handle and it rattled in an unsatisfactory way. I allowed myself a secret smile as I pulled a small black case from my jacket pocket and flipped it open.

A neat set of lockpicks glistened in the electric lights. Kate had shown me how to pick locks during a few slightly less-than-kosher searches of felons' houses. Not the most respectable skill for a cop, I know, but it came in damn handy.

I selected a lockpick and rolled it between my fingers, studying the lock speculatively. Then I inserted it like Kate had shown me and twisted slowly.

There was a sharp snap as the tip of the pick broke off and jammed the lock.

Screw it, I decided and shifted to demon. With a nerve-achingly loud crack, I forced the lock and then glanced around, convinced someone had heard and was about to leap out and grab this spiky intruder.

Nothing. No one.

I breathed out and let the demon go with the air, pushing the door open and flicking the light on. The office was clean and tidy, obsessively so. The pencils on his desk were even ordered by length, for God's sake! Disturbing as that was, it wasn't necessarily demonic, though. I closed the office door and took the thrice-damned hat off. It landed with a soft thump on Harper's desk, as I crossed the room to check out the filing cabinet in the corner. It was locked too.

I didn't even bother with the picks this time. The cabinet screeched as I yanked it open, my green fingers leaving indentations on the metal handle. I pushed the demon away again, and began to poke through the files.

Yadda, yadda, expenses... yadda, yadda, gross profit...

Half-jokingly, I checked under 'D' for demon. Unsurprisingly, no joy there. What the hell had I thought I could look for? A hand-written confession: 'I am a demon. I feel very bad about it'? What?

What I *found* was a very concise and accurate copy of the post-mortem results on Peg, last name Durbane. How the hell had Harper got this? The body had only been found yesterday, so the detectives had probably only received the PM results themselves a few hours ago. Kate was right; the Harpers did have connections.

The file didn't tell me anything I didn't already know. The subject's approximate age was well over 100, and she appeared to have died from a shock-induced heart attack. Mind you, at that age sneezing can cause a heart attack.

The sound of footsteps outside the door abruptly ended my musings. The door swung open and I leapt across the desk, clearing it easily and crashing into the newcomer. I slammed him up against the wall as I kicked the door shut with my foot.

"Hi, 'Perry'," I purred, tightening my grip on his designer jacket lapels. "Whatcha doin' here?" I glanced down at his hands. "With a crowbar, no less."

"I work here," he rasped, his eyes moving to the door.

"You'd never make it," I told him easily. "I'm faster than I look. And why exactly are you visitin' your own office late at night with a large crowbar, 'Perry'?"

"My father locked me out," he said sullenly. "Said I was stirring up trouble, poking my nose where it didn't belong."

5 *Faith, the Exotic Dancer*

I was pretty confident he wasn't the demon by now. Shock always drove my demon to the surface, and if my surprise attack hadn't made him change, my guess was he didn't have another form to change to. Of course, he was still a creep, but I wasn't in machete territory. Bit of a shame, really.

"You were investigatin' the disappearances," I said, lowering my hands

"Yes," he said, adjusting his tie. Recognition flickered in his eyes. "Hey, you're that PI from yesterday!"

"The very same," I admitted.

He smirked. "New look for you." I flushed inwardly. PIs on TV are always very cool and dramatic, with slick leather clothes on the opposite end of the fashion scale from my current outfit. Real life is annoying like that

I shrugged, hiding my embarrassment. "Part of the whole 007 deal. Now, you wanna explain to me how you could let girls go missin' from this joint for ten years and not come up with some kind of plan to stop the disappearances? Better security, for one thing."

Harper had the good grace to look slightly ashamed. "Pop ran the club mostly. He sent me off to business school in Europe, pretty soon after he bought the place. I graduated a year ago and came back, but it took six months before a vacancy opened." *That* hadn't been in Kate's file. Okay, maybe the guy wasn't as heartless as I'd thought. I still didn't like him much though.

I eyed him in sudden understanding. "An' when you tried to play detective, Daddy shut you down."

"Uh-huh," he said. "After you showed up yesterday, he got convinced I had tipped you off. He practically flayed my skin off in his office and then took away my keys."

"Grounded, huh?" I commented ironically. "But what's with the whole secrecy deal? I would've thought the old man would be glad if someone could solve the murders."

Harper sighed. "Pop isn't always a very moral guy. He's just in it for the money and cops are bad for business. Besides," he added defensively, "it wasn't murders, until you found that body with the same tattoo as Peggie. He could have really believed that they had just run away." I could tell from his tone that he didn't believe that crap any more than I did, but I let it go. It's hard for someone to condemn their own father. Of course, in my case, it had been a lot easier.

"So what's your theory on the disappearances?" I asked casually, scooping up my hat and brushing it off.

He folded his hands. "Simple. Time travel."

I nearly dropped the hat. "*Time travel?*"

"Of course. The government has developed it and they're using the girls as test subjects. They abduct them, carry them to the future and do experiments and then take them back when they're too old to be useful." I guess that explained the large stack of Conspiracy X magazines I had found at the back of the filing cabinet.

I couldn't hold back a chuckle as I patted him on the shoulder. "Listen, pal, I've got news for you. Time travel has nothin' to do with it -" I chuckled again and caught a noseful of his strong cologne as I did so. I tried to hold it back, but I sneezed.

Harper stared at me in horror as the spikes raced across my skin. "Hang on, man, just stay..." he turned and lunged for the door, yanking it open. I grabbed for him, tearing his jacket, but he got away. "... calm," I finished belatedly, staring at the scrap of jacket in my hand.

I waited tensely for the shouting to start, for the bouncers to come running. I could probably take down three or four quite easily, but by then someone would have called the LAPD and then the shit would really hit the fan. I had enough enemies left in the department to make it very certain that I'd be hammered with every inch of legal force the cops could bring to bear. And that would be the end of me, of the firm. Faith and Wes would go on their way, and probably send a postcard or two to my jail cell every now and again.

But no one shouted. No one raised the alarm. Bouncers didn't charge into the office armed with iron bars.

My demonically-sharp hearing picked a muted groan from just down the passage. I went human again and stepped out of the office. I heard a creaking sound around the corner, but as I stepped towards it, something bumped against my foot.

An old man lay barely meters from the office door, his hair a thick mix of brown and white. As I watched, a clump fell out. His rheumy eyes met mine and he reached out hesitantly, bird-frail bones snapping beneath his skin. I didn't need to look at the torn trendy jacket he wore to recognise him.

"Daddy..." he moaned.

His breath rattled in his throat as I clasped his outstretched hand. Then his eyes went blank and his fingers stiffened.

Swallowing tightly, I reached out and closed his eyes. The Umbrosh must have been getting pretty desperate to have risked such an attack, and judging from Harper's body, I had disturbed it in mid-meal. That meant it would have to feed again, and soon.

With one suspect dead, I now knew exactly which human disguise it was hiding behind.

5.21 Chapter 21

I still wasn't that keen about just taking the Umbrosh on solo, so I went looking for back-up. Unfortunately, Faith was in the dressing rooms chatting to her new girlfriends, which were guarded by burly bouncers. Which left me with...

" Wesley, Wesley Wyndham-Price," I heard him say smugly over the receiver. "A pleasure to meet you, Clarice. That is a lovely dress you're wearing, by the way."

I scanned the crowd, wishing the bugs had some kind of tracking function on them. I'd already been standing at the door to the main dance floor for five minutes, just trying to pick Wesley's figure out of the mass. Unfortunately, more than a few men were carrying canes and *all* of them were wearing elegant suits. A slender arm slipped around my waist.

" Can I help you with anything... sir?" a breathy voice whispered in my ear. I tried to keep from dissolving into a little puddle of frustrated lust as I turned to the gorgeous blonde and explained that I was just looking for a friend. She shrugged in a business-like fashion, something I found riveting thanks to her skimpy top, and walked off. Inwardly I groaned as I watched her firm buttocks sway as she sauntered up to another potential 'client'. This was worse than torture.

Of course, Faith would probably go in for some serious torturing herself if I laid more than my eyes on any of these beauties, but that didn't mean I couldn't temporarily regret my lack of availability and of a ten-page bank statement.

I finally spotted Wes, off talking to 'Clarice' at a booth and sipping brandy. Judging from her relatively-modest clothing, I guessed she wasn't an employee. She *definitely* wasn't a nun either, though.

Wesley appeared to be letting her do most of the talking, a skill I wasn't aware he possessed. Every now and again, he would smile pleasantly or chuckle in response to one of her comments. Not exactly Casanova, but he was doing pretty well, it seemed. Unfortunately, I didn't have time to see if Wes could revive his asphyxiated love life. Unfortunately for him, that is.

"Sir!" I said loudly as I hurried towards him.

Wesley looked up and blanched. "Yes...um, Higgins?" Inwardly, I seethed. Next time, Faith would *not* be allowed to pick my cover name.

"The test results are back from the hospital, sir," I said in my best well-meaning voice. "Dr Abrahams called me fifteen minutes ago."

"Hospital?" he bleated.

"Hospital?" Clarice said dubiously, glancing at Wesley.

"Yes," I said gravely. "I'm terribly sorry to tell you this, sir, but he says the rash is contagious."

"Rash?" Clarice asked sharply.

Wesley smiled pathetically at her. "Um, well, I, we -"

"Goodbye, Wesley," she said bluntly, standing up and walking away.

Wesley sighed deeply and took a swig of his drink. "That was really unnecessary, Doyle."

I shrugged. "I found the demon. Sorry to interrupt the socialisin', but that is why we're here, after all."

He straightened in his chair. "Yes, you're quite right," he admitted grudgingly, but made no move to get out of his chair. He reached for his glass and I put my hand over it.

"I'd like you to stay sober tonight, if you don't mind, Wes," I told him firmly.

"Hilarious," he responded, his cane clicking on the floor as he rose to his feet. "You're sure about the Umbrosh?"

" Well, of a list of two suspects, one of whom is dead, I'd say I can hazard a guess," I snapped.

" Just asking," he said defensively, starting his slow progress towards the exit.

I lingered by the table, Harper's heavily lined face rising up in my thoughts unpleasantly as I did so. Screw the changing rooms and bouncers, I *wanted* Faith with me against this demon. But odds were it was already looking for another meal, and every second I wasted waiting in the vain hope she might suddenly appear was another second the Umbrosh could use to stalk its next victim.

I gulped down Wesley's brandy and walked away from the table, the liquor scorching my insides.

5.22 Chapter 22

" Couldn't you at least have let me get her phone number?" Wesley whined as we left the heat and music behind us.

" Oh, shut up," I rasped, my throat still stinging from the brandy.

" But couldn't you have said that I was needed outside, or that the car had a flat tire, or something less...less infectious?" he complained as we rounded the corner of the passage.

My scathing reply turned to garbled nonsense on my tongue as I found myself eye to chest with Cecil's huge, bandaged form. The big man looked down at me and his eyes popped with surprise. "You..."

I smiled sheepishly and then sunk my fist into his gut. As he doubled up, smelly breath gushing from his mouth, I grabbed his already-descending head and smashed it into my knee. Cecil grunted in pain and I brought his face up with both hands and slammed my forehead into it. My ears rung, but Cecil flopped down limply, like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

" You were sayin'?" I asked Wes as we carefully stepped over his unconscious form.

" Uh...nothing significant." Prudent of him.

Thanks to my various travels through the back passages of the club, it took very little effort to find Harper Senior's office while still avoiding the main areas of traffic. Cecil's nose had left rather a large dent in my hat, so passing people without comment was no longer a possibility.

The elder's office door differed little from the younger's, except that the handle was perhaps slightly more worn. And, unlike the other one, it turned under my hand. At first, I thought the dark room was deserted, but then I noticed some small red lights hanging in the darkness across the desk. My imagination immediately conjured images of lurking red-eyed monsters and fiends, but I ignored it and flicked the light on.

Wesley and I squinted through the sudden glare and it took me a second or two to figure out what I was looking at. Instead of a normal chair behind the desk like in Junior's office, a large metal wheeled nightmare gleamed and shone there. Red LED's on the armrest - the demonic eyes of my imagining - blinked in a distinct pattern, over and over.

And lying, encased in the steel wheelchair like a withered mummy in a metal sarcophagus, was an old man. His tiny frame was so still I was sure he was dead, but the steady flickering of the lights on the chair contradicted me. I noticed other extensions off the wheelchair, an oxygen mask, a yellow-stained catheter, but his face was what held my attention. The features were small and wrinkled, but the dark eyes hidden within the folds of his skin were sharp and aware. And they were looking at us.

"I see my... appearance... startles you," he said, in a voice like rasping paper. He smirked as if he was enjoying our shock. "Can I help you?"

Wesley glanced at me, obviously expecting a response. I wasn't sure what mine would be. This guy was the total inverse of the creature we were hunting, but then again, it was a perfect disguise... if he was the demon. And if he wasn't, I was just sitting here staring at an old man while the Umbrosh surveyed Halo like a glutton at an all-you-can-eat buffet.

"Well?" The paper voice was sharper now.

"Um... Mr Jacob Harper?" Wesley inquired hoarsely.

"That's what it said on the door. You can read, I hope?" the old man sneered. "Something to say, or are you just going to stand there and gawk?"

"Our apologies," Wesley said awkwardly, "but your appearance is somewhat... startling."

5 Faith, the Exotic Dancer

"World War II," the elder Harper said sardonically. "A mortar shell. Haven't walked since." I noticed that his legs were even more twisted and wrecked than the rest of his aged shell, barely even the size of a child's. "That was a war where men were made," he continued. "Strong men. Not like that gutless, layabout son of mine."

"Your son is dead," I snapped, more harshly than I intended.

Harper didn't even twitch an eyelid. "I know."

With a sick feeling in my stomach, I recalled how the dying young man had called for his daddy. I had thought he meant that his father was the demon, but I suddenly realised that the truth was much worse.

"You watched him die, didn't you?" I asked, his throat tight with horror and disgust.

"And the others," Harper answered blandly. "Part of the deal."

"Deal? You made a deal with a creature like that?" Wesley snarled with an anger that seemed utterly out of place on his bookish face. "What kind of foul, depraved... *monster* are you?"

Harper regarded him with palpable contempt. "You can make a deal with just about anyone, I've always believed. Or *anything*."

"Why?" I asked disbelievingly.

"Oh, I found out that the creature was hiding in my club quite easily, barely a month after it slipped in," Harper said derisively. "I decided to employ it. It helped enforce some of my... less than legal transactions, and in return, I gave it a place to stay."

"And to feed," Wes said grimly. "You let it brutally drain the life from innocent girls in your employ just to sustain your own craven criminal acts."

"Innocent?" Harper chuckled. "None of those girls was ever 'innocent'. They were nothing, nobody. It slaughtered them and no one noticed, no one cared. I kept the police off its back, and we were both happy. Besides, it was fun to watch."

"Fun?" I asked, feeling my mouth twist with revulsion.

"I found it...stimulating," he said with a disturbing casualness that was far worse than any wicked glee could be. "They all walked around, more free than me, able to move and sway and dance while I was stuck in this damned contraption. But in end, they ended up just like me. Dried-up husks, barely twitching."

I glared at the evil little man, wanting to leap across the desk and strangle him before he could speak another twisted word. I had thought he was the inverse of the demon. But now it seemed they were more alike than I had believed.

"Her?" Wesley asked suddenly. Harper's jeering smile slipped. "It's one of the dancers?"

But the smile resurfaced quickly. "You can't make me tell." He chuckled again.

And I heard another chuckle, as if in response to his, from the receiver tuned to Faith's microphone in my pocket. A familiar, rumbling chuckle.

5.23 Chapter 23

"Faith!" I yelped.

We were out the door and running in seconds, Wesley lurching awkwardly on his bad leg and cane.

If Faith was going up against that creature again I wanted to be on hand. Last night, the demon had creamed her - although admittedly it had caught her by surprise. But it had seemed pretty tough to me in a straight fight, all the same. I didn't know how a Slayer would stand up to it under similar circumstances, and wasn't about to risk the possibility she might *not*.

Turning a corner of the corridor, I bounced off the chest of Cecil, who was coming the other way. While I was still recovering my balance, he was already lunging forward, and I groaned inwardly in expectation of another bash.

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" Wesley muttered. The next instant, a black cane swished through the air and connected with a loud *Crack!* Then, Cecil was back on the floor again in a large, softly moaning heap. "Can we go?" Wesley snapped impatiently, speeding up again, and half dragging me behind him for the next few steps, as I stared in disbelief over my shoulder to where the thug had now subsided in a motionless sprawl, arms and legs splayed-out untidily.

5 Faith, the Exotic Dancer

"That's a new look for you." Faith's sarcastic quip, emerging surreally from my pocket, contained surprise and a trace of very real disappointment.

Damn it, I thought. So much for Faith making friends outside of the slayin' business.

"Your energy should last me a long time." I'd been expecting that demonic rumble, but the voice which replied was the shy, girlish Sandy I'd listened to Faith conversing with for much of the past two nights. And the tone - there was none of Harper's malicious, villainous satisfaction. It was matter-of-fact and level, if also lacking in any remorse.

I exchanged concerned glances with Wes. As we descended the stairs, he cursed at one point when his bad leg gave way under him, but then caught his balance and forged on. Which was fortunate, because I wasn't going to wait around to help him. Right now, Faith needed me more. We reached the ground floor and turned on to the corridor leading through to the dressing rooms.

"Yeah? I reckon it could be a whole lot shorter that you think," Faith was responding, hot anger and betrayal blazing in *her* voice. "That was you, last night? You tried to kill me - me and Doyle - "

"Doyle? That would be the boyfriend you're so sweet on?" When she laughed, the rumble was back. "Your descriptions left out the part about his being a demon..." A momentary crackle of static drowned out the rest of what she said, but whatever it was, it pissed off Faith considerably, because after the static finished I heard a growl of fury and the smack of flesh hitting flesh with Slayer-powered force.

"You don't know anything about it!" Faith snapped, meaty thuds and occasional crashes punctuating. I wondered what exactly she'd said, and whether Faith would even repeat it to me later if I asked. Probably not.

"About what it's like to hide what you really are from a world that won't understand?" the soft voice qualified gently. "I think we've all had some experience with that, Faith. You, too - I knew the first time we met that you were no more a normal girl than I."

The demon did something that made Faith yell out in pain. I ran faster, listening to still more punches and crashes. Wesley, slowed by his limp, was several paces behind me now.

A particularly loud crash, and the microphone cut out again.

I skidded around a slight kink in the corridor. The dressing rooms were on the other side of it. A guy who could've been Cecil's larger brother was standing outside them. I didn't even try to explain, or even slow down - I just hit him as hard as I could, with all my running momentum behind me. He obligingly collapsed.

Wesley caught up as I drew the machete from my jacket and lunged for the door handle.

"Uh, Doyle," he began, his face reddening and his eyes fixed on the sign that said 'Women Only'. "Are you sure we -"

I shoved open the door. No feminine protests sounded as I barged inside, Wesley following nervously at my back.

I didn't think that any semi-clad dancing girls that were inside would object to our intrusion, not while a demon and a Slayer were duking it out in there already.

The scent of sweat, mingled with cloying, sweet-scented deodorants and perfumes assaulted my nostrils. I could see rows of rails and lockers, stacked with garments and towels. A few of the dancing girls were huddled in the far corner, fear in their eyes. A crash sounded from behind the row to my left even as one of the girls raised a shaking hand to point over that way, and I swung around the edge of the rail.

Only to find a demon hurtling towards me at speed.

"Doyle!" Faith's yell sounded, filled with exasperation and too-late warning. The demon's uncontrolled lunge had apparently been propelled by Faith, and it was unfortunately spared the brunt of the impact. Crushed between the demon and the rail at my back, I choked as the air was forced from my lungs, and collapsed bonelessly to the floor in a breathless, gasping huddle as the demon's weight bounced away again.

The machete, knocked from my grasp, skidded across the floor - I didn't see where it went, but I thought the blade had nicked the creature as it crashed against me.

I managed to raise my head in time to see the demon's bulky form diminish into its fragile human one as it picked itself up. Standing in its place there was now a pale, skinny, extremely top-heavy blonde girl, who wore nothing except what seemed to me to be two strategically-placed black ribbons. A gash in her arm oozed blood.

5 *Faith, the Exotic Dancer*

Wesley, having moved to block the path of a demon, spluttered as he found his hands full of apparently very human, very naked, very female flesh. He leaped back like her touch burned him and made no further effort to restrain the demon as it barged past him and out of the door.

"Way to go, lover," Faith snarled over her shoulder at me as she disappeared after Sandy.

I would've found some suitable reply, if I wasn't so preoccupied trying to breathe.

Wesley sighed as he bent down and hauled me to my feet, using his cane as a lever to push our combined weight up from the floor. "It's just not our week, is it?"

5.24 Chapter 24

Following after Faith, we emerged into the public area of the club at the back of a slightly raised area. I wouldn't have called it a stage exactly, since the clientele lingered on it - but so did quite a large proportion of the dancers and it was the focus of more than a little attention. Wes and I attracted a few odd looks, picking our way across the platform, dodging naked flesh. I hoped they weren't expecting me to spring into a strip tease, what with the bloody stupid uniform I was wearing.

The music pounding away and the strobe lighting joined forces to assault my still-aching head.

Even in that lighting, which flickered first bright white and then blue as I tried to focus, it wasn't difficult to pick out the objects of our pursuit from the crowds. The deceptively delicate Sandy was shoving Halo's outraged clientele aside left and right, and just as they caught their balance or started to pick themselves up, Faith came charging after her and knocked them flying again.

Fortunately for us, by the time we followed the victims had wised up. They cleared out of our way with helpful, speedy respect.

In a flash of painfully intense yellow light, I caught a glimpse of the expression on Sandy's face. She looked so scared I almost felt sorry for her, despite knowing what she was and all she'd done.

After all, this demon had to kill to survive. Decency was not an option.

Unlike that miserable old bastard we'd left upstairs. I didn't know quite what we'd do about him. I could hardly kill some helpless wheelchair-bound old guy in cold blood, and I doubted we'd find any way to pin the murders of the dancing girls on him, considering his connections and our lack of any evidence we could reasonably show the police that would stand up in court.

Distracted by my thoughts, I collided with one of the dancers, getting a completely unintentional handful. I leaped back, stuttering apologies, but not before *her* hand cracked across my face in a reflex slap.

The girls sure did have good reflexes at this place.

I distinctly heard Wesley, behind me, snigger.

I reached the edge of the platform. Before I jumped down into the crowds, where the general head-height was far enough above my eye-level to obscure my view, I saw Sandy, about twenty yards away, throw herself at one of the bouncers, sobbing. I couldn't hear what she said, but I could see her lips moving frantically and I could hazard a good guess. She took refuge behind the guy, her face tear-stained, and then slipped away into the crowds at his back as he squared himself up to block Faith's path.

Idiot. I only caught glimpses of what happened next through small gaps in the moving crowds - brief, flashing snapshots of actions as Faith floored him with a single, brutal, effortless punch to the jaw and continued after Sandy without breaking her stride.

Beside me, Wesley staggered as his cane slipped on the smooth floors and I gripped his shoulder, keeping him on his feet. I caught his gaze as I did so. "This is way too public!" I yelled over the noise, indicating Faith where she moved purposefully and single-mindedly, her attention fixated only on the chase.

He nodded, and I saw my concern reflected in his expression. "We have to get to her, before she does something we'll all regret!" he yelled back.

Bodies were shifting, the crowds pulling back from the mounting commotion, allowing me a view of what Sandy was up to now. She had turned her efforts to the clientele and was standing in a circle of guys, her mouth working frantically as she pleaded for their help. Evidently they'd seen what had happened to the bouncer who'd gotten in Faith's way, though. That, combined with the expression on her face right then, I think was enough to convince them it was more than their lives were worth to interfere.

5 Faith, the Exotic Dancer

Giving up, Sandy just turned and ran. She must have known she couldn't make it. She was running through the dense press of clientele that cleared quickly after her passage in anticipation of Faith following.

She got as far as the queues beyond the main doors. Faith, only yards behind her now, leaped up to grab the top of the door frame and swung outside in an athletic arc. Each foot connected precisely with the face of a bouncer moving to stop her on her way to the ground.

Wesley and I picked our way between the unconscious bodies, stumbling in our haste, although I was aware, sickly aware, that we were not going to reach her in time.

Faith hit the concrete, rolled, and came to her feet directly behind Sandy. Turning, seeing her there, the demon started to cry out "No -!" even as Faith's hands shot out, twisting as they grasped.

The snap rang out on the night air, witnessed by dozens of appalled eyes... Wesley and myself among them.

Faith looked up, an odd expression in her eyes as she met the watching crowds with a kind of surprised wonder... as though she'd no idea why they should have any problem with what she'd just done. I couldn't tell how much of it was acting. "Hey," she said defensively. "She jumped the queue."

"Shit!" I snarled under my breath.

"I can't believe she just -" Wesley's own groan cut off abruptly and I followed his gaze back to Sandy.

The corpse was shrivelling even as Faith released it. By the time it hit the floor, it appeared as the body of an ancient old woman. A second later, there was nothing there but dust.

5.25 Chapter 25

Of course, nobody believed what they'd seen. After a couple of seconds' shocked pause, some of the queuing people even burst into a smatter of applause as though they thought the display had been part of Halo's floor show. And Faith just stood there looking bemused and lapping up the attention, even giving a theatrical bow... until Wesley and I caught hold of an arm apiece and hauled her away to the car.

5.26 Chapter 26

I watched from the window as Colridge left the office building and walked across the street. And I wondered, guiltily, whether I had done the right thing. Or whether I could've done anything else.

While Kate knew the truth, the police, as I'd thought, couldn't prosecute Harper Senior, and it looked like the case would remain 'unsolved'. No official connection had been made between the aged bodies found and the missing dancers. Although possibly a few people had their suspicions and private explanations like poor old Perry... I hadn't liked him, but he'd been trying to do the right thing, and he hadn't deserved to die like that.

I turned the cheque over in my fingers regretfully. Much as we needed the money, I'd felt pretty bad taking it, when all we'd done was find her dead. I shoved it into a pocket and traipsed out into the office reception.

Wesley was sitting collectedly in a chair flicking through old accounts with a mildly interested expression on his face, while Faith was adorning a desk with her bored, stretched out, leather-clad form.

"Better take this to the bank," I said, retrieving my jacket from the back of Wesley's chair and shrugging it on over my shoulders. "You guys wanna come? We could pay a visit to a pub or ten on the way back." I didn't say anything about celebrating a case closed and a fee paid. There wasn't a whole lot to celebrate there, far as I could see.

Well, maybe we could drown our sorrows instead.

"I suppose so," Wesley allowed, rearranging the papers into a neat pile as he switched his attention to me. "So long as we don't stop by Halo."

Faith snickered, rolling off the desk, twisting and landing neatly in an athletic little move. Her two-day turn as one of Halo's dancers, short as it had been, seemed to have had something of an impact on her moves, I noted. "They wouldn't let you in anyway, now your posh pals have rumbled you. You do know Colridge told them you're Doyle's secretary?"

"What?" He looked appalled and turned on me, standing up, indignation clear in every line of his abruptly very Watcherly posture. "You told him -"

"Uh, calm down there, man," I said quickly. "I didn't tell him anythin' of the sort... He made the assumption!"

5 *Faith, the Exotic Dancer*

Wesley drew himself up even taller, folding his arms in disgust, and peered down his nose at me. "Well, personally, I thought I did rather better at the undercover work than some people I could mention. . ."

"Only 'cause you enjoyed hobnobbing with the rich and snotty," Faith pointed out.

"So what if I did?" he protested, slightly too guiltily, turning his disapproval onto her instead. "After some of the places you've dragged me to in this dreadful country, perhaps it made a pleasant change to socialise with a few people with some culture."

"Your 'cultured' buddies there were payin' to gawk at your slayer and those other gals barin' all," I pointed out.

"Well, yes, there is that," he allowed with a sigh. "Anyway, Faith, after the things I heard went on, you can't claim you didn't enjoy 'hobnobbing' with those young ladies."

Bad subject. Faith's mouth tightened into a scowl and she didn't reply.

He eyed her for a moment, then retrieved his cane and jacket, and sensibly changed the subject, "I rather thought we were going to the bank."

"Yeah. You go on ahead, Wes, and wait for us downstairs. I'll lock up the office."

I think he got the message. He retreated quickly enough out of the door, at any rate. I collected my keys and herded Faith out. A quick look around reassured that Wesley was using the elevator to descend to the foyer. I opened my mouth as I turned the keys in the lock, but she got there before me.

"Something to say?" she asked sarcastically. She was leaning back against the wall at my side, and her body language was defensive. "Very subtle getting shot of Wussley there, by the way."

I frowned at her, and asked hesitantly, "You are... all right? About Sandy, and all that?"

Her gaze was level, and impenetrable. Like it had been while Wesley scolded her for risking slaying Sandy in public. "I'm fine," she said. "You worry about yourself, Doyle, and let me worry about me. That's the way I operate, that's the way I like it, I keep things that way and everything stays five by five."

She said it as though she was trying to convince herself. Not many people had gotten under that tough skin, I reflected, and wondered why Sandy should, in so short a time. Maybe there'd been something in what she'd said about their being kindred spirits. That thought made me shiver.

"No offence," I said. "I'm just... I just..." *I just* do worry. But I couldn't say that. I reached out a hand and moved a stray lock of hair back out of her face, my fingers brushing against the skin of her cheek. She flinched her head back out of my reach, but then relented.

"I liked her," she said, after a moment, without inflection. "She was a big murdering demon in disguise. I'm a slayer. I slayed. Job done, no big deal... let's go get drunk."

"Now there's a plan I can live with," I agreed, as she slung her arm in mine and we headed for the stairs down to the foyer. After a moment I added, innocently, "Maybe we could even go do somethin' **boring** to round off the night."

I happily watched her eyebrows shoot up through her hairline in realisation.

5.27 Chapter 27

A couple of days after we'd closed the case, I was catching up on some paperwork in my office when I heard the door open. The hurled newspaper landed in front of me before I could raise my head.

"Headline news," Wesley said curtly. He sounded annoyed. "How did you do it?"

I stared down at the black print. In bold big letters, the headline read, 'Disabled War Hero Dies in Tragic Accident'. I read further. 'Well known public face, club owner Jacob Harper', it turned out, had fallen in his wheelchair down the elevator shaft of his sparkingly expensive apartment in the early hours of that very morning. Technical problems with the elevator had apparently caused the accident, all very clear-cut. There wouldn't be an investigation into it.

All a little too convenient, though, knowing what we knew.

It was like a punch in the gut - though not entirely an unexpected one. "I didn't do anythin'," I choked, unconvincingly.

5 *Faith, the Exotic Dancer*

"You're lying..." he started slowly, as though hesitant of making that accusation. Comprehension dawned in his eyes after a moment, and then the accusation was there full-force. "What did you tell Colridge? I did wonder how you managed to persuade him to pay us when the girl remains officially listed as missing and we have no proof of what happened to her beyond what most people would dismiss as fantasy."

"I didn't tell him anythin'... I jus' gave him the tape. And it wasn't about the *money*, besides..."

"Tape?"

"The tape... y'know... when we talked to Harper and he was gloatin' happily away about his involvement. You still had that bug on you, an' that little device I was using..." I dug it out of the drawer to show him the slot where the cassettes went. "'Course, I edited out the references to demons and suchlike. Just gave him enough to prove she was dead, and Harper was responsible for it. Hell, money issues aside, the poor guy deserves to know what happened to his lady love. And to have opportunity to do somethin' about it.

"I didn't think he'd kill him," I added.

"That's weak, Doyle," Wesley said disgustedly. "You must have known the possibility was there. In case you've forgotten, we're not in the business of killing people. Not that Faith cares one jot, of course, but I thought *you* did."

I met his gaze with silence. I didn't really have anything to say. Couldn't explain to a furious Wesley that I knew what Colridge felt. That I'd thought the guy deserved his shot at the revenge I'd never gotten for Harry. That I knew, technically, I was in the wrong - and though I might feel guilty as hell over it, I would do just the same over again.

I wordlessly rose from my desk, paper in hand. Leaving Wesley standing there, I headed down to my apartment to find something to drink.

I dropped the newspaper into the waste bin on the way.

6 Vampires, Served Cold

by Mike, Ellen, Roseveare and Mike Dewar

6.1 Prologue Part 1

Harry giggled foolishly as we sat side-by-side on the picnic blanket, staring up at the blue sky. The elderly man handed our camera back to us. "There you go," he said warmly. "A lovely family photo."

"Thanks a lot," she answered, smiling at him. The old man returned her smile, nodded to me, and then puttered his way down the beach. "Well, he was nice," Harry said. "Wasn't he?"

I could tell by her tone that it was one of those special wife questions that is always answered by "Yes, dear." So to wind her up a bit, I frowned.

"I don't know... seemed a bit strange to me..." I said slowly.

"Strange?" she asked incredulously. "We've both seen much weirder old guys than that. Remember that regular at the soup kitchen who kept trying to play the harmonica with his nose?"

I laughed. "Yeah, I remember. It never did work, but he never gave up. But handing our camera to the guy? He could have been a insane psycho-killer type, looking to collect souvenirs of his victims," I chided her.

Harry snorted. "Uh-huh. An 80-year-old runs around killing people. What does he do, fall over on them?"

"Age doesn't mean weakness," I said as sternly as I could, already growing tired of teasing her. "My grandmother could do away with a professional wrestler, she could."

Harry shoved me playfully, forcing me to lie down. It was a fine excuse for me to stop talking and do what I really wanted, which was grab her and hold on tight. I pulled her down next to me, and she pretended to resist, but not too hard.

6 Vampires, Served Cold

We did the marital-cuddle thing, lying on our backs. It was nice and cosy, except for one thing.

"Ow," I muttered.

"What's wrong, Francis?" she asked, snickering as I blinked repeatedly.

"Harry, you've got me staring directly into the sun. It smarts a bit, you know?"

I could feel her smile as she pressed her head into my shoulder. "Poor baby."

"I'm glad you find my agony so amusing," I shot back. "If I go blind and fall off the edge of a cliff, it'll be all your fault."

"Francis, there are no cliffs around for miles," she told me, snickering.

"Well... there are high rocks," I offered, stroking her hair.

"Oh, the danger, Mr Doyle!" she said in a mock-scared voice.

"Never fear, Mrs Doyle, I eat danger for breakfast!" I replied, doing my best superhero imitation.

"Is that some kind of crack about my cooking?" she asked tartly.

"Wouldn't you like to know..." I said, glancing at her and waggling my eyebrows.

Harry giggled again. "You look like an utter idiot!" she gasped, between chuckles.

"I'm going to be a blind idiot soon..." I said melodramatically. "Because my cruel, cruel wife is making me burn my eyeballs out."

"Oh stop being a baby," she said, poking me. "Take the sunglasses." I accepted the proffered black lenses and slid them onto my nose. "There, is that better?"

It wasn't. Pain tore through me, and my back arched so sharply I thought it would break. I stared upwards at the blue sky and saw...

...Harry, sobbing with fear as something leapt on her, growling like a wild beast... blood spilling in a ruby pool across the floor of our living room... Her shrieks cut off abruptly. Everything seemed to darken.

"Harry..." I moaned, trying to bring back the images of her. What was happening to me?

But the picture darkened further. And then I became aware of something else, directly in front of my face, in the darkness. A strangely familiar set of features, greenish in hue with spikes sprouting from every inch of skin...

I screamed as it rushed towards me and the hideous face screamed too... and its voice was my own.

With a final jolt, the images left me, broken and tired, lying on the picnic blanket, Harry holding my trembling hand and staring at me with wide eyes.

6.2 Prologue Part 2

"Oh, my God! Francis! Talk to me, are you going to be all right?"

As the jumble of flashing images slowly began to fade out of my mind, I could hear the note of panic in Harry's voice, and I tried to focus on a single goal: calming my wife. I wasn't nearly so certain that I could reassure myself.

"I will be... in a moment," I managed to gasp, with my hands still pressed tight over my eyes. "I'll be fine. Just... give me a minute."

The intensity of the pain had diminished now, but it was still throbbing angrily behind my eyes, and I was sure that if I opened them, the world would be spinning around me in dizzying circles, faster and faster, and I would surely pass out. Best to keep my eyes safely closed for as long as possible.

"What is it? What's happening?"

"Some kind of... migraine, I think. Never had this before," I muttered. "Maybe the sun... I don't know. I'll be fine in a moment."

"Francis... I..."

"It will be all right," I repeated. "Just... need a little time."

A good stiff drink wouldn't hurt either, but we hadn't brought anything of that sort on a daytime picnic to the beach. For the first time, I wished that I were the type who always carries along a supply of my own liquid painkiller.

6 *Vampires, Served Cold*

Her hands were stroking my forehead tenderly, and although the sensation itself wasn't pleasant, the feeling behind it made it tolerable. With my eyes still firmly shut, I reached up to take her hands away from my face, and pressed my lips lightly against the palm of each. She put her arms around me then, whispering, "Francis, please be all right."

"Gettin' there," I whispered back, hugging her to me, as the pain gradually eased. The memory of what I'd seen, or hallucinated, would take longer to go away.

Harry being attacked by something? A monster that turned out to be... me?

Was I having a premonition that I would do some harm to Harry?

I had heard stories that something vaguely called "the second sight" was supposed to run in the family, but I had never heard that "the sight" involved excruciating pain. If it did, I couldn't imagine anyone who had it ever surviving long enough to pass it on to another generation.

I wasn't sure that I'd survive another episode of whatever this had been.

Then again, if those flashes meant that I was going to hurt my Harry, that the blood I had seen spilled on the carpet in our living room was hers... better if it did kill me.

Of course, the picnic mood was spoiled by that mind-splitting headache, and as soon as I was able, Harry and I packed up our things. I was still a bit unsteady on my feet, but I put her off when she suggested a stop at the nearest Emergency Room.

"I'm better now," I insisted. "Whatever that was, it's wearing off. Do you really want to spend the next few hours sitting around with the overdoses and the stabbing victims?"

"I just want to make sure you're OK, Francis."

"I'll be fine. I just want to go home." I knew that there was still doubt in her face, so I looked away, hearing the tone of pleading in my own voice and hating it. "Let's just go home."

When we arrived at our apartment, though, the first thing that came to my mind was what a stupid idea it had been to hang that huge full-length mirror in the living room, directly opposite the front door. It gave me a perfect view of how terrible I looked.

No wonder Harry was still staring at me with that worried expression. I glanced at the pain-pinched face in the mirror, complete with red-rimmed eyes, and immediately got a flash of memory of the green, spiked face that I'd seen while I was having that fit.

I'd seen the monster's face in my mind only through a haze of darkness, but I was almost sure that I'd been seeing it reflected in this very same mirror.

Maybe I had a brain tumor. Maybe I was going crazy. Maybe I was dying.

Well, whatever it might be, I was spending the rest of this day with my wife in our own home. Tomorrow, along with whatever medical testing, poking and prodding it might bring, would just have to take care of itself.

"Hot water or cold?" Harry called out from the bathroom, after I sank down on the couch and closed my eyes again.

"Huh?"

"I'm getting a washcloth for your head. Would hot or cold feel better?"

"Let's try hot first." In a few moments, she came out with a steaming-hot washcloth, her hands still red from wringing it dry, and placed it gently on my forehead. I winced at first, but after a moment, the heat did seem to help a little. I wasn't sure whether cold might not have done just as well, but I wasn't in any mood to experiment.

Harry curled up next to me on the couch, and I managed to put one arm around her. "I'm feeling better, really," I assured her. "It's almost gone now."

"Whatever it was."

"Whatever it was," I agreed softly, pulling her close.

For awhile, neither one of us said anything. The pain was finally gone, but the fear remained. Harry was holding on to me like she didn't want to let go, and I was feeling much the same way.

"Francis?" She whispered softly.

"Yes, love."

6 *Vampires, Served Cold*

"I just want you to know. . ." Her voice broke off abruptly, and she traced the outline of my lips with a finger, instead. "Oh, God, you're only twenty-one," she blurted out. "I can't stand the idea of something happening to you."

"I'll be all right." I tried to sound reassuring, but my wife knew me better. She could tell that I was just as scared as she was.

"I just want you to know that whatever happens, even if you're sick. . . I'm not going anywhere. OK?"

"I hear you. I'm not plannin' on goin' anywhere either, sweetheart."

She pressed tighter against me. "You'd better not, because I'll never forgive you if you leave me, so don't you dare."

I laughed a little at her fierce expression. "Yeah, I know. Love you too."

She kissed me then, and I found that I was doing quite a bit better, after all.

The first time the doorbell rang, we ignored it. We had something much better to do. The second time, though, Harry sighed and pushed herself away from me, with an obvious show of reluctance.

"Hold that thought, lover, I'll be back," she promised.

"I certainly hope so."

When she first opened the door, I was looking toward her, not toward the mirror. A slight, blonde woman with a blood-streaked face sagged in the doorway, her arms dangling limply at her sides, held between a teenage boy and a large, muscular-looking man.

"Oh, thank you so much for answering! Can you help us?" the boy blurted out nervously "We were in a car accident and my mother's been hurt. I think she hit her head. May we please use your phone?"

"You shouldn't have moved her!" Harry exclaimed. "Yes, come in, you can call 911 from here. I hope she isn't too badly hurt."

I stood up, ready to help if I could, and my own movement caught my eye in the mirror. That was when I half-glanced toward the mirror, and then looked again. The mirror showed only Harry standing in the doorway, talking to... Nothing.

The woman and the two men standing there had no reflection in the mirror. At the same moment when I realized that, all three of them moved.

"Harry, no!" I shouted, too late. The man seized her by both arms, and the boy headed toward me.

At that point - if I was lucky - I would wake up, still screaming her name.

6.3 Chapter 1

"Doyle! Wake up, dammit! You're having a nightmare."

It wasn't Harry's voice. Something in my sleep-befuddled mind said, 'Threat,' and I rolled away instinctively, putting my arms over my head. Half-waking, I found myself about to spin off the edge of my bed onto the floor.

A hand caught me and hauled me roughly back.

"Wake up!"

I opened my eyes, to see an angry-looking, nude brunette hovering over me. "Doyle! Are you awake now?"

Actually, I wasn't sure. But I wasn't too keen on going back where I'd just been, so I nodded.

"Good, 'cause I don't need to share your nightmares, thank you."

Gradually I recognized the angry voice, and face, and body now sharing my bed. I don't know what my own face looked like at that moment, but something in it must have reached her, as her expression softened. "You gonna be all right now?"

I still couldn't speak, but I tried to nod again, realizing for the first time that I was shaking.

Yeah, some way to impress a slayer. It suddenly occurred to me that I actually cared about that, and I wondered dimly why I bothered.

"Hey," Faith said, her voice dropping to a tone that was almost tender. "It's okay, Doyle. I know that shit still gets to you sometimes. It's all right."

Awkwardly, she stretched out next to me and threw an arm over my chest, like she wasn't sure of how to touch a man without signaling "sex." "Hang in there, guy. Not too much longer till morning," she murmured as she settled herself against me. "I'm goin' back to sleep now."

My body still felt cold, locked in the nightmare, but her warmth pressed against me helped to make the trembling subside. I shifted my position to put an arm around her shoulders, holding her against me, as she went back to sleep.

"Thanks," I whispered against her dark hair, and I felt her lips move in a smile against my chest, just before her body relaxed back into slumber.

I stared up at the ceiling for a long time.

6.4 Chapter 2

"Sunnydale Coach Tours."

I frowned at the flyer that was tucked into the newspaper. It looked like it had been run off by somebody's home computer, but that wasn't what caught my eye.

What human in his right mind would choose to go to Sunnydale? Even at the dirt-cheap rates being advertised, there wasn't any good reason for a human to travel to the nowhere town that just happened to be located on the Hellmouth.

Then again, one can never overestimate the human capacity for denial.

"Visit beautiful Sunnydale! Leave with a group of new friends tonight, and enjoy your full day bus tour tomorrow. Tour package price includes a light breakfast, lunch and dinner. Enjoy twenty-four hours out of the ordinary. It's a day you'll never forget," the ad enticed, with a price lower than what two meals would cost in most restaurants. I would be willing to wager that I'd find the flyer at bus stations, homeless shelters, and maybe even at the soup kitchen.

The thought of soup kitchens, with its unwelcome reminder of Harry, brought back a recollection of my nightmare. I pushed it aside.

Walking back into the office, newspaper in hand, I shoved the flyer toward Wesley. "Hey. That mean anything to you?"

Wes looked up blearily from his book. Seemed like I wasn't the only one who hadn't been sleeping well lately. Slowly, he reached out for the flyer.

"Good God," he muttered, after reading it. "Are you thinking what I am?"

"Most likely, yeah. I'd guess the vamps have run down their food supply, and they're looking to haul in some fresh livestock."

I lit a cigarette, ignoring Wesley's pained look. This attempt to quit had lasted eight days and fifteen hours. No, of course I wasn't counting.

"You didn't get a vision about this, did you?"

"No, I didn't. Wonder why not."

"Perhaps your Powers that Be aren't calling upon you to deal with this particular problem?"

"I'm not plannin' to wait for a vision, Wes, not if the Master is making forays into L.A. to fill tour buses with take-out. It's one thing to admit that we're not ready yet to go and fight the Master on his turf. It's another when he starts raidin' ours."

Wesley smiled slightly at the 'ours,' then tried to hide it. "Hmm, yes. I must agree there."

"Agree with what?" Faith asked as she sauntered in, and yawned. She spotted the cigarette in my mouth, smirked, but said nothing. Good. I didn't need any self-righteous superiority from a seventeen-year-old with twice as many vices as I had - not that I didn't enjoy sharing a few of hers, but that was beside the point.

"He agrees that we're gonna check out this little operation." I handed her the Sunnydale Coach Tours flyer, and she glanced indifferently at it, then did a visible double-take.

"Sunnydale?"

"Yeah," and I glanced at Wesley as I deliberately echoed his words, "I'd guess you're thinkin' the same thing I am."

6 *Vampires, Served Cold*

Faith snorted, tossing the flyer on the desk. "Fast food run, yeah. I get it. Think we can disrupt their supply line?"

"It's a classic of military strategy," Wesley put in. "Before launching a direct attack, first cut off the enemy's access to critical supplies, such as food and weapons." When both Faith and I glared at him, he lifted his hands a little, backing off. "I am merely pointing out that I do agree it's a good move."

"Fine. Got a plan, Master Strategist?"

"Not yet, but I will shortly."

"Good. Speaking of a food run, anyone for donuts?"

6.5 Chapter 3

Sunnydale Coach Tours had rented a tiny office in one of the poorest and dirtiest neighborhoods in L.A., confirming my suspicion that they were trying to recruit the type of travelers who would not be easily missed. This had to be a short-term operation, I concluded as we approached. Even the homeless have a grapevine of sorts, and the word would get out soon enough that the Sunnydale-bound tourists never returned.

In the meantime though, the vamps seemed to be doing a good job of filling their bus. There was already a long line of people waiting to buy tickets, and while I hunted for a parking space where the car might possibly be intact when we returned, the line grew longer.

"There's a certain art about it, I must admit," Wesley remarked as I finally maneuvered the car into a space. "Getting your victims to pay for their own death."

"Yeah, sounds like a vamp with a flair," I muttered.

"So, are we gonna jump the line?" Faith piped up expectantly.

"We're the government tonight, o'course we are. The Department of Transportation Licensing never waits in line."

"I thought it was the Division," Wesley said.

"Whatever. Think you can handle doing the talkin' while Faith and I try to figure out the vamp-to-human ratio?"

"I can most certainly handle doing the talking."

"Yeah, Wesley does the officious, meddling bastard thing really well," Faith commented sweetly. "Ain't that right, Wes?" She clapped him on the shoulder, and although I could tell that she was being careful not to hurt him, he winced in anticipation anyway. By her grin, that was the idea.

We entered the building at a deliberate pace, Wesley strolling in front with his cane and a slow, dignified walk that made the cane seem like an affectation, Faith and I following with the bored expressions of civil servants. The people in line glared at us and muttered, but did not interfere.

All along the line, there were only humans in sight. Of course, I couldn't shift into demon form to take a sniff for vampires, but the body language was telling enough. I glanced quickly at Faith, knowing that she should be able to sense the vamps too, and she shrugged very slightly, almost imperceptibly, letting me know she was coming up empty as well.

It wasn't until we were nearly at the reception area, with its one small desk, that I heard her voice. It was soft, girlish, a little breathless. "Well, yes, of course it's a bargain. We're a small town, but there are plenty of jobs, and this tour is an opportunity for people to experience the beauty of Sunnydale and consider making a new home for themselves and their families. Consider it a welcoming gesture from the friendly residents of Sunnydale, who hope that some of you will become their new neighbors. There's absolutely no obligation after the tour is done."

I didn't realize I had stopped walking until Faith's hand closed around my arm, forcing me to go on.

Woodenly, I moved forward, trying not to show any reaction. I knew that voice.

As we came closer, and Wesley cleared his throat, preparing to launch into his speech, she looked up, blonde hair falling aside slightly, and I saw her face. Faith's grip was the only thing that kept me standing there, playing my part, because my whole body had gone numb and I wasn't sure where my feet were. But I was sure who she was.

I didn't want to remember. I didn't want to think about it.

But I remembered.

6.6 Chapter 4

The blonde straightened up and moved confidently into my apartment, a serene smile on her blood-dappled face, as the big man held my struggling wife with one hand.

"No, I'm not too badly hurt," she said to Harry in a soft voice, watching her closely. "Thanks for asking, though."

Desperately I dashed toward the phone, knowing that there was no way I could possibly take the man holding Harry; he was twice my size. If I could only reach the phone -

The boy followed me, moving much faster than I could. He caught me by the shoulder, his fingers digging in like they were made of metal, and grinned triumphantly as I winced in pain. He grabbed my neck and lifted me completely off my feet, wrenching my head to the side. His face suddenly transformed into the ugliest thing I'd ever seen, as he dragged me headfirst toward what looked like - fangs?

As he grabbed me, the woman's tone suddenly sharpened. "Jesse, wait!"

The boy immediately stopped moving, as the eager grin faded from his distorted features. "What?"

"First of all, you called me your mother. You were supposed to call me your sister."

"Sorry," he mumbled, still holding me in an amazingly strong grip. With my head twisted to the side and my feet dangling inches above the floor, any movement that I made hurt, but I tried to pull his hands off me anyway. I couldn't budge him.

The man who was holding Harry watched the exchange with an amused look, obviously in no hurry. She was still fighting him, punching and kicking, but he hardly seemed to notice.

"Second, don't waste your time with him." It was bizarre, but I recognized the tone of a teacher instructing a somewhat slow student. "I know a fledge like you wouldn't know the difference, but he's not human. After awhile, you'll be able to tell by the smell."

"What?" As soon as Harry made a sound, the big man holding her put one hand over her mouth, holding her easily with the other.

"Oh." The boy, still holding me by the neck with his fingers digging into my throat, sounded disappointed. "What should I do with him then?" He glared impatiently at me as I kicked him as hard as I could, fighting to get free. The kick hurt me a lot more than it did him. I could hardly breathe, but he seemed to be cut out of the same rock as the man who had Harry. All it got me was an annoyed grimace and a plaintive, "Hey, he kicked me. That actually hurt. Can I kill him?"

"Jesse, dear," the female vampire chided, with appalling sweetness in her feathery little voice, "You still seem to be missing the point. How are we going to have fun with him if he's dead? No, I have something better in mind. You'll see. We're going to have quite the entertaining show here, and we're going to make him watch."

"Sounds good to me, Darla," the man holding Harry put in.

"I don't need your approval, Luke," she replied tartly. "Just hold the woman. Jesse, you keep hold of whatever that thing is," gesturing contemptuously at me. "Make sure that he doesn't miss anything. Do you think you can manage that?"

"Okay," Jesse said sullenly. I kicked him again, and he winced, but didn't budge except for digging his fingers deeper into my neck. His grip made breathing a struggle, but I couldn't even think about that. All I could see was Harry, who was staring back at me over Luke's hand.

Darla looked back at Harry, with a sugary smile. "Aren't you the good Samaritan then? I do so much appreciate your willingness to help. I'll bet you adopt stray kittens, and you probably volunteer at a food pantry somewhere, too, don't you? Of course you do."

She reached out and flicked a lock of Harry's hair with her finger. "Come to think of it, you remind me of a missionary I ate once in China. You shouldn't mind feeding a few thirsty strangers."

Luke laughed. "Are you going to bother feeding at all, Darla, or are you just going to stand there and talk the girl to death?"

"Patience, Luke, patience. Let's show Jesse how to enjoy the game." Her eyes were still on Harry, who seemed to be trying to bite Luke's hand. Luke only grinned and tightened his grip on Harry's face, now covering her nose as well.

"So, what's a nice girl like you doing here with that thing?" Darla gestured dismissively in my direction. "Oh, that's right, you can't tell me anything at the moment, can you? Let me guess."

6 *Vampires, Served Cold*

She pretended to consider. "Is he one of your charity cases? Was he a soul in need of saving? Hmmm, now there's a good question, does he even have one?" Harry's face was starting to turn color as Luke's hand cut off her air.

Darla glared at Luke. "Excuse me! Did I say that you could suffocate her? I'm not finished yet." Then Darla shrugged, apparently losing interest.

"Well, never mind. It doesn't matter any more, but if you wanted something strong enough to protect you from the things that go bump in the night, then I'll let you in on a little secret." She leaned closer to Harry. "It isn't working."

Harry's eyes met mine, and in them, I saw goodbye.

"No!" I cried out, as I saw the woman's face change, and felt my own body turn to fire.

"Yeesh!" The boy cried out in surprise as my skin seemed to shift under his hands.

He threw me aside. I found myself flying through the air, and then I felt my head hit the wall, hard, the sickening thud jarring my already twisted neck.

I could only lie there, stunned, uncomprehending.

I couldn't move, as I watched what I had already seen happen once before.

6.7 Chapter 5

They were still laughing as they left Harry's broken body by the door. I crawled toward her, hoping desperately that she was somehow still alive.

Although I could hardly move, and my head felt barely attached, I managed to drag myself to her side, and touch her pale cheek.

For a moment it seemed that my frantic prayer had been answered, when her eyes opened. She looked straight up at me.

"What... What are you?" she whispered, staring at my face, with a look of utter horror.

And then she died.

6.8 Chapter 6

I stood up, covered in Harry's blood. My mind had shut down, like someone turned off a light; there was no room for thinking.

My movement was reflected in the mirror, and I stared.

In the full-length mirror, in my blood-soaked clothes, a monster with red eyes and a spine-covered blue-green face stared back at me.

"No! No! No!"

Under the monster's fists, the mirror smashed in a thousand pieces to the floor.

6.9 Chapter 7

Faith's grip on my arm tightened painfully, dragging me back to the present.

Wesley was giving his speech, but no one was listening to him, least of all Darla. She was looking straight past him, at me, with an expression of amusement.

"I don't think so, Mister... I'm sorry, what did you say your name was?" Her voice was still soft and sweet, as she moved out from behind her desk and came closer to Wesley.

The people in line grumbled impatiently as Darla walked over to Wesley. She stopped right next to him, leaning so close that they might be talking about a bribe.

Speaking so that only we could hear her, she murmured, "The next time you try to impersonate city workers, stick to humans. More convincing. I won't harm you now, because I don't want to scare away our customers. Leave quietly, and consider yourselves lucky that you can."

Over Wesley's shoulder, she smiled at me. "Whatever you are, did you really think that you could fool me?" Her voice stayed low, a silky whisper. "There isn't much I haven't seen in four hundred years, you know." Then she tilted her head quizzically. "Come to think of it, have I seen you somewhere before?"

Faith answered for me, "I don't think so," and steered me firmly in the opposite direction. I made no attempt to resist.

6 *Vampires, Served Cold*

Wesley murmured under his breath as we retreated, "I didn't think vampires could sense you that quickly."

Faith muttered back, "I guess four-hundred-year-old vampires can."

I didn't say a word. Walking was difficult enough.

Faith reached into my front shirt pocket, where a business card or two was usually buried between my lighter and a pack of cigarettes. It seemed like a funny time for a smoke, but I wasn't arguing.

Ignoring the cigarettes, Faith removed one business card and the lighter. As we approached the door, with one hand still firmly on me, she casually flicked the lighter with the other, and tossed a suddenly flaming business card into an overflowing wastebasket by the door.

"Fire!" she yelled, and then grabbed Wesley's arm with the hand not already occupied in shepherding me out. She dragged us both out of the door and clear before the stampede of people dashing out of there could trample us.

That place emptied out before Wesley even had a chance to protest. As for the wastebasket by the door, its performance had a short, but dramatic finale.

I watched the flames, listened to Wesley's tirade begin, and still remained silent.

Darla didn't even remember who I was. But that didn't matter.

It was time for a new plan...

Just as soon as I could stop shaking, that is.

This wasn't the time or the place, but I was going to make sure that Darla never fed again.

6.10 Chapter 8

"...And, furthermore, I'm quite certain there must have been a significantly less hazardous manner in which to clear those people out of the place - one that did *not* risk inducing mass panic and sending the whole building up in flames..."

I was half aware of Wesley lecturing Faith as we filed back through the office foyer and into the elevator, but I felt curiously disconnected from the scene. As though I was suddenly surrounded by strangers, and Wesley was nobody I knew and his words had nothing to do with me.

Faith and Wesley, the pattern of my life now in this office... suddenly nothing of this seemed to matter any more. The last three years disappeared, wiped out in an instant, and Darla seemed much closer in my memories than three years away.

Her soft laughter echoed around my hollow thoughts.

I felt... numb. I watched my hand, lifting to push the control of the elevator, and it didn't seem to belong to me.

Faith said, "Yeah? Well, at least they're not vamp food. So anyway, what would you have done, 'Master Strategist'? You don't like my plan, so why not come up with your own? You're supposed to be the brains of the outfit, *Watcher*."

There was a rather long pause.

"Hey, still waiting here." She tapped her heavily-booted foot.

Wesley stuttered with Watcherly indignation, and after a moment finally relented with a sigh. "Granted, it was very much spur-of-the-moment," he allowed evasively. "And there was not a lot of time to hone plans."

I heard Faith's snort and her muttered, "Thought so," as the elevator drew to a halt.

I supposed I could at least be thankful that their arguing had stopped them from noticing - or at least commenting on - my own silence. Because there was absolutely nothing I wanted to talk about with them.

When they got like this, it could go on for hours. And I hoped it did, because that would give me the time I needed for what I had to do.

The door opened and I exited the elevator without looking their way, and walked straight through to my private office, hearing the door slam with unintentional force behind me.

6 *Vampires, Served Cold*

I slumped over my desk as the silence and isolation which I'd sought immediately brought back the crushing barrage of memories I'd spent much of the last few years trying not to remember.

The images battered through my mind with more agony than the damned visions.

Almost four years... it seemed like half a lifetime - no, a whole *new* lifetime - to me.

Darla? She'd looked just as I remembered her.

She hadn't remembered me, though, I thought again, anger rising finally, creeping in to replace the numbness. I wondered, how many people did you have to kill before your victims became so anonymous...

I saw Harry's dying face in my memory, and that last expression on it - the horror in her eyes which hadn't been caused by the sight of the *vamps*. I flinched from the reminder.

Whatever else happened, I'd make sure Darla remembered me before the end.

6.11 Chapter 9

Mirrors. They still bother me. Too many memories, seeing myself in demon form... I don't want to see that face looking back at me and recognise it in any way as my own.

It was easier to practice this move in front of a mirror, but I hated it, just the same.

For years I had been working to control the change to demon form, and I had finally reached a point where I could change one part of my body before the rest. The Brachen defensive spines don't usually pop up on the rest of the body, only on the face, to protect the eyes and other vulnerable areas. I had found by trial and error that if I concentrated hard enough, I could force spines to come out on my hands as well.

Unfortunately, once they did, my hands immediately became useless for anything other than hitting someone. Hand spines make it impossible to hold a weapon, or anything else, for that matter. Evolution gave humans an opposable thumb and no hand spines for good reason. You can't use both at the same time. But for a moment or two, in the thick of a fight, they could be useful.

Hand spines just might buy me enough time to dust Darla and her minions before she killed me.

"Getting ready for the dance, lover?"

I had been concentrating so hard on changing only my hands that I hadn't sensed Faith coming into the room. I could see her in the mirror now, standing in the doorway with hands on hips, watching me.

"You might say that," I muttered, not bothering to turn around.

"Are you going to tell me what all this is about?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Believe it or not, Faith, I had a life before you showed up here. Not everything is about you."

"Newsflash, Brainiac, we're partners now. If it's about you, then it's about me."

"I don't think so."

"You don't?" She strode over to me, grabbing me by the shoulder and spinning me around. "So what's it gonna take to convince you?"

I put up my hands defensively, still spined, and she noticed them with a little whoop of delight. "New trick! Way cool!" She reached out a finger and brushed it very lightly against one spine, grinning when it drew a drop of blood. "Sharp, too." She put her fingertip to her lips, licking the blood from it with an exaggerated show of enjoyment.

"So, tell me. Who are you practicing to beat up on?"

"It's not really any of your business."

"Ah, but I'm afraid it is our business, Doyle."

Wesley. Wonderful. It wasn't enough to have Faith trying to worm information out of me, now I had to deal with Wesley as well. As I turned toward the door to deal with Wesley, I started to slide my hands into my pockets, while changing them back to human form. It didn't quite work fast enough; the spines snagged on my jeans along the way. Wesley raised an eyebrow, but made no further comment on my hands.

6 *Vampires, Served Cold*

"You've barely spoken to either of us since that vampire recognized you," Wesley went on. "Don't you think we should know what's going on here?"

"No," I snapped back with barely repressed fury, "No, I don't think you should know what's going on. No, I don't think you need to get involved in my private business. No, I don't need your help. Is that clear enough?"

"Crystal. But what if we need yours?"

That one threw me. "Excuse me?"

"If you're planning to do something reckless that might get you killed, you might want to stop to consider that your actions do affect other people, as well as yourself."

Before I could say anything, Faith jumped in. "Oh yeah, like we haven't heard that riff before."

"As you might recall, Faith, I have actually been proven right on occasion, however reluctant you may be to admit that. Now, Doyle, that vampire said she had seen you somewhere before. You obviously know her. I do have access to information about known vampires, so I would suggest that we pool our resources here and discuss this situation."

"Thanks, but no thanks. I already know all that I need to know."

"Oh, really? You know exactly where to find this vampire, and how many others will be there? You know everything that you need to know to dispose of her and survive the experience? No, you don't, do you. And if I'm guessing right, you don't particularly care about the surviving part."

Damn. When had Wesley become so perceptive? I must have missed that.

Faith gave me a long, slow look. "You getting ready to go kamikaze on us, Doyle?"

"My life is my own business," I snarled back at her, and then realized, too late, that I had answered her question. Faith's face darkened. She advanced toward me, backing me up against the mirror.

"Think again, boss. Now, who is this vamp and why are you so hot on getting her that you don't care if you come back? Give."

I glanced from one face to the other, and realized that the only way I was going to get out of here without some explanation was to knock them both unconscious. Wesley wouldn't have been that much of a challenge, but Faith was another story.

"All right," I said grudgingly. "Her name is Darla."

Wesley seemed to recognize the name. "Darla? Hmmmm. That's not all that common a name among vampires."

Faith snorted. "Yeah, don't they usually prefer scarier names like 'Spike,' also known as 'William the Bloody'?"

Wesley continued as though she had not interrupted, his voice thoughtful. "There was a Darla who made quite an impression in Europe during the last century. She and her companion, Angelus, were near-legendary in their time, wreaking carnage and destruction wherever they went. But they both dropped out of sight around the turn of the century and haven't been heard from again. I wonder if this is the same Darla?"

Faith, as usual, moved straight to the point. "I don't give a rat's ass what she did a hundred years ago. What is she to you, Doyle?"

I didn't answer, and she pressed closer to me. "I said, what is she to you?"

Reluctantly, I gave in. "She killed Harry."

"Oh, dear God," said Wesley. "I'm so sorry, Doyle."

Faith said nothing for a long moment, just stared at my face.

"Oh," she said finally. "I get it now."

She looked away from me as she stepped back, moving toward the door, head down like a child who had been slapped in the face. I don't think I'd ever seen her turn so completely quiet.

Wesley started in again, filling the sudden silence. "You have my deepest sympathies, Doyle. But surely we can still be of some assistance to you?"

Faith's head snapped up again and she whirled toward Wesley. "Wes, shut up. Just shut the fuck up, okay?"

6 *Vampires, Served Cold*

"Faith!"

"You have no idea what you're talking about, so just shut your face."

"And you do?"

"Yeah, I do. Remember?"

They glared at each other for a moment. I had no idea what was going on between them, and frankly, I didn't care. If it took them out of my way, it was fine with me.

Wesley began to bluster. "If not for the intervention of the Council, you would have been killed, and you know it, Faith. Why would you want Doyle to make the same fatal mistake that you would have made?"

"Because it's his right, just as it was my right, that you took away from me. You think I forgot? I don't forget, and I don't forgive. So, why should he?"

"You don't mean to tell me that you would stand by and watch him go to his death?"

Faith bit her lip, then shrugged, with an odd, bitter smile. "It's his life. I don't own it. I don't own him. Let him do what he wants, he's entitled. Now let's get out of here."

Perversely enough, now that Faith was willing to let me go, I found myself becoming suspicious. What if her sudden compliance was a ruse, and she and Wesley planned to follow me in secret?

"Wait a minute," I said, in as conciliatory a tone as I could manage. "Maybe you two can help a little, do some research on Darla. That might be of some use."

Faith gave me a dirty look. "Yeah, right. We'll sit here and do some research while you sneak out to kill her. Do it, if you want to do it, Doyle, but don't try to play me for a fool."

Wesley put in, "If you're going straight on out of here to take her on, will you at least allow us to come with you?"

"I'd rather not. But I suppose I can't really stop you from following me, can I?"

"And what makes you think we'd follow you?" Faith flared. "You really think we care so much about your sorry butt? If you're so wicked determined to go get killed, don't think I'm going to throw myself in front of you."

"Faith..." Wesley said plaintively, and Faith glared at him. She took a quick swipe at one eye, but before I could tell if she was chasing a tear or just an itch, she turned away.

"Do what you want," she repeated sullenly, her face averted. "Gee, big bad vampires. Why would you want to involve little old me? I mean, it's not like I'm actually a vampire slayer, or anything like that."

The heavy sarcasm in her voice got through to me, and I relented a little. "All right, already. You can come with me if you insist, but you're going to stay in the car. I'm going in alone."

"Then what in the world is the point of us coming with you at all?" Wesley reasoned, but Faith cut him off.

"We'll be there to claim the body after he's done. That's all you expect from us, isn't it, Doyle?" Her voice was brittle. "Clean-up duty. Well, hop to it then, before I change my mind and try to stop you. What do you want on your gravestone? Oh, don't tell me, I know. 'Beloved Husband.'"

She spun on her heel and walked out of the room. I stared after her blankly for a moment.

Was she actually jealous of a dead woman?

Then I shook my head, dismissing the question. It didn't matter any more. Nothing else mattered, but getting Darla.

I turned my back on Wesley, who was still standing there tongue-tied, and returned to the mirror to practice retracting the spines a little faster from my hands.

6.12 Chapter 10

I drew the car up across the street from the Sunnydale Tours building, tucking it tightly into the shadows at the mouth of an alley.

6 Vampires, Served Cold

"Stay here," I ordered, getting out, slamming the door after me.

Predictably, Wesley drew down the window to debate the issue even as I was starting to walk away. "This is *insane*," he hissed, in a theatrical whisper that seemed to carry far louder in the night air than normal speaking tones. I winced and turned back to him.

"Yeah, okay - fine. So it's insane." I replied, snappishly. "But its *my* insanity to do."

"We get that. Go already," Faith said. Wesley jerked as her foot connected forcefully with the back of his seat. He shot a disdainful glance over his shoulder at her.

I eyed Faith for a moment, hesitating.

She understood.

Maybe... but no, I couldn't imagine what Harry would think to see me now with this girl...

This girl. A super-strong force of nature possessed of dubious morality, and large appetites, and rather too few years in comparison to my own...

I couldn't see her approving.

No. I would do this by myself. This was old business, and Faith and Wesley were no part of it.

Besides, one person made less noise than two for a spot of breaking-and-entering, right?

I kept to the shadows as I made my way to the entrance. The place seemed all quiet, no lights lit up anywhere. I shoved to the back of my mind the very real possibility that they might not even be there.

The lock crunched under my hand as I switched to demon. I changed back and slipped inside.

6.13 Chapter 11

Most of the building proved empty, nothing but vacant rooms staring back at me every time I pushed open a door. Eventually, working my way up flights of stairs and methodically checking every level, I reached a handful of rooms that looked to have recently seen some use. At least, they contained a scatter of furniture and an occasional pile of papers.

'They're not living here,' I realised, finally admitting what I'd suspected since I walked inside the darkened building. 'This place is just their business front. Their real base of operations must be somewhere else.'

Angrily, I kicked over a chair, my frustration getting close to overwhelming me. Slammed a fist into the wall. So near -

I didn't know where they were.

'But I know where they'll be tomorrow,' I thought desperately, struggling to recapture some control. 'Yeah, they gotta come back here to book in Sunnydale's latest order of Happy Meals.'

And since I was here now, I might as well learn what little I could from the things they'd left.

I spent the next half hour sifting through the papers I found lying around. Most of them were in a small office, a square, boxy little room, with peeling pale green paint on the walls, and a window with a heavy blind that was currently drawn up. I left it up, not particularly caring if the light could be seen from the street. Daring them, in fact, to come back and find me there.

Caution wasn't big on my mind. Nothing much was, beyond Darla, Luke and Jesse.

For all my searching, there was little of use in there - accounts, the costs for the coach. An invoice listing the dates they had the coach hired for, which I folded and stuck in my jacket pocket.

I looked around. Nothing else I could do here. Time to go.

A glance out of the window double-checked that all was still quiet outside at the front of the building.

6 *Vampires, Served Cold*

I was just reaching for the door handle when I saw it turn. Before I could even think of moving, the edge of the door rushed at my face... as whoever had been listening on the other side belted it back with an inhuman strength.

It knocked me halfway across the room, crashing into the desk and sending papers and an angle-poise lamp flying. There was a line of pain down my forehead and the side of my face where the edge of the door had hit.

Damn it. They must have snuck in via some back entrance. How long had they been waiting?

I shook myself and struggled up onto my elbows, blinking.

Luke was standing over me. Behind him, Jesse was bouncing on his feet in excitement at the prospect of doing violence to someone. I cursed and reached up to grab the edge of the desk, to haul myself to my feet. Before I could, Luke shot forward and snaked an arm around my neck, choking me. He pulled me semi-upright, making sure I stayed off balance, my weight dragging my throat down against his already very tightly gripping arm. My feet floundered for purchase on the floor. Achieved it, for a second. But then papers slid around underfoot, the head of the lamp skidded and rolled, its bulb crunching - and my weight yanked down against Luke's arm once more as my feet flew out from under me.

I couldn't breathe. The edges of my vision were crumbling into fog.

In desperation, I reached for the extra strength of the demon.

Luke growled as spines pierced his meaty arm. His grip loosened, and I yanked an elbow back into his stomach as hard as I could. It was his turn to choke. I broke his weakened grip and I spun, reeling out of his grasp - straight into Jesse's.

The younger vamp grabbed hold of my arms, carefully avoiding spikes. With no small amount of malice I responded by head-butting him in the face.

I was enjoying his howls of pain when a double-fisted punch to the back of my neck sent me sprawling face-first over the desktop, the part of my brain which controlled my limbs deciding to take a back seat for a moment.

Luke hauled me up again by my hair and I knew from their suddenly attentive reactions that the third member of their party had entered the room.

"I remember this guy," Jesse said, his hands raised to his punctured face, which was distorted by pain as well as his demonic visage. "He was living with some tasty blond chick, that time we were playing the injured-travellers racket here in LA."

"Yes," the soft voice said. "I remember."

I knew from her tone that she hadn't needed Jesse's reminder. The spikes alone had been enough.

Hell... I'd wanted them to recognise me. But not like this.

This was all far too familiar.

Luke pulled my head back so I was forced to meet her eyes. His other arm was wrapped around my upper arms and chest, and my resumed struggles made no impression at all.

Darla drew closer, stepping daintily through the mess of office accoutrements that littered the floor. She reached a hand out and touched my face...

I stilled. An overwhelming feeling of sick helplessness flooded through me at the contact.

Her finger drew a line of ice starting at my forehead and meandering down through the spikes to my lips. I swallowed and with an effort shook off the spikes. Whatever small victory over her *that* marked, I wasn't sure.

But if I was going to die here, it would damn well be as a human.

"I never forget a... face," she cooed, withdrawing her caressing hand from my human skin. When she let go I felt like the air had returned to the room and I could breathe again, like my heart could start up once more.

Her eyes travelled up and down my form. There was something languorous there, in that pale blond-framed face and soft voice, that was both seductive and childishly innocent... and very, very chilling. "Look how you've grown. I approve... it's always nice to know you were the one to give a bright career its push-start."

I felt numb. I just swallowed, and didn't reply. I couldn't believe I'd put myself here, at her mercy. Again.

"Come, now, child. Where would you be now without me?" she asked, a gentle whisper.

Happily married to Harry, still, possibly with a family...

"You think your little wife would still be with you, if she'd lived?" she continued, as though reading my thoughts. "You really think she'd want a demon for a husband? You surely don't think it wouldn't have shown itself if not for me, do you, darling? It was *inevitable*. I've been around four centuries. I know a little about demons, and halfbreed demons. I probably know more about what you are than you do yourself." Again that sugary laugh.

I wanted very badly to smash my fist through that gently smiling face, but even if Luke hadn't been holding me I don't think I could have forced myself into action at that moment.

But she had no right to talk about Harry. How she *might* have felt...

"You really think a human woman wants a brood of demon halfbreed brats?" she asked. Her tone changed to a harsher, spiteful one which curiously enough I found much less fearsome than her sugary persona, as her vamp face sprang out. "No... Without me, you'd still have lost her. Drunk yourself to death in some gutter, drowning in your own misery. Not belonging anywhere. A *freak*!" She flung her arms out theatrically, seeming to enjoy the irony. "But look at you now! The big bad vampire hunter. You're *someone*! And you owe it all to me."

"What about us? Don't we get any credit?" Jesse asked, sullen and offended. She ignored him.

I finally found my voice.

"You didn't make me," I growled. There was more than that. Kate... three years in the LAPD... nearly four years of battling Darla's kind... Faith and Wesley... All those things and more. "You just laid the first brick, 'darlin'."

Powered by anger, I reached for the demon, and to my surprise the form I'd thrown away minutes before came easily back to me. I threw my head back, catching Luke a heavy blow on the jaw that was so hard it almost gave me concussion. He dropped like a stone.

Darla and Jesse were both moving towards me, and I knew I couldn't take both of them on. Unfortunately, they were also between me and the door.

I glanced quickly around the office, and saw my only other escape route.

I swallowed, but there wasn't much time for debate.

I leaped straight for the window, my body lifting and rolling in the air, the demon's reflexes allowing me to meet the glass side-on rather than face first. The arm I flung over my face offered some protection from the shattering cascade of sharp, silver points of light. I heard Luke swear and Darla laugh appreciatively. Then there was just darkness and glittering glass splinters around and underneath me, and I had time to remember, in sickening clarity, that the ground was an awfully long way below.

6.14 Chapter 12

I could hear the voices of others hurrying over as I lay on the pavement, my body numb with shocked aftermath, staring up at the dark sky and the window I'd jumped from, four floors up. I couldn't make myself move, even though I knew they could be coming for me.

I wasn't sure how many minutes I'd been lying there before they arrived.

"Doyle!" It wasn't Darla's voice.

"Oh my God," said the more cultured, English-accented tones.

I groaned. Nothing actually hurt, I was still numb, just anticipating the onslaught of pain when the numb wore off. I wondered how much was broken.

Faith said, "You all right?" Her face hovered above me, a white blur surrounded by charcoal-dark tresses, with smudges for eyes.

"Y-eah..." I managed. "Get - don' let 'em get away..."

"Okay," she said softly. Her face retreated. I heard her feet slapping against the pavement after she'd exited my narrow, skywards line of sight, as she sprinted towards the entrance to the Sunnydale Tours building.

Wesley knelt down at my side and gripped my shoulder. "Don't move. I'll get help."

"Wait - " I reached out and caught his arm before he could get up. The impact had shaken off the demon form, although I'd not realised that until seeing my human hand lift to grasp his.

6 *Vampires, Served Cold*

My vision was starting to clear and the numbness to wear off, and to my relief - not to mention surprise - nothing felt particularly horrendous. I seemed to have gotten away with no more than bruises. The demon must've absorbed the impact.

"Don't think... 'm hurt," I said, struggling up onto one elbow.

He eyed me suspiciously. "I think you should be careful," he said. "A fall like that -"

"Yeah, right. I'm okay, Wes."

"Why did they push you out of the window, anyway? I mean, as reliable methods of disposal go, well... it obviously wasn't very success -"

"I jumped."

He stared at me incredulously, then sighed and looked away, muttering something about how he really should've learned, by now, not to ask.

Something occurred to me and I shot upright. Wesley caught me as I staggered dizzily and almost fell flat. "We gotta go after Faith," I explained, desperately, struggling to recapture my balance and take my own weight. I wasn't sure whether it was the fall that had knocked my centre of balance so far adrift, or something else. "I wasn't thinkin' straight, sendin' her after them alone. I -"

Wesley's eyes focused on something over my shoulder. My words dried up as I turned and followed his gaze.

Faith was walking back out of the building with an irritated, no-luck expression on her face.

"Looks like they've cleared out," she said as she closed with us. She frowned malignantly, dark thoughts collecting behind her eyes. "Smart of them."

"We'll go after them..." I - my demon - would find them while the telltale trail of their scent was still fresh.

"We'll do no such thing," Wesley said, aghast. "You could have been killed. You could have internal injuries. And even if you don't, you're still in no condition to face them again tonight. What we will do is go home, rest, and do some proper research on Darla. Then, tomorrow night, we can all of us face them - *prepared*. You know, preparation is the key to..."

For once, Faith nodded in positive, absolute agreement with her watcher, although she also gave him a very dark warning look which cut off the old familiar "three p's" lecture before it was even begun.

I would have argued, but since I could barely stand up straight on my own just then, I didn't really have much choice in the matter.

6.15 Chapter 13

Wesley sat hunched amid an enormous pile of books at the kitchen table, and occasionally darted furtive, nervous glances to where I paced back and forth across the floor. Presumably, he thought I wasn't aware of the concerned scrutiny. I didn't care - I had other things on my mind.

Back there in the Tours office, Darla had made me feel like another person, one who'd been over three years dead... The man she'd killed along with Harry.

And I hadn't like it one bit. It had been a long time since I felt quite that helpless.

One more humiliation at Darla's hands, and another reason to fuel my desire to see her dead.

Now that I'd recovered from the events which, earlier, had left me so shaken, that desire was becoming harder to ignore. And though I knew Wesley and Faith were right - that it was better to go in prepared, to go in rested and with back-up - I was also increasingly aware that every moment I let slip past added to the chances of them deciding not to stay in LA now they'd been rumbled, and going back to Sunnydale before I could get to them.

And would I follow them, there?

'Probably,' I admitted to myself grimly. *'If I had to.'*

I didn't want to drag this out any longer. Almost four years, it had taken me, to stumble across them again. I wanted it over.

And then what? wondered a treacherous little voice at the back of my mind. Once they're gone, what's left? Settle back down to a normal life?

As if.

6 Vampires, Served Cold

It would continue to go on - the visions, the vampires - until I was dead.

The new me wasn't built for anything else.

I pushed the thought aside. Deal with it later. Hell, I was probably a dead man anyway. And would that necessarily be such a bad thing?

My eyes were drawn to Faith, sitting cross-legged on a chair with a book lying open on her lap, glaring down at the pages with focused concentration. Joining in with the research she hated, for once. For me.

A reason to live?

I wasn't sure.

Wesley coughed, apologetically, as though he felt guilty at breaking the silence. "Oh dear. I believe I've found something," he said, dragging his glasses from his face and rubbing a hand across his eyes, looking tired. "It looks very much like Darla was sired by the Master. She's certainly one of his most valued minions."

"Crap," Faith said. "That's all we need, to draw the attention of the boss-vamp-man himself."

Wesley nodded slowly. "It also seems she might be, ahem, 'related', I suppose you could say, to our friend Spike. One or other of her own protege's turned him, although the chronicler here seems unsure precisely which of them it was. But they all of them caused a good deal of mayhem together, back before the turn of the century."

There was a snap as Faith broke a pencil between her fingers. She flung the pieces to the floor. "Great. Bloody William the Bloody, too. This is so not good."

Wesley looked up at me, saw my bleak expression, and misunderstood. "It's not much information to go on, I know, and none of it good so far - but we will find more," he began to reassure.

I shook my head, picking up my jacket as I headed for the door. "It's all I need," I said. Somebody had to stop her, *especially* if she was that close to the Master. She was more dangerous than any of us had realised.

"What...?" he began. I ignored him and continued walking.

Abruptly, Faith was up from her chair and she'd launched herself across the room to intercept me, blocking off my path to the door. "Now, hang on there a minute. These guys are serious vampire muscle, Doyle."

"Quite right," Wesley said, his chair scraping noisily as he stood up and left to kitchen to join us, limping badly without the cane he'd left leaning against the table. "I suggest we need to find a better plan than 'charge in and allow ourselves to be brutally killed'."

"You may. I don't. I don't think I ever said anythin' about wantin' any company." I glared at Faith, and realised how distanced I suddenly felt from these two people who'd become such a part of my life these past months, with my past looming up so close behind me. I said softly, "You're not goin' to stop me."

"Doyle," she said. There was something pleading in her eyes that I hadn't seen before. Or maybe I was imagining things. "I know you have to get them. I know you have to do it alone. But wait 'til you're rested, and stronger, and in your right mind to do it, boss."

"No," I said. I moved forward to shove past her and she shoved me back.

"Not getting past me." She saw the anger in my eyes and some spark in her own ignited in response. She said softly, dangerously, "Wesley - go. Get out of here. Now. Research Darla upstairs."

"But -!" he spluttered.

"I'll handle it." And that was said a little too meaningfully, there, for my liking. "You really don't wanna stick around."

He squinted down at her with suspicion before reluctantly retreating out of the door without another word, his back set straight and his bony shoulders squared in annoyance.

Faith looked at me.

"You can get out, too," I told her, darkly.

She gave me a bemused appraisal, a suspiciously amused smile on her face, then planted herself solidly, standing with her legs braced slightly apart and her arms folded. I knew that stance.

Fightin' mode.

6 *Vampires, Served Cold*

"Make me," she said.

I eyed her for a moment, not sure she was serious. While we'd been speaking, I'd been sidling around her slightly. I thought I could get to the door. Of course, if I didn't, Faith would kick my ass halfway across the continent.

There was a flurry of movement from behind me as I darted past her. I didn't turn around, just trying to get out of there quick and lose her outside in the streets I knew better than she did, but I'd barely gone two steps when she grabbed my arm with both hands, one above the elbow and one around the wrist, and hurled me roughly, face-first into the nearest wall.

I grunted in surprise, finding myself the next minute sat on the floor with the room spinning in circles around me.

"Going somewhere?" Faith said. "Don't think so. Not like this. I've kinda got used to having you around. Besides, if you got yourself dead, I'd have to find someplace to live. Probably with Wesley."

"You hit me," I muttered in mounting fury, climbing with some difficulty to my feet. "You bloody... well, you're not gonna stop me, Slayer or no. I'm damn well *going*, and you can just -"

"Uh-huh. Well, obviously you're not thinking clearly, if you think you can take me." She actually looked annoyed, like I'd insulted her. She tripped me neatly, caught my weight before I fell again, and shoved me back into the wall. The demon came out to play automatically. I forced it back into its box - no way was I letting it loose against Faith, whatever crap she was trying to pull.

"Hey, this isn't fair!" I snapped, whirling around, breaking her grip, staggering and almost falling. My shoulders hit the wall and its support kept me standing. "You're stronger'n I am!"

"Yeah," she agreed, with no small amount of glee. "Ain't that a kick in the teeth?"

I lunged forward, trying to barge past her, and she intercepted me. Angrily, I snapped off a fast punch aimed at her face. She blocked it easily, and then she did this sort of lunge and jump move, straight up in the air, which looked more like a gymnastic turn than a fighting move.

I didn't figure out what she was doing until it was too late. Her legs scissored around my waist, gripping, and her weight and momentum knocked me backwards. I hit the floor hard, with her on top of me. I tried to shove her off and her hands snagged each of my wrists. She twisted them outwards, pinning them to the floor, and leaning her weight forward to keep them there.

"Doesn't look like you're going anywhere, Doyle," she said.

She had me effectively trapped. Her arms pressed down on my wrists, crushing them into the floor. I felt bone grate threateningly and yelled in pain despite myself. "Faith! You're -"

"Hurting you?" she cut in. The way she was leaning over me, her hair hung down on either side of her face in two dark wings, casting her features into shadow. I couldn't see her eyes. "Thought you wanted some pain, huh? Want to go kill yourself? What's wrong, isn't this good enough for you?"

"Hell, Faith! I'm gonna have two broken arms here in a minute -"

She eased off. Slightly. "Can't go after them then, can you? And that would never do." She paused as though thinking. The pressure returned. "Maybe I should, huh? Two broken arms might just save your life."

"Don't you *bloody* dare. Get off me, you freakin' bitch!" I struggled desperately, both against Faith, and to keep the demon at bay, instinct screaming for me to change and use that extra strength.

She only laughed again at the insult, flinging her head back, her hair flicking back out of her face so I could finally look her in the eye. Not that that did any good.. "You don't know the half of it. C'mon, hit me again, lover. 'Cause guess what - I've heard it all before."

"An' you guess what? You're... bloody... fired!" I snarled, and as the pressure of her fingers became too much and, convinced my wrists were about to snap and lose me the only opportunity I might ever have to go after Darla, I finally lost my control over the demon.

"Whoa! So you're finally getting the big guns out, huh?" Faith jeered, not flinching from the spikes. "Won't do you any good. Hell, you know I don't mind playing with Prickles every now and then. Fired, huh? Well, that assumes I was ever working for you in the first place, and I don't recall ever getting any kinda official paycheck."

6 *Vampires, Served Cold*

She was still stronger than me in demon form, and to my annoyance I found I still couldn't escape her grasp. Only difference was, she was unlikely to be able to break my bones while I was in this form. But if anything, the pressure she was applying increased, like she hadn't been using her full strength before. It wasn't much comfort to see I was forcing her to exert every bit of that slayer strength against me now, her expression set in a grimace of effort, sweat springing out on her skin.

The places where her body was applying pressure, pinning me to the floor, were becoming a lot more than uncomfortable. It was also getting hard to breathe with her sat on my chest. "Faith, get... off... me," I managed to snarl out, my breath rasping.

"No way. Not while you're still trying to do yourself a damage, or ready to run off on some crazy suicidal revenge mission," she panted.

I blinked up at her, taken aback as her logic struck me. "What, you're gonna stop me hurtin' myself even if you hafta beat me into a pulp to do it?" I asked incredulously, so surprised I stopped trying to resist.

Something changed. A little of the anger died away, a little of my sense came back.

She relaxed her grip slightly for good behaviour. The expression on her face had changed, too. She said, as though she was considering carefully, "I could do that. Could do other stuff instead. Either way, I reckon you won't be thinking too much about Darla anymore." She finally loosed my wrists - for all the good that did me, since she'd crushed all the strength out of them and I couldn't feel my hands.

Her hands crept inside my shirt. They felt cold despite all her activity, and I shivered as they touched my skin.

After a moment, one of the hands meandered elsewhere. I gasped.

"Faith!" I struggled again, still futilely. "This is not the time!"

"Seems as good a time as any, to me. Hell, in fact, we should do this more often. All this fighting and squirming together's made me hot." She snickered. "How about it, boss?"

Her mouth descended onto mine in an aggressive kiss. Her hands were busy too.

Her lips muffled my protests - but after a moment, I lost all thoughts of wanting to voice them anyway. And by the time she was so preoccupied she forgot her plan to keep me weighted to the floor, I wasn't about to go anywhere.

6.16 Chapter 14

It must've been about an hour later before I was finally convinced Faith had fallen asleep. I opened my eyes and blinked around, cautiously hitching up on one elbow, conscious of the body sprawled loosely half across mine. In the darkened apartment, we were still wrapped around each other on the floor. It was late, but not so late that dawn wasn't still a long way off.

There was still time...

Time to kill. Time to die.

I slowly, carefully, disentangled myself from Faith. She snorted and shifted in her sleep as I lifted her head from my chest and pillowed it on my abandoned shirt. She settled back to quietly snoring as I stood and pulled on the rest of my clothes, retrieving a new, relatively clean, shirt from the bedroom, and along with it the pistol that had hung unused on a gunbelt in the wardrobe ever since I'd left the force.

Bullets might not be able to kill vamps, but they sure as hell could hurt them, and I'd need all the weapons I had tonight.

I paused to drape a thin blanket across Faith's quiet form. She looked so different, sleeping. I knelt down and touched my fingers to my lips - then touched her hair, one last time.

She still didn't stir. It occurred to me that perhaps I'd wanted her to wake up and stop me.

But she didn't move, and I couldn't not go, and so I left - stopping by the weapons cabinet to collect up a few items before I walked out of the door, not looking back.

6.17 Chapter 15

The large demon looked up at me, his glowing eyes narrowing with displeasure. His companions around the table regarded me with equal hostility, their varying shades of demonic hide mottling with annoyance.

"Whaddya what, Doyle?" he rumbled irritably, gesturing at the stack of chips before him with a fan of cards. "Can't you see I'm in the middle of a game?"

6 *Vampires, Served Cold*

"Nice to see you too, Paullie," I said pointedly, leaning against their table as I glanced around the rest of the bar. The place was jam-packed with various non-human clientele, all there for their different definitions of 'fun'. An unspoken code of conduct, as in most supernatural bars, meant that most demons were safe from violence here, even do-gooders like me. Hopefully, that code would keep me alive tonight.

"You said you knew where he was when I called," I reminded Paullie in a lower tone of voice.

His fiery eyes rolled in their sockets. "Oh, right. That stupid deal. Sure you don't want just pull up a chair and join in instead? I'm on a roll!"

"Temptin', but I've got other plans." Paullie's 'rolls' never last. If I sat down, I could probably win enough to pay the rent for four months. But that wasn't why I was here.

I put my hand on his shoulder and looked directly into his craggy face. "This is important, Paullie."

Paullie's eyes narrowed slightly in response to my intense stare. If he didn't spill his guts in the next few seconds, I'd spill them for him, and the code be damned. And he knew it.

The demon shrugged. "Whatever. He's across the room. Corner table." I followed the line of his clawed hand and spotted the bleached head of my target.

"You're a prince, man," I said sincerely, patting his horny shoulder and bruising my fingertips. "Or at least a frog with prince potential."

Paullie raised a hand to his warty features defensively. "Funny."

"Yeah." I leant closer and murmured into his ear, "By the way, the Ano-movic who's smilin' all the time? He's got a flush."

"Aw, hell," he snarled, tossing his cards down as I slapped his shoulder one last time in gratitude and walked away.

I carefully pushed my way through the crowd, trying not to cause a stir. In the mood I was in, I *wanted* to cause a stir, to grab one of those demons and pound him until my hands were bloody, but I couldn't afford the luxury of aggression. Not here, not now.

I still looked human to the naked eye, but most demons have a pretty good sense of smell so none of them gave me any hassling. My quarry had his back to me as he nursed a small glass - beer, not blood, I noted - and rocked on his chair.

I took a single calming breath and before my common sense could intervene, sat down in front of him. "Spike."

The vampire looked surprised and amused at the same time. "Doyley! Wouldn't have expected to see *you* here." His leather duster was as rumpled as always, and he looked like he was wearing exactly the same outfit I'd seen him in last time we'd met. Minus the bullet holes.

I pulled a cigarette from my jacket pocket and lit it. "I'm a social guy."

Spike nodded, playing along. "So, what next? Crutches and your Slayer going to leap out of a secret door and nab me?" He inclined his head in the direction of the demon-populated tables. "Could get hairy."

I smiled easily, keeping up the façade of friendly conversation. It wouldn't do for anybody else to get too interested in our conversation, particularly if Spike wasn't prepared to be reasonable. "It's not like that."

"Isn't it?" he asked mockingly. "Wait, I know! You just felt like a nice drink so you came out and decided to get boozed up at a bar, surrounded by demons and seated next to your ol' pal Spike. Am I getting warm?"

"You got a problem with that scenario?" I responded coolly, blowing a cloud of blue smoke across the table towards him.

Spike seemed undaunted by my calm demeanour. "Works for me. Any last words?"

"Somethin' will come to me," I said, deadpan.

The vampire chuckled. "Still got guts, haven't you, Irish Avenger?" Spike plucked a pack of smokes from his duster pocket and shoved one between his lips. "Got a light?"

I shoved my lighter across the table. Spike lit his cigarette and took a long drag, savouring the smoke. He sent my lighter flying back to me with a flick of his wrist. I fumbled the catch and nearly dropped it, scratching its side on the hard table. My hands shook slightly as I tucked it away.

6 *Vampires, Served Cold*

Spike snickered. "Graceful. Those reflexes slipping, huh? Must be a pain for someone in your line of work."

I exhaled cigarette smoke slowly, stilling my hands. Suddenly, I was tired of this, tired of baiting Spike and exchanging barbs. I had older fish to fry. "I want some information," I said abruptly, stubbing out the cigarette.

Spike leaned back in his chair, appearing truly interested for the first time in our conversation. "I hear that right? Doyley, whatever you've been drinking, you've got to tell me where to get some."

I glared at him. "I'm sober. And serious. I need information."

Spike laughed. "Oh, please. What do you think I am, some weasely little snitch you can beat up until he squeals?" He actually sounded offended at the thought.

"Works for me," I riposted.

He tucked his hands behind his head, not intimidated in the slightest. Not that I'd been expecting him to be. "I think our fellow customers might take that the wrong way, mate. I'd hate to have to queue to kill you."

Spike had a point. I had come looking for him with only the vaguest idea of what I was going to do when I found him. Spike was still my best lead on Darla, bar Wesley's research. And Wesley and Faith had been taking far too long for my taste. 'Sides, I didn't need them. I'd been killing the undead for more years than either of them. I didn't allow myself to dwell on the fact that Darla had been killing humans for more years than I had been alive.

Still, I had to find some way to convince Spike to tell me where she was hiding, and I guessed appeals to his better nature were out.

And thanks to the demonic crowd around us, there was little chance of me using violence to convince him. Not to mention that Spike would simply respond in kind and probably smack me across the room. I would sooner break my own arm than bribe him, and so most of the usual fact-obtaining methods were out. Luckily, I had another option.

"Speakin' of things the customers might take the wrong way," I said casually, "do you remember Phil?"

"What, that shopkeeper I killed?" Spike asked, smiling. "Oh, I never forget a face. Or its last expression."

I found my hand fingering the stake tucked beneath my jacket as he spoke. Phil had been a friend, and here I was, chatting calmly to his murderer with the power to avenge him in my hand. But the stake stayed under my jacket. It had somebody else's name on it, so Spike would just have to wait in the queue.

"Yeah. I'd guess about half the demons here visited his shop on a weekly basis. He was liked, for a human. His services were well appreciated. Now, what do you think would happen if I walked over to Lucius over there an' told him that *you're* the reason he now has to trek to the other side of town to buy his sheep's brains. He might 'take that the wrong way', doncha think?"

Spike eyed the huge Gorshk demon by the bar who I was indicating. "You wouldn't risk it," he said slowly, but his voice lacked the brash relaxation of a few seconds before.

"Wouldn't I?" The fact was, I wouldn't, since I owed Lucius four hundred bucks for a dice game that had got a *little* bit out of hand. Snake eyes can be a very sobering sight, even after eight tequila slammers. But hopefully Lucius wouldn't notice me until my business with Spike was concluded. And then, well, I could run faster than either of them. I hoped.

Spike chewed his lip, his eyes flicking to the demon and then back to my poker-face. "I could kill you in the five seconds it would take him to get here."

I smiled sardonically. "Quit the crap, Spike. We both know you couldn't."

"All right then, I would take *ten* seconds," he allowed. That was probably the nearest I would ever get to a compliment from him.

"An' then Lucius would be very displeased. I've seen him displeased, Spike. People get damaged."

"I could take him," Spike said harshly, cracking his knuckles.

I glanced at him quizzically. "Really? An' me? An' Lucius's brother Danner over there in the corner? An' the bartender? An' the bouncers? Amazin' how quickly the odds change...Spikey."

"What do you want?" he bit out, glaring at me.

"See, that wasn't so hard, was it?" Spike's ensuing growl convinced me to keep the discussion moving. Even though I was pretty sure he wouldn't risk the exposure of a serious brawl, I wasn't a hundred percent sure, and taunting him wasn't so much fun that I'd risk my neck for it. "Got any family, Spike?" I asked. "Of the vampiric sort, I mean."

"Some," he said guardedly.

I leaned closer, resting my elbows on the table as my eyes bored into his. "Well, I'm lookin' for one of your relatives. Name of Darla. You know where I could find her?"

"Darla?" Spike asked, his brow furrowing in confusion. "What do you want with her?"

"My business, Spike," I told him grimly. "Your business is to see if you can tell me where she is before I yell for Lucius. I know you vamps stick together, an' I'm enough of a gamblin' man to bet that you know where to find her."

Spike stared at me intently for a few seconds, as if weighing his options, and then gave one of his quick, off-hand shrugs. "Why not? She's at the old West Empire Mental Care Asylum. You can find it on any road map. You do know how to read maps, don't you Doyley?"

I ignored his mocking tone. "Asylum?"

"Yeah. Nuthouse. Loony bin. Place for people who have a vacancy in the penthouse apartment. You get it?"

I felt like a coiled spring that had just been wound a little tighter. I knew where she was. And she wouldn't be expecting me. For the second time in days, I had a chance to avenge Harry's death. And this time, I wasn't going to dive out of a damn window.

"You know, it's almost a shame," Spike said philosophically. "I'd been looking forward to killing you, and now Darla's going to beat me to it. Oh well, at least we're keeping it in the family."

"Not goin' to happen, Spike," I told him as I stood up. Darla had murdered the old me along with Harry. But the new me wasn't going to follow in his predecessor's footsteps.

Spike looked at me dubiously. "Listen, Doyle," he said frankly. "You're a dead man. You can go after Darla and get yourself killed, or you can wait a few weeks until I get around to doing you in. Your call."

"Then I'm makin' that call." I turned my back on him and walked away.

"Before she kills you, tell her I send my regards," Spike called after me.

I kept walking and lit another cigarette.

6.18 Chapter 16

An abandoned mental hospital. The cop in me, or maybe the demon, had to admire the twisted logic of it. Places like those close down regularly, at least compared to regular hospitals. Some other facility is built, with better treatment, and then all the crazies get pulled out by the relatives and dumped into the new one. It's like a game of musical chairs, except that the people sitting on the chairs could at any moment pick them up and beat each other to death with them, because 'God' or 'voices' told them to.

Oh, sure I know not all the patients are violent, but I heard bad things about West Empire's brand of client on the force. They specialised in the serious sickos, real Hannibal Lecter types. Kate and I had sent some people there who I really wouldn't like to meet in a dark alley, demon or no demon. The kind of guys who would hack up their own wives and kids because their pets said so.

Every now and again, I wonder what would happen if someone with medical training saw me have a vision. Would they try and send me to the nuthouse?

'Kinda losin' the plot, aren't we?' I asked myself as I entered the facility, walking along the smooth, cream-coloured passageways. Well, mostly cream-coloured. Several of the more artistic patients had apparently taken it upon themselves to carve pictures on the walls. A few seemed to have used somebody's blood as paint.

Apart from the artwork, the place was in pretty good shape.

Yup, few windows, no visitors... perfect vampire territory, I mused. *And a few toys.* Or more correctly, sets of electro-therapy equipment, just the kind of thing a vampire would get a kick out of. I passed by the menacing metal boxes with a shiver.

I picked up the murmur of voices from a side corridor and pulled on the demon. Vampire scent. And engraved on my mind, Darla's own distinct scent, like a thin, lifeless perfume.

Half-following the voices and half the scent, I quickened my pace, shaking away the demon.

6 *Vampires, Served Cold*

"...damn...half-breed." I heard Jesse say. Nice to know they were thinking about me.

"We should kill him," Luke's louder voice said firmly.

"Hush, both of you." *There* was the voice I had been listening for. Darla's languid tones continued, "My baby won't be any trouble. I can handle him if he tries to disrupt the business again."

The corridor ended in a plain white door. I slipped to the side and listened.

"The Master will be displeased if our operation fails," Luke noted.

"He'll gut us," Jesse said more literally and probably more accurately, judging from what I'd heard about the Master.

Darla's voice was sharper. "I know that! But we won't fail. He'll have many more tourists to feed on and turn before we close, and that'll satisfy him, no matter what. . .inconveniences we incur along the way."

The topic of conversation changed, as they began to discuss how to load the most passengers onto the next bus. The calm, cheerful way in which they discussed packing people off to a vampire-run slaughterhouse was sickening.

It looked like they weren't going to get anymore detailed about the Master's plans, I rationalised, so best to strike now, before Darla could pick up my scent.

Luke said dourly, "I don't like this. The half-breed is inconvenient. We should just kill him."

"Luke. . ." Darla sighed. "I expect such idiocy from Jesse - "

"Hey!"

"- but surely such a one as you can see the potential here? This half-breed wants to kill us, so let him try. When he makes his move, we'll take him and use the facility's equipment to. . . extract information from him. He'll be able to get us connected to LA's demons and vampires, and give us valuable allies for the Master's expansion or tell us what we need to know to eliminate those who might choose to stand in his way. And of course, we serve the Master in all things, don't we, Luke dear?"

Luke laughed. "Don't try to convince me, Darla. You're the one who almost left him when your soul boy - "

"Don't mention his name." Darla's voice went cold. "I've been serving the Master since long before you were born into this world as a puny, whining human."

"Funny, you seem to have taken a special interest in this particular puny, whining human."

"Half-human, and don't worry. I created him. I can destroy him."

"Looking to replace your lover?" Luke taunted.

I had heard enough. Feeling eerily calm, I kicked the door open. "Hello, mommy."

Their room looked as if it had once been used as a nurses' rest station. There was a coffee machine in the corner and the entrances to several padded cells at the far wall. Jesse was seated in front of a laptop at what looked like a nurse's work desk, with Luke beside him and Darla beyond her two companions. Their faces all reflected the same surprise.

"Well, what kinda welcome is that for a son come home?" I asked, my voice bitterly sarcastic. "No hug? No flowers?"

Darla slowly smiled, studying my movements. "Very brave. Stupid, but brave."

I couldn't reply. The calm of before had vanished the second I saw Darla's face, and now my throat was too dry and tight for words. Jesse growled, going vamp as he stood up, his chair clattering against the floor. "Screw this," he said venomously and strode towards me, his hands wide.

I pulled my pistol out from under my coat and fired. Jesse jerked as the shots hit him, the crack of the gun shattering the quiet of the hospital. I kept on pulling the trigger as blood rolled down his chest and he twitched and spasmed. As he slumped to his knees, I lowered the gun.

"You think you can kill me that easily?" he hissed slowly, rising to his feet again and stepping forward, his yellow eyes berserk with fury.

I let him get a step closer, and then I plucked the stake out from under my jacket with my free hand and shoved it into his chest. "Yes," I told the dissipating dust cloud.

6 Vampires, Served Cold

My eyes returned to Darla. Luke's enraged rumbling distracted me, as the large vampire stormed through the cloud that had been Jesse. I brought up the gun a second time and yanked on the trigger, but the hammer clicked on an empty chamber. Luke flashed me a fang-filled smile.

I dropped the gun and hit him right in the centre of the smile. Luke didn't even try to block what he thought was a flimsy human punch, which is why he was considerably startled when my suddenly spike-encrusted fist slammed into his teeth. The rest of the change rippled through my body as I snarled, feeling the demon growl with me.

Darla smirked from a safe distance. "Baby's all grown up," she murmured.

Luke was considerably less amused. He took a single step back and shot a right cross for my nose. I smacked the punch aside and hammered my own fist into his jaw. Luke grunted as I brought my other arm whirling across and under the angle of the first punch, slamming his gut. I caught his clumsy responding blow on the palms of my hands and stepped in close, pummelling his meaty torso. Luke shook off the punches and raised a huge hand. With my fists too low for an adequate defence, Luke easily drove the blow home.

I felt my teeth crunch together as I lurched backwards. Luke stepped up to me and his hands went around my head.

Oh, crap...

The wrench tore through my neck with searing pain and I dropped like a rag doll, my head flopping to one side.

I heard Luke laugh as he stepped back from me to survey his handiwork. Darla's softer laughter rose beyond his.

Damn it, I swore, Even if they do kill me, they won't be laughin' at the end. I owed Harry that much.

A choked snarl escaped my throat as I wrenched my head back into position and rose with the full force of my outrage, my arm curving around in an uppercut that threw Luke back into Jesse's desk, flattening the laptop.

The vampires had thought they were fighting the same man they had beaten so easily before.

But things had changed. *I* had changed, and now I could fight them on their own level. It was time they learnt that.

Luke pulled himself from the wreckage of the table, shaking away splinters. "I'll break you in half for that!"

"Show me!" I growled furiously.

The vampire's charge hit me full force, lifting me up and slamming me hard against the wall. My back crunched against the plaster as my fists slammed his face and shoulders again and again, but Luke refused to quit. He grabbed me by the shirt and slammed me up against the wall a second time. This time, with the full force of his arms behind it, it felt like my spine had shattered.

Gasping for breath, I tried to push him away, but he just knocked my weakened strikes aside and threw me against the wall again. A burst of agony shot through my neck muscles, and I could feel that my neck was about to snap again as Luke scooped me up for a fourth throw. As he hefted me, I grabbed his shoulders and pushed down with every inch of force I could muster. I rose above him, suspended by my aching arms, and drove my knee hard into his nose. He groaned in pain and grabbed for my feet.

With a grunt of effort, I lifted them up and kicked out against the wall, propelling myself right over him.

As I flipped over him, my hands shifted position and gave a sharp twist, accompanied by the sound of snapping bone.

I hit the ground awkwardly, dizzy and confused, and nearly leapt out of my green-coloured skin when I turned and found myself eye to eye with Luke.

But the yellow eyes that met my own were glazed and in pain, and they were staring directly over his shoulder, like one of those owls that can rotate its head around 360 degrees. From the way his neck was bent, there was obviously something seriously wrong inside.

"See how *you* like it," I snapped as he collapsed, moaning like a child in his crippling pain.

I turned slowly to face Darla once more. Her amused smile was gone. I was too tired, too angry and in too much pain to be witty. "You're dust, lady."

6 *Vampires, Served Cold*

As I strode towards her, she grabbed a hospital trolley and shoved it at me, the wheels screaming. I flung myself out of the way, hearing with grim satisfaction how Luke groaned as the wheels of the trolley jolted over his prone form.

Darla was on me in a flash, her punches thudding into my face I tried to defend myself. And despite her apparent slenderness, her punches hurt a *lot* more than Luke's. Reeling, I staggered back against what felt like a counter of some kind. Shooting a quick glance over my shoulder in between Darla's strikes, I saw that I had fallen against some kind of prescription counter, probably where the nurses had given out medication.

My hands found the rim of the counter and I pulled myself up and over, my feet catapulting into Darla's delicate face. By the time the blonde vampire was ready to fight again, the counter was between the two of us.

"I'm beginning to think you need some disciplining, my boy," she said dangerously.

I smiled bitterly. "Harry used to tell me that all the time."

As Darla leapt for the counter, I scooped up a box of old medicine bottles and hurled it straight into her face. She snarled in rage and pain, smashing the box aside with an arm, her suddenly-hideous face pale with fury. I threw myself across the counter and into her.

We hit the ground hard and kept on rolling, but it was evident the second we landed that I had made a mistake. Darla was smaller and more agile than I was, and I didn't have a hope in hell of pinning her. A flip of her long legs slammed me flat on my back, and then she straddled me and smashed both fists into my jaw.

My head lolled about as I tried desperately to retain consciousness. I felt Darla's cold hands go tight around my neck and her breath touched my cheeks. "Immune to neck-breaking, are you?" she asked. "Let's see what happens if your head gets ripped clean off, shall we? Call it research." I tried to keep my eyes open, but my entire body seemed very numb and far away.

She yanked hard at my head, and the pain of my neck injury rose again, pulling me from my semi-conscious daze. I shoved a hand up at her face, and she sunk her fangs into my palm, then spat my own blood back at me. "Disgusting, filthy little half-breed!"

I shifted my hand to her throat and squeezed. "Now, I admit my bathing habits aren't world-class, but there's no need to be unpleasant." Tugging hard to one side, I threw her off and rose to my feet.

Darla was already standing by the time I was capable of looking for her. There was a row of marks along her neck from my fingers, but she seemed unconcerned. I, on the other hand, felt as if I was slowly strangling in a noose of fire.

The sudden flare of triumph in her eyes, combined with a feral growl from behind, warned me that Luke had recovered at last. Both vampires moved at the same time.

But I still had one trick left to play. Both my arms struck out in open-palmed punches, one before me and one behind. The admittedly pathetic blows fell far short, but a twist of my wrists lengthened my reach by a good few inches as the spring-loaded stakes in my sleeves lunged out.

Darla's eyes went wide with horror as she tried to halt her charge. Desperately, she whipped a hand up, the stake sinking deep into her palm and halting in front of her chest. I felt Luke's bulk slam into my other arm and then suddenly the weight vanished, as dust covered my shoulders.

I ripped the stake out of Darla's hand and my back arm came across and around, pounding her face. I spun with the blow and thrust a kick hard into her belly, launching her into one of the padded cells.

Before she could rise to her feet, I slammed the door shut and heard the lock click into place.

Peering through the grille at her, I allowed myself a grim smile. "Oh, yeah," I told her. "Almost forgot."

"Spike sends his regards."

6.19 Chapter 17

My hands pressed to the grilled glass window in the door as I looked through - seeing my own reflection and, behind it, Darla.

She flung herself at the glass in fury, but it was made to withstand the almost-supernatural strength of the criminally insane and it bore up against her vampire strength too.

Her hands battered in futility upon the glass which was all that kept us from touching.

6 *Vampires, Served Cold*

I wondered how long she'd last, abandoned in this padded cell, without blood, without company. Would she starve? Would she go mad? Could a vampire even die from starvation, or only wither, remaining ever alive and conscious in a decaying shell?

Either way, I knew she'd suffer.

Her lips moved. I could only just hear her through the insulating padding of the cell and the thickened glass.

She said, "Let me out."

I was still breathing heavily from the exertions of the fight, and when I caught my breath enough to answer her, the words came out bitterly sarcastic. "Ya think?"

Her vamp mask had left her features, leaving me faced once again with the petite blonde innocence of her human disguise. Her eyes were large and frightened. Hard to imagine that a demon lurked behind them, but all the same, those mind games were not going to work on me now.

I stretched the muscles of my face into a grim smile, and extended a hand to tap out a mocking, jaunty tune on the glass with my fingers.

She shrieked in fury at being mocked, and threw herself at the door again, this time not so much like an angry demon as like a child having a tantrum. Her bleeding hand painted red stains across the window.

It lasted a few seconds before she collected her composure - assuming she'd ever really lost it: I had to remind myself that I couldn't underestimate her dexterity with these head-games, as convincing as her acts could be.

She stared at me, putting her face up close to the glass, clawing her dishevelled hair out of her face with one hand. Something in her eyes was different, like she was really seeing me for the first time. As something other than an amusement, or an annoyance.

"Do you know, I don't even know your name?" she said slowly. "Imagine - all this, and I don't even know who you are."

"It's a little late for introductions, darlin'," I said. I was trying not to let myself get too cocky. Trying to keep in mind that she could still be dangerous, even caged.

Her eyes went misty, as though she was thinking, dredging her mind for something. "Your wife called you Francis," she said abruptly. "But... that's not who you are now, is it?"

I stayed silent.

"Is it?" her voice was soft, and pleading.

"Doyle," I said, harshly, reluctantly, and then wondered afterwards why I had. I certainly felt no pity for her. Perhaps it was just that I wanted her to know who it was that was killing her, just as she seemed to need to know the same.

"Doyle," she repeated, and laughed girlishly with pleasure. "Why do we have to be enemies? Nobody's ever got this close to killing me before. I like that in a man. Perhaps I like you. And since I killed your partner... perhaps we could join forces, and I could give you... recompense... in kind. You find me attractive?"

She was playing the wrong game, if she expected me to go for that. "You disgust me," I snarled.

"I do?" she appeared to find that interesting and amusing, setting her head on one side in a philosophical pose. "Why?"

"You have to ask? You killed my *wife*. You kill people, an' you don't even do it quick and clean, like most vamps - you have to screw with their heads first."

"Everyone needs a hobby. I made you the man you are. Aren't you even a little grateful?"

"I guess I'm just funny like that. You wouldn't know what it feels like, to lose the one person that matters to you, to have your world fall apart. Have a nice life, Darla, stuck in your little padded room." I'd heard enough of this. I was going. She could stay here and rot.

I started to turn my back and she said "Wait!" sharply.

Her eyes flashed anger, and after a moment she said, "Do you think you're the only person who ever lost anyone they loved? You think I can't feel as you do? You can't know how it feels to lose someone after a *hundred years* of companionship."

6 Vampires, Served Cold

I blinked at her. A hundred years meant some other vamp. From her apparent lack of reaction to his dusting earlier, I guessed she wasn't talking about Luke. "You got a hundred years," I said. "I barely got three. Excuse me for not sympathising."

"Two hundred years wouldn't have been enough," she said, her voice a hoarse whisper I could barely hear. "I had to watch what they did to him, the Master and his people, and say *nothing*... to lose him twice over. I thought we could break the curse, but all they did was torture him, and kill him when he finally escaped. Now all I have left of him is dust... so *don't tell me I don't know how it feels to lose someone!*"

I didn't know what she was talking about, and to be honest I didn't particularly care. The thing I owed her least of all was sympathy.

I said, "Well, d'you know what? This time, you just plain lose."

I'd made up my mind. I would leave her in this place, keep tabs on the building to make sure nobody decided to start occupying it or pull it down. Maybe check in person every now and then, to see that she was still there. To watch the process of her decay, or whatever it was that starving vampires did.

I turned to leave, and heard the thud of her weight once again impacting heavily on the door.

"You're really going to leave me?" she asked, a harsh challenge in her voice now. "You're really so afraid to open this door and fight me that you'd risk leaving me here to be let out by any passing stranger, any squatting tramp or vagrant who wanders inside?"

I hesitated.

"I don't call this winning. I call it a stalemate!" she practically yelled. "I can't get to you, but you can't get to me without risking letting me out. I thought you wanted revenge, Doyle? I thought you wanted it over. To kill me with your own hands, isn't that right?"

I spun around. "I'm not letting you out," I growled.

Her face, framed in the small window, was laughing. "But you know I will get out, darling. Sooner or later. I won't die in here, because I can't die, although it's true I may want to, a few years down the line, if my imprisonment were to last that long. But consider this - what if *you* die? It isn't exactly a low-risk business, what you do. You

can't check up on me, then - can't be my jailor forever to make sure I stay shut in this box. I'd live longer than you anyway. But that's all immaterial, because you simply can't watch this place day and night, every day, and it won't stay empty forever. One day, someone is going to come in and let me out, while you're not here to stop them."

Although I knew what she was trying to do, my resolve faltered - because she was, to some extent, right. There was a chance she'd stay in here for a long time undiscovered, but it was a gamble. And even though I was a betting man, it was a gamble I wasn't prepared to take.

'Leave her,' I told myself firmly. 'Sure, so it's impractical to leave her here indefinitely, but give it a few weeks, come back when she's weak and starving, and stake her then.'

But somehow, that suddenly felt like cheating. A cheap, cruel, cowardly revenge. Not the grand gesture I'd wanted to make for Harry. Leaving her here at all was not really what I'd wanted to do.

My plan... shortchanged me. And yes, she stood to gain from it if I risked opening that door, she didn't want to gamble being stuck here a long time, suffering - certainly better a quick staking or a chance of freedom than that.

But, also, what if somebody came in the next few weeks? Someone in Sunnydale might know they were based here, and come to check up on them when the Tours didn't turn up. Then, Darla would get away free.

I couldn't leave her here. But I also didn't want to give in to her manipulations. A few days wouldn't harm.

Tomorrow. I could come back tomorrow, with more stakes and Holy Water.

Come back, maybe, to an empty cell?

I looked at Darla, separated from me by the glass, and knew I couldn't let her out of my sight until she was dust.

My neck felt awful, and I didn't feel like fighting her again right now - but on the other hand, she wasn't in the best of shape either, tired and battered and with a hole through the center of one palm where the stake had gone in, earlier.

"All right," I said smoothly. "If that's what you want, lady, you're dust."

6 *Vampires, Served Cold*

I retrieved one of the stakes from where it had fallen, and cautiously stepped forward, reaching for the door's complex locking mechanism.

I turned it, slowly.

It stuck.

I yanked on it, hard, using all my demon-enhanced strength, and it didn't budge.

Darla, on the other side, shrieked, "No!" She battered on the window with her bloodied, maimed hand. "No, no, no!" She screamed, her face contorted in fury and fear.

We could neither of us get to each other. She couldn't get out, and I couldn't get in.

I couldn't kill her. Stalemate.

I fell back from the door with a groan.

6.20 Chapter 18

The empty bottle fell from my fingers and splintered on the floor. I barely noticed. By that time of the evening, I was pretty drunk, just like most days now.

I leaned over the window, seeing my own reflection there, seeing the city stretched out beyond it. My reflection didn't look like me any more. Even though, at that moment, it didn't look like a demon either. I pulled the window up, fumbling with alcohol-induced clumsiness, and the image disappeared.

Leaving me faced with only the vast, dark, sprawling vista of LA.

It was a fairly long way down, and I looked at it for some time before deciding, no, not today. I left the window wide open, letting a mild breeze blow through to toss papers around the shoddy little apartment, but I was too drunk to feel its chill.

The bottle... the traditional, effective anaesthetic.

I fetched myself another from the kitchen, and sat down in a tattered armchair to drink it, and tried not to think about the events of the past few weeks... as usual, a futility.

I didn't know exactly what it was that vampires did to make new vampires, and I didn't know whether it was done to Harry or not, but I wasn't going to take any chances. Harry's family never did forgive me for having her cremated the day after her death.

I couldn't exactly explain to them that I was making sure she wasn't going to rise from the grave. Then again, if they went ahead and had me committed, it might be the best thing.

The guy at the crematorium did ask me if I wanted to leave the ring on her hand, since it would only get melted into a useless lump. I hesitated for a moment, then said: "I'll switch rings, then."

"Same thing will happen."

"That's all right." I switched my ring with hers; our hands were the same size. From now on, I would wear her ring.

I brought the ashes home in a little box. The living room was still in a shambles, with fragments of the mirror and Harry's blood all over the rug. I could even see the imprint, in her blood, of where I lay sprawled for half the night beside her.

I broke the lease the next day and moved into a hotel until, a week or so after, I found this apartment. The company that managed the building billed me top dollar for cleaning up the place, but they didn't say a word about what caused the mess.

The police had been just as indifferent to the strangeness of my story, and the condition of Harry's body. I half expected them to lock me up. After all, isn't the husband always the first suspect? And I didn't have nearly the fight I expected to get them to release the body for a quick cremation.

The cop who took my statement, a big, burly guy who reminded me uncomfortably of Luke, didn't seem to be too interested in the details. Death by exsanguination even had its own little abbreviation, just another D.B.E. in L.A. As I left the police station, I heard him joking to another cop: "Tell Lockley she's won the pool on D.B.E.s for this week."

Somehow I didn't think that the Los Angeles Police Department was going to do much about the creatures that killed Harry.

I took a leave of absence from my job. It took awhile before I got around to telling them that I wasn't coming back. They would have figured it out fast enough when they read my obit in the paper, but somehow I never quite got around to the suicide that I thought about almost every day.

I spent a lot of time coming up with ways to do it, but I never actually tried. I didn't even know what the demon part of me would mean happened, when I died. For all I knew, it could be worse than this.

Instead, I found out that there were bars in L.A. where it didn't matter if you turn into a demon when you get drunk, because everybody else is just the same. It was a side of the city I'd never noticed before, and I could see it fast becoming my home.

After awhile, when I closed my eyes, I didn't see Harry's face any more. But sometimes, I still saw Darla's, and heard her laughing at me.

6.21 Chapter 19

In the abandoned mental hospital I lay on my back on the floor, staring up at the settlement cracks in the ceiling and feeling the odd angle of my neck. Putting off the sickening wrench of pain that I would have to endure, sometime soon, to set it back right.

I'd only discovered my mistake when the door swung back. Then I'd realised what her unseen hand had been doing while I tried to open the door.

She hadn't stopped to fight me, just delivered the single, powerful, open-handed slap which snapped my already-weakened neck out of place again, and then ran.

I supposed I could take some comfort from the fact that she hadn't wanted to risk fighting me again, either. Unless, like before, she just enjoyed the irony and the cruelty of knowing someone she'd damaged was still out there, alive, still feeling her legacy.

I was a work in progress.

My mind floated over disconnected things. Harry, and the past. Things I couldn't change. Coming back, eventually, to wondering what Faith and Wesley would say when I got back home.

It took a long time just lying there alone in all the padded, empty space of the abandoned hospital before I finally pulled myself to my feet, to begin that journey back.

7 Past Lives

by Roseveare and Mike Dewar

7.1 Prologue

I knew there was some creature other than myself lurking in the shadows of these dark, quiet streets. I recognised the bar on the corner from my vision. The name on its flickering neon sign was indecipherable, more of the letters broken and unlit than not.

Whatever I'd come to find, it was close by... My hand tightened around the stake concealed inside my jacket and I headed towards the bar.

The trouble was happening in the side street adjacent to it. Two vampires had hold of a young guy. If not for their twisted, demonic faces, the vamps could have been normal youths. They dressed in brightly coloured, floppy clothes... about as far from demonic as you could get. The man set to be their lunch looked to be in his mid twenties, a little down on his luck, unshaven and shabby.

I edged forward, trying to get as close to them as I could before I made any move. But when one of the vamps prepared to sink his teeth into their victim's neck, I knew I could wait no longer for the sake of keeping the element of surprise.

"Hey, that's not very polite," I said, drawing out the stake. Their yellow eyes shot up to glower at me, taking in the weapon.

'Yeah, you bastards. I know what you are an' I know how to kill you...'

One of them sniggered. "That's got to be just the ugliest slayer."

I didn't waste any time trading insults. I gripped the stake in readiness and lunged for the vamp who was holding the weakly struggling guy.

The vamp shot out a hand to grab my wrist, stopping the stake an inch short of his chest, but the impact as I barrelled into him was enough to send all three of us sprawling to the concrete.

The vampire landed heavily and, momentarily stunned, his grip on his victim loosed. The frightened guy rolled aside and staggered to his feet, staring back at me and the vamp in terror. The second vampire lunged hungrily towards him and I awkwardly flung out a leg. The vamp tripped over it and landed with a graceless splat on the pavement.

"Run, man!" I yelled to the guy, as he staggered back a few steps, his eyes glazed and stupid from fright. "Get the hell outta here!"

He didn't need telling twice. Lousy coward.

That left me with the two vampires.

I'd lost the stake when I fell, and now I couldn't see it anywhere. I scrabbled around, searching, working blind 'cause my eyes were fixed on the two vamps as they started getting up. They looked more than a little pissed, too.

I skinned my fingertips against the rough surface of the pavement in my panicked fumbling, but found no stake.

Without the weapon, I was suddenly feeling a lot less confident about the whole venture.

The vamp I'd tripped moved faster than I could follow. He lunged forward and grabbed me before I could even attempt to dodge or fight him off. Hauled me to my feet only to throw me against the outside wall of the bar, my shoulder mashing into the brickwork with bruising force.

Unable to catch my balance, I slumped to the ground and my forehead bounced off the pavement.

My head spun. I couldn't focus... couldn't see anything but darkness and the abrasive concrete of the road surface. But, *'there are vampires,'* some small working corner of my brain reminded insistently. *'Get up.'* Dizzily, I slowly struggled up onto hands and knees.

Feet. Two pairs, planted inches away from my nose, filling my vision. Encased in huge black boots. I dragged my eyes up and found the vampires were standing right over me, both grinning down nastily.

I automatically tried to flinch back. The wall hit my shoulders, and as if that wasn't enough, one of them stamped down on my hand, pressing his weight down hard, pinning me to the ground. My knuckle joints crunched under his boot and I yelled in pain despite myself.

The sound drew a laugh and a sneer, "Did you leave your cape and tights behind, Mr Hero?"

'Great plan, Doyle,' the mocking thought rang out inside my head.

Now, I faced two vampires for my stupidity - unarmed, and with my senses still scattered and reeling.

"You let our dinner get away..." the vamp snarled, backing off a step - I thankfully peeled my squished fingers off the pavement, teeth clenched from the pain. Then the vamp shrugged and grinned a nasty grin as he shot forward again. "Hello, dinner."

I surged to my feet, dredging up some measure of extra energy from somewhere. I managed to throw an awkward punch at his twisted face.

But there was no strength in the blow, and it only made them both laugh. The vampire caught my arm before I could draw it back from the swing and he wrenched me forward, off balance. His other hand shot out to twine in my hair, twisting, baring my neck.

'What the hell?' I thought frantically. 'The others knew... how could these not know? Were they younger, stupider? I'd thought I was safe from that, at least...'

I felt the teeth sink into my neck.

This was what Harry must've felt, those final moments, that final day... My life had changed so much since then.

And now, it was going to end...

The teeth in my neck felt cold as ice, threads of chill squirming through my veins towards the wound as the vamp sucked out my blood. The pain was intense. It warred with the lethargy of blood loss which threatened my consciousness.

'Aw, Harry, now I know what it was I failed to protect you from... What a damned awful way to go out.'

Moisture collected at the edges of my eyes, but anger kicked in with the memory as well, and, driven by it, I started to struggle fiercely. Too late, though - he'd already taken enough blood to weaken me too much for it to make any difference.

An instant later, I was flung away again. I landed roughly, but it still felt like a reprieve after the pain of the bite. I lifted my head from the pavement; it seemed to weigh about ten times more than usual. I hazily tried to focus, to find out what the hell was going on.

I could see the vamp bent over, retching my blood back out all over the pavement in red spurts. "Shit," it gasped. "I never tasted anything like that. That was gross. There's something wrong with this guy. He's sick or something."

Using the wall for support, keeping one hand clamped to my neck to reduce the blood flow, I tried to stand. My knees buckled halfway and I ended up back on the ground. I tried again, until I realised the two vamps were watching me with mild irritation and curiosity.

The one who'd bit me said, belligerently, "Well, if we we're going to go hungry tonight 'cause of this guy, least we could do is share our displeasure."

"Yeah. That sounds like a plan."

I finally got to my feet even as they moved, again, like lightning.

The vamp suddenly in front of me sent a punch my way, which connected with the side of my face even as I raised my arm far too slowly to block. Knocked backwards, I staggered straight into the grasp of the other vamp. Rough hands on my shoulders stopped me from falling as my legs refused to support my weight.

He immediately flung me back to his buddy. Great, they were taking turns in making me a punch-bag. He shot out a kick which struck my face with so much force behind it that the vamp holding me lost his grip. I hit the wall again. I was getting very tired of that wall.

Something happened. As I hit the brickwork and slumped down to the ground, I felt it sweep through me. I felt... *changed*.

By that time, though, I was almost too far gone to care.

Where I lay on cold concrete, barely conscious, I heard them speak, seeming from a long way away.

"Shit. That is not normal, bud."

"Spikes, dude."

"I don't like this. There's no wonder he tastes lousy. No way is he human. Let's finish him and go."

I became aware I was lying on something - an uncomfortable lump underneath my shoulder was digging into the bruises they'd made. Surreptitiously, I edged a hand around and my fingers encountered the splintery wood of the stake I'd lost earlier. I gripped it, trying to keep the motion undetectable to the two vamps.

The one who'd bit me was coming towards me again now, and I could tell from his expression that they weren't intending to play any longer.

The vampire reached down to me, and I twisted and plunged the stake blindly upwards. I felt curiously stronger now than I had a minute ago.

By sheer luck the stake pierced his heart, dead on target. He exploded into a scatter of dust.

As the dust settled on my clothes and on the road surface, I was left crouched with the stake and the stunned realisation that I'd killed it... *I'd done it.*

His pal looked aghast - about as surprised as I was. "Dude?" he said, mournfully, to the slowly settling dust cloud. He turned to me, and his face twisted into a snarl of vengeful fury I understood all too well. "*You killed him!*"

A vicious kick took the stake out of my hand before I could move to defend myself. He wrenched me up by my bloody collar, his hands taking a grip on my shoulder and in my hair and *twisting*, violently, in opposing directions.

The resultant *snap* reverberated right through me.

He let go and I slumped to the ground. My head lolled oddly. Something felt decidedly wrong in the area of my neck.

Some instinct told me to keep still as the vamp delivered a few final kicks to my side. I realised he thought he was kicking a *corpse*...

I heard him turn and walk away.

7 Past Lives

I lay there for several minutes before I was certain he was gone and I wasn't dying.

Cautiously, I sat up. My hands went to my head to hold it in place. Feeling sick, knowing exactly what had happened now I could feel with my hands the angle of my neck, I gritted my teeth and twisted.

It hurt like hell, but my neck snapped back into place. I felt things click back together right.

'How the hell did I just do that?'

It was then I realised the skin on my hands was visibly green even in the dim light of the alley. I reached up to my face and felt the spikes there. I remembered the vampires' words, a hazy memory, I'd hardly been aware at the time.

It had happened again...

I hadn't done it. The demon had. It had saved my life.

I might have made a total mess of what I'd set out to do, but I'd discovered a weapon. Darla's amused scorn retreated almost into insignificance in the face of the discovery.

A weapon alone wasn't enough, though. The night had been more than enough to demonstrate that to me. A weapon was only as useful as the person wielding it was skilled.

I didn't know how to fight this fight. But I needed to learn, and fast. I needed a plan, 'cause I couldn't do this again, unprepared. It was sheer luck I hadn't ended up dead this time.

After a while, I painfully scraped myself up of the concrete, retrieved the stake, and slowly made my way home.

7.2 Chapter 1

present day...¿

My mind went out of autopilot as I heard the scream. Adrenalin rushed through me in response, but I forced myself to remain calm. The dumpster's surface felt cold against my face as I cautiously peered around it, carefully checking that my shadow didn't fall before me and give away my hiding place. The streetlights were dim, but there was no sense in telegraphing my position. Not yet.

There she was, a hundred meters ahead and closing, bleeding from the one shoulder, her face twisted into a grimace of fear and pain. Behind her two black silhouettes pursued, one loping smoothly after her while the other lagged behind, obviously tired. But the first silhouette was definitely gaining on the woman, judging from the panicked looks she tossed over her shoulder every few seconds.

I studied her face in between her turns. Yup, she was the one from the vision, and she was nearly upon me. Time to do my job.

I stepped out from behind the dumpster and she gave a little half-shriek, stopping abruptly.

Her panicked eyes met my own. "Please... please... help me... these people... they're..."

I raised my hands comfortingly. "I know, darlin'. I know."

"Oh, thank God." She glanced nervously over her shoulder. The figures were closing. "Who are you? Shouldn't we run?" The questions tumbled after each other.

"No," I said firmly. "It'll be all right. I'm a friend."

Relief leapt across her face, and her mouth parted to say something.

The stake I shoved into her chest interrupted her.

Her expression jolted from relief to shock and was twisting towards rage as she melted into dust. "Just not *your* friend," I remarked casually.

Faith skidded to a halt in front of me, Wesley gasping for breath as he leaned against a wall just behind her. "Job well done," she said, not even winded as she folded her arms and tucked her stake away.

"Piece of cake."

Wesley pushed himself away from the wall, swayed once or twice, and lurched over to us. "Yes, indeed," he said breathless but cheerful. "A centuries-old vampire preying off the kindness of people offering charity, now reduced to a pile of powder. Bravo."

"Yeah," I noted dryly. "Immoral *and* predictable."

"It does make you think, though, doesn't it?" Wesley asked, gazing speculatively at the aforementioned-pile. "Hundreds of years of unlife, reduced to... this." He gestured at the dust.

"No, Wes, it doesn't," I said bluntly. "In fact, even if she was around since the Crucifixion, I don't give a rat's -" A siren cut me off. In the distance, I could see familiar blue-red lights approaching our position.

"Oh, er, yes," Wesley said awkwardly, following my gaze. "In our pursuit, we did, um, chase her through a clothing store." The sirens grew louder. "Several clothing stores and one supermarket, actually."

"I thought we were goin' to wait until *after* she left the mall before we moved in. That was the plan," I said pointedly.

Faith shrugged and tried futilely to look innocent. "I revised the plan. Went off Lone Ranger style. Not unlike some other people have been doing recently."

I ignored the none-too-subtle jab and pushed both her and Wesley into the alley, but Wesley's mumbled explanation had delayed us, and one of the cruisers was practically in front of the alley before we could find cover. I strained to identify the person behind the flashing blue-red glare. I couldn't pick out if it was Kate or not, but the lights flicked off abruptly and the car moved on while I was still blinking away the spots across my vision.

"Whoa," Faith breathed by my shoulder. "That was a little hairy. Thought we were jailbirds for sure."

"Old friend?" Wesley inquired.

"Couldn't say," I returned. "But whoever it was, they've just given us a grand opportunity to go home an' not get arrested for stormin' through shopping malls, so let's take it."

"I couldn't agree more," Wes said firmly. "And while we're on the topic, Faith, a Slayer is supposed to fight evil in secret. Not in the Wal-Mart."

Faith shrugged again and grinned unrepentantly. "I took the initiative."

As we walked towards the car, my mind was only half on Wes's stern rebukes and Faith's casual ignoring of them. The other half was voicing an unspoken answer to Wes's question. With one exception, I had no friends in the LAPD. Just those who, if a demon got lucky one day, would pause before they started drawing a chalk outline around my broken form.

And those who wouldn't.

7.3 Chapter 2

I knew I didn't have a chance. My only hope was to try and slow my opponent down, to get in one crippling strike to slow the devilish attacks that were sure to defeat me otherwise. And I didn't think much of my chances for getting any strikes against this enemy, much less crippling ones.

Faith and I locked gazes, our fists raised. Her eyes narrowed with lethal intention.

I judged I had about half a second before she moved. Half a second to plan my attack.

I judged wrong.

Her left hook thudded into my ribs, and then her right smashed my jaw. I managed to catch her lightning-fast kick on crossed forearms and launched a counterattack. She swatted my strike away and drove another blow into my ribs. I twisted away, sweeping my foot around in a defensive arc. Faith ducked under my leg and threw her full weight into my belly.

I staggered under her charge, crashing up against a wall, barely maintaining my balance. Faith's forearm slammed across my throat like an iron bar as she pinned me up against the wall.

"Nice try, lover," she sneered. "But you're out of your league."

"Faith..." I gurgled weakly

Wesley watched complacently from the shadows as his Slayer increased the pressure. I managed to hook my fingers under her rigid arm and pushed her away, freeing my neck as she tumbled back, rolling to her feet easily.

Wesley regarded this change in the battle without the faintest sign of concern one way or the other. He sipped his tea and smiled.

Faith shifted her stance slightly, drawing my attention back to her. She looked content to wait until I made a move, confident she could flatten me when I did so. She was probably right. Hell, she was *definitely* right. There was only one way to equalize this battle.

I pulled the demon free and struck quickly, using speed and strength she wasn't expecting.

Not enough speed and strength, as it turned out.

She grabbed my fist, arresting the blow with a grunt of effort. Her other hand slammed open-palmed into my chest as her foot hooked my heel.

Propelled by Slayer strength and skill, as well as my own body weight, I tumbled backwards into the wall. Faith took a step towards me as I lay sprawled, helpless, on the floor before her.

"All right, Faith, that's enough," Wesley said finally, placing his cup of tea down on a saucer and stepping between us. "An excellent fight all round, I feel."

Faith smirked at me. "The opposition was kinda lacking, ya know?"

I decided to wait until after my inner ear stopped its own private Tsunami before responding.

Wes glanced down at his notepad. "One small detail, Faith. I couldn't help but notice that your left hook was lagging a bit. You're not using your wrist enough." He waved his hand in a vaguely aggressive way, as I struggled slowly to my feet. "Like so."

Faith chewed her lip thoughtfully. "Let me see if I've got it right." She lashed out and caught me on the jaw as I straightened. My teeth throbbing, I went down again, the floor swaying in interesting ways.

"Excellent," he said with, for Wes, unusual warmth. "Well done." Wes and Faith had actually been getting on pretty good over the past few days, which was a nice change. Unfortunately, the major common ground they had found with each other was disapproval of my little vendetta-based Darla hunt. They were mostly subtle about it, at least Wesley was, but there was always that pointed reminder.

You thought you could handle her without us. You were wrong and she'll kill again because of it.

Their criticism combined with my own frustration had caused a peak in my liquor consumption unmatched by anything since the weeks after Harry's death.

"How was I, Wes?" I asked sarcastically from the floor. "My groans of pain convincin' enough for you?"

"Yes, yes," he said breezily. "Good show. I think we should probably move on to weapons now, Faith."

Faith smiled eagerly, rubbing her hands together in a way that promised pain for me as soon as I stood up again. I shuddered the demon away.

"Uh-huh," I announced firmly. "The punchin' bag vetoes that decision, Watcher-man. I need a rest break before my next session of catharsis."

Faith glanced at me challengingly. "What's wrong, lover? Haven't you got the stamina?"

"More to the point, I don't have unbreakable bones and iron skin," I told her. "I gotta take a breather if you expect me to continue bein' your violence test dummy. Unless Wes can do it?"

The Watcher looked considerably alarmed at that. "A five minute break, perhaps?"

"Thank you," I said with feeling, limping towards the elevator.

"Remember, just five minutes..." Wesley's braying voice called after me. I grunted once and punched the button for the office before he could change his mind.

7.4 Chapter 3

The office was nearly bare of paper. We had pretty much zero active cases, vision-related or otherwise, and it showed. Particularly in our letters from the bank manager, which were getting longer and more irate by the day. Rubbing a hand across my sweat-sticky forehead, I walked over to the water cooler and hunted for a cup.

The cooler was Wes's brainchild, installed when the builders were in fixing the damage from Spike's little visit. He said he wanted at least one cold non-alcoholic beverage freely available in the office, and water seemed like the cheapest option. Both Faith and I stubbornly stuck to drinking beer, but I'd seen her sneak a cup or two down when she thought Wes wasn't looking. I had admit, there was something refreshing about crisp, icy water every now and again, as opposed to the lukewarm soup that I got out of the taps.

Not that it was any kind of health thing, mind you.

I abandoned the search for a cup and stuck my head under the nozzle, letting cold water drizzle into my mouth as I savoured the growing numbness of my tongue. I flicked the handle to the closed position, hearing something wooden clatter near my feet as I did so. It was a long wooden staff, worn in many places and sharpened at one end.

Faith stood in the doorway, another staff cradled easily in arms that weren't even as thick as the weapon they were holding. "Time's up, boss. On with the work-out," she said with a smirk.

I kept my hands free and loose by my sides, sizing her up. She looked relaxed, but the slight tenseness in her muscles told me that if I made a move for the weapon, I'd get a skull fracture for my trouble.

"Can I just finish my drink?" I asked plaintively.

Faith shrugged wordlessly, and I bent over the tap again. "Nice butt," she murmured teasingly and I felt my ears heat up. I cupped my hand beneath the tap and flicked the handle on and off quickly, filling it with water. I raised it towards my mouth and then shoved it out to the side, spraying it at Faith and snatching for the staff with my other hand.

The surprise chill of the water didn't delay her more than a second, and her staff was whipping across towards my back as my fingers closed around my own weapon. I tucked myself in and rolled over my staff, hearing hers whistle over my hunched body. I continued the easy forwards roll like a kid in gym class, coming to my feet low and directly in front of her, the blunt end of my staff thrusting hard into her belly.

Faith grunted in surprise, winded, and I brought the weapon up and around into her side. She spun away from the strike and I moved to pursue, the staff slipping in my sweaty hands.

I was never that happy sparring with Faith, and not just because of the regular ass-kickings I received. I'd been raised not to fight with girls, *particularly* not girls who I was sleeping with, and I couldn't help but feel a twinge of guilt every time one of my attacks struck home.

Faith on the other hand, evidently had no such reservations, as she readied an over-hand stroke that would have me seeing stars for weeks. I freed my left hand from the staff and sent it flashing up, grabbing the staff before she could strike. Faith's brown eyes stared mischievously into my own as we struggled, momentarily face to face. The corners of her lips turned up slightly as she deftly shifted the angle of her grip, running the wooden shaft into my stomach. I gasped for air, losing my grip on her weapon.

A second later, I lost my own weapon as well, her powerful follow-up blow smashing it aside. Just for good measure, she slipped the staff behind my heel and yanked my feet out from under me.

I lay flat on my back as she smiled triumphantly and pointed the sharpened tip of the staff at my throat. "Gotcha, slowpoke."

I held my hands up, fingers spread, preparing to take my defeat with dignity and quietly praying that Wes had run out of fun training exercises, but the sound of metal on metal distracted me.

It took me a second to identify it, since it was such an unfamiliar sound in my new life. But when I recognised it, a rush of cold came with the recognition.

The sound of a gun being cocked.

"Hold it right there," a strident female voice warned, and the cold of fear melted into the heat of embarrassment.

I twisted around, hands still raised. "Kate? Hold your fire, if you don't mind?"

Kate Lockley stood in the doorway to my office, legs apart, her pistol held firmly in both hands, and a singularly humourless expression on her face. She slowly lowered the weapon, her blonde eyebrows coming together.

"Kate," Faith said slowly, toying with her staff. "So this is Constable Katey, your good ol' buddy from the pigs."

"Detective," Kate said coolly. Amazing. In less than two seconds, the two most hard-headed women I knew were already deep in mutual loathing.

"Kate," I said, dumbly parroting Faith. "Ah... good to see you."

Faith helped me to my feet, taking the opportunity to slip her hand possessively inside my shirt. I winced, and not just from Faith's none-too-gentle caresses on my bruised flesh. Kate's deliberate stare radiated disapproval as I carefully fended away Faith's questing fingers

"You must be Faith," she said.

Faith seemed surprised. "You heard of me?"

Kate shrugged. "Your name got mentioned in passing."

"Oh." Faith's eyes were a fraction less antagonistic, and I began to hold out hope for a peaceful resolution.

Kate turned to me. "You actually let this kid fight vampires?" she asked bluntly.

Faith's stroking fingers suddenly jabbed sharp nails into my flesh and I yelped slightly. "Not exactly let...as such," I said, squirming with combined pain and guilt.

"Damn straight, he does," Faith said aggressively. "Some kind of problem with that?"

I could see trouble on the horizon and frantically planned to head it off. If nothing else, after a few more minutes my chest would be in ribbons. "So, Kate, social call?"

"No," she said irritably. "There's this little matter of the file I lent you on the Halo case, and how I need to write this little thing called a *report*, which is very *overdue*."

"Sorry," I apologised guiltily. "Completely slipped my mind. It's probably around here somewhere." I waved my hand at the office as a whole. "Tell you what, we can go and chat in my office. Reminisce. Faith, you go see how Wes is doin'. Practise eye-gougin' or something."

"Whatever. You legal eagles have fun," she said sullenly. The nails jabbed one last time, and then she slunk away down the stairs. Kate and I watched her go in silence.

"Nice girl," Kate said dryly.

"She has her moments," I said diplomatically. "So, can I get you anythin'? Coffee machine's broken and we're nearly out of the hard stuff, but we've got water."

"You sure about that?" she asked. I followed her gaze and groaned inwardly. The cooler had a large staff-shaped dent in it and the tap was a mangled mess. I made a mental note to clear away the office furniture before Faith's next training session. I gingerly rubbed my chest. And to get her to trim her nails if possible.

"Well, I've got an office," I said wryly. "Pretty sure that still works."

Kate smiled slightly.

7.5 Chapter 4

Under the brighter light of my desk lamp, I got my first good look at Kate. Her face was drawn and there were black rings under her eyes. Her clothes were rumpled and stained too, and had obviously been slept in.

"You look like hell," I told her.

Kate chuckled tiredly. "You really know how to make a girl feel special, don't you, Doyle?"

I grinned in response. "My mother always told me the best way to court a lady was with honesty. Though gettin' her to have sip or two of whiskey helps."

"That work for all age-groups?" Kate asked pointedly.

I raised my hands in surrender. "It's a long story. But it's actually quite reasonable when you hear the full thing."

"Somehow I doubt that," Kate said with amusement. "Two words: Statutory. Rape."

"Two more words: Long. Story."

She nodded in surrender. "Don't suppose I can blame you. She seems like a nice girl."

I snorted. "You're tryin' to be tactful, darlin'. It isn't workin'."

Kate smiled with real warmth for the first time. "It never was my field. 'Sides, not my business anyway. So, how about those files?"

"Uh... yeah. Files. That could take some doin'. I never did get the hang of the department filin' system."

Kate rolled her eyes. "It was alphabetical."

"Uh-huh. The alphabet of *which* language, exactly? 'Cause I'm damn sure it wasn't English."

"So you've lost it," Kate said frankly, folding her arms.

"Yes. But not forever. I'll get it back to you, as soon as I can root around a bit," I said quickly, praying that I could. With my luck, Wesley had scrawled Latin incantations all over it or Faith had used it as a primitive firelighter.

Kate sighed. "That was about what I expected." She yawned and blinked her eyes irritably, as if trying to wake herself up.

"Tough case?" I asked sympathetically.

She smiled wryly. "Oh, yeah. All-nighter fun."

"D.B.E. or regular?" I asked, slipping back into cop-talk with surprising ease. Somehow, whenever Kate and I talk shop, it's just like we still share a patrol car. I sometimes get surprised when her radio crackles and I realise I'm not carrying one.

"Looks like a lone vamp," she answered. "Stalking the streets, feeding off homeless, that kind of deal."

"Need any help?"

Kate straightened in her chair. "You serious? I mean, what about the business? You got time for this stuff?"

"Kate, the business *is* this stuff, remember? An' I'm sure I can turn away a few of the queues of Hollywood stars desperately seekin' my services to help an old friend," I told her as dryly as I could manage.

"The PI business not entirely what it's cracked up to be?" she asked curiously, but with a hint of sympathy there too.

I shrugged. "Well, it's good that I'm my own boss, you know, master of all I survey... though if I actually try to give my employees any direct orders, it could get hazardous for my health... it's all right."

She smiled wearily. "That's good."

"So, details, details, details," I ordered. "Spill your guts."

She ran her hands through her hair, obviously trying to concentrate. From the look of things, she really was on her last legs. I was surprised she hadn't called me for help earlier. "Unfortunately, that's pretty much all we've got. I can show the scene photo and bagged evidence and the rest of it when you drop off the file, but we're drawing a blank. Can't even find the bastard to stake him."

On second thoughts, I wasn't surprised. Kate isn't the kind of person to ask for help, even when she should. To be honest, I wasn't really sure if we could shed any light on the case if the LAPD couldn't, but maybe we'd strike lucky. Maybe I'd get a vision. Maybe the Powers would hang a neon sign outside the killer's house, saying, "Murdering Vampire Here." Whatever.

"I'll talk to the guys, see if we can dig anythin' up," I told her.

She nodded, rising to her feet. "I'll keep you posted."

I walked Kate to the door, half-expecting her to fall asleep before she got there. A brief goodbye later, I shook her hand and she walked out. I turned back into the office, nudging the door shut with my foot.

Faith was standing by the elevator, leaning against the dented water cooler. "So that was the famous Kate."

I nodded. "That was Kate."

7.6 Chapter 5

3 years ago...

"The *last* thing I need right now is to be babysitting some rookie. Attach him to someone else. Now, I have work to do -"

I couldn't help but hear. A woman's voice, it was filled with anger and bitterness. Approaching Captain Rensen's office, where I was supposed to be reporting, I almost collided with its owner, who was on her way out.

Blond hair writhed as she flung her head back, flicking the bright mass out of her face. Cold, pale eyes, with a surprising amount of human hurt in them alongside the fury I'd been expecting, settled on me.

They slid away again dismissively. She made to push past, to continue on her way.

Behind her, somebody coughed with intent. Captain Rensen stood there, arms folded across his chest. "Detective Lockley - Officer Doyle," he introduced, pointedly.

The woman looked at me again, and this time those eyes fairly glowed with anger. She opened her mouth, clearly intending to object strenuously.

Rensen wielded a finger at her in a characteristic gesture which even I, not knowing him all that well, could read as a clear sign he was reaching the end of his patience on the issue. "Show him the ropes. If all goes well, in a few months I'll think about reassigning both of you elsewhere... Am I understood, Kate?"

For a moment, she looked as though she was about to snap his head off. And I don't mean that metaphorically, either. But then she sighed and gave in with a weary, "Yes, sir."

Over her shoulder, the police captain shot me a glance that was half apologetic, and half amused.

7.7 Chapter 6

"All right," she snapped, once we were in the car, reaching across to grab my arm and my attention as I fumbled with the safety belt. "I've a lot to do. You don't get to ask questions. You don't get to talk. You get to follow me around and keep your mouth shut, because I don't have time for this. I've no doubt Renson and the rest of the station finds this all extremely funny, but you're the last thing I need. You wouldn't even be here, if it wasn't for the current crisis, but unfortunately officers are needed right now so the department's taking *whatever* it can get.

"As far as I'm concerned, Renson's out of his mind accepting you - and the rest of that latest batch they rushed through the training program. You're going to get yourself killed and then we'll have yet another LAPD corpse on our hands. But then, the *public* are demanding more officers on the streets, and with our people dropping like flies right now, recruitment isn't exactly at an all-time high."

"I know that," I interrupted, somewhat irritably. "That's part of why I wanted to be here, believe it or not -" Or why those damnable visions wanted me here, at any rate.

She stared at me blankly. "You must have seen those pictures that leaked to the press and..." I nodded in confirmation. "You're crazy," she concluded.

I'd seen the pictures, all right. I'd seen them in glorious vision-induced Technicolor as well as front page black-and-white print. They weren't pretty either way. And I continued nodding, since I suspected she was probably right on that second count, too.

She sighed and muttered under her breath something that sounded a lot like, "What the hell. I guess that makes two of us, then."

We set out in Kate's unmarked police car. I watched her as she drove: in return, her eyes stared straight ahead, studiously ignoring me. I noticed there were bruises on the side of her face, and a long scrape on her right hand that was almost healed. Looked like she'd seen a bit of action, recently. She had the air of someone who'd been doing this a while. And I supposed she had reason enough to be stressed out, what with all the killings and all.

We'd been driving about ten minutes when the call came in on the radio in a burst of almost unintelligible, scratchy static. Kate answered, then swung the car around, cursing. "Well, you're about to see what it is everybody's been talking about - and the Chronicle's most notorious scoop of the day - firsthand," she told me.

I didn't tell her I'd already seen it, in vague, blood-soaked flashes which had left me crouched over the sink for half an hour. Minutes later, we pulled up at the mouth of an alley. I could see a couple of uniformed officers already there, but they seemed to be concentrating largely on keeping the curious public out.

The late morning sunlight was streaking down the sides of the buildings to wash the alleyway in a golden glow that was anything but ominous. Kate's expression was grim, though, and I didn't much like the idea of what we were going to find as we walked towards that little huddle of sun-streaked darkness the uniforms were protecting.

There were two bodies, dumped side by side against the wall. From what Kate had said, I knew they'd been cops, but from the mess they were in it would barely have been possible to tell they were *human*. Somebody had set to work on them with a large-bladed instrument of some kind, like an axe or a meat cleaver. In parts they were practically sliced and diced.

Their clothes were sodden as well as shredded, and the whole mess was bad beyond any chance of distinguishing at a glance if they'd been in uniform when they were killed. Not that it mattered. From the reports I'd read in the news and what I'd heard since I signed up, whoever was responsible for the butchering was doing their research. This was a systematic campaign to wipe out as many of the LAPD as they could get, whether they happened to be on duty or not. Somebody was waging war against the law in this city.

Chillingly, I now confirmed something else that hadn't reached the press - because even with all the gore I could see, there wasn't anywhere near two whole bodies' worth of blood there, although the sheer size of those cuts should have spilled it all.

Although I felt near enough to throwing up already, I knelt down for a closer look at the neck of one of the corpses.

I couldn't *not* look...

There was a gaping slash in the side of the neck, just where the bite marks would have been. As I studied it, trying to choke back my increasing urge to vomit, a cockroach crawled out of the depths of the wound.

It was the last straw. Kate saw that it was and yanked me to my feet by a fierce grip on my collar, thrusting me away from the corpses. "Don't puke on the crime scene!"

I staggered over to the mouth of the alley and spent several fairly wretched minutes getting reacquainted with what little I'd managed to choke down for breakfast.

I could hear Kate shouting orders and I knew more people had arrived. I was vaguely aware of her voice discussing the matter with another detective, a conversation which ended with her saying she had other cases to attend to so she'd be on her way now, and he should let her know if anything else came up.

Hearing that, I pulled myself together and headed back to the car, fairly dreading what she'd have to say about this. She shot me a weary, irritated look as I climbed in.

I guess I could have hoped for a better start to my first day on the job.

7.8 Chapter 7

The rest of that day set a depressing pattern for our working relationship over the next few weeks. While Kate wasn't outright aggressive, she didn't leave me in any doubt that she'd be happy to lose me altogether, and I quickly gave up trying to forge any kind of friendly relationship. We simply learned to put up with each other.

I mostly tried to keep my head down, endured the additional trials of my new life, and hoped things would improve.

In those weeks I noticed that Kate often came in to work looking exhausted as hell, occasionally sporting a bruise or scrape that I knew hadn't happened while she was at work. She also, on those days, let a gasp or a wince escape once or twice, as though there were other deeper hurts I couldn't see. Maybe she was taking her work home with her, or maybe she was into dangerous sports. I wasn't about to pry into her personal life. I knew she lived in an apartment across town which was a good deal better than mine, because I'd met her outside there for work a few times. I knew she was single, and not seeing anyone, because of all the jokes around the guys at the station about how she seriously needed to get some.

She seemed to attract more than a few whispers, rumours, and sideways looks. I managed to get a few of the other guys at the station to tell me the story. According to them, she'd basically been self-destructing for some time. Up until several months ago, she'd been a solid, responsible officer. Then her father had died, and it was after that she'd gradually metamorphosed into some kind of maverick cop.

There was a sadness there, something desperate and driven, that powered that outer bitch.

She lived like she expected to die tomorrow. Like she might even welcome the event.

Her view of me didn't improve any, and the incident with the gun-toting maniac at the beach about a week after our introduction didn't help.

Thing was, this lunatic was waving a gun around in the midst of all the kids and the tourists, threatening to cause a massacre. I had a clear line of fire. But I hesitated, and didn't take the shot, despite the fact Kate was screaming at me from twenty feet away to pull the trigger. Another cop took him down a few seconds later, and got a bullet in the leg for his pains.

I knew Kate was right, I should've fired. A whole lot of people could've died because I didn't. I was bloody lucky it worked out all right, and the only damage done was to the cop who took him down, and that just a flesh wound which healed within a couple of weeks.

But what Kate didn't, *couldn't* understand was that I had this creature within me. Demons prey on people - and me, I was half one of them. I couldn't take that shot because if I killed him it wouldn't be a human killing a human, it'd be a demon killing a human.

I was just too afraid of crossing that line, afraid it might burst the dam and set loose this monster inside me. Even though I still didn't know what it was capable of, and it only spoke to me as a bundle of tracking and fighting instincts when I took on its form, and didn't speak to me at all at other times. Its instincts weren't those of a killer so far as I'd yet been able to determine... but, still, that was a form made to do damage, with those spikes and that strength.

I guess it was the same problem in training. That was why I'd come so close to flunking, though I knew much better how to do the fighting, by then - against vamps, at least. When I went up against humans, I had resources they couldn't tap, I could inflict levels of damage they couldn't touch, and it *felt* wrong.

I got over that one in time, for the most part.

At work, my relations with others in the department were indifferent at best. I'd found, since Harry's death, that I didn't relate too easily to people any more, knowing I wasn't completely one of them. I took to coming into work with my mind set on a kind of autopilot unless actual immediate danger was involved, saving my energy for the evenings.

I still got those weird visions, and they still needed answering, though I had no more clue as to what they were now than when I'd had the very first one. I told myself it was something to do with my demon half, and subdued the impression I occasionally had that these images weren't coming from anything that was within me.

At any rate, I had these visions, and I had a weapon with which to answer their call... and I was learning, all the time, through those night-time excursions and the job that I hated.

And if it wasn't exactly the best time in my life, it was survival, and I was getting by in this weird world where Harry was dead and I was some kind of monster.

Somehow I was getting through. Doing what was required and managing not to get killed - although it came close a few times. Luckily, the demon was resilient; the neck-snapping thing wasn't the half of it.

Fighting wasn't the only thing I did those nights, either. I was also getting to know a part of this city I'd never had a clue existed. Because I wasn't the only demon out there. There were a multitude of different kinds, who generally had nothing to do with the vamps. They had a world of their own existing within our... the human one; I kept finding more bars and clubs and other hangouts which humans seemed to know instinctively to avoid.

I was making more contacts within that world, too. Even demons are partial to a friendly wager, or a round of drinks, and I picked up a few of my bad habits - not to mention debts - that way.

Not that I *wanted* to associate with these guys particularly closely. But it was useful to have any extra sources of information, and I was discovering that demon blood could be a handy ticket to a little insider knowledge in these circles.

And I was getting used to the fact that, having access to both worlds and belonging to neither, you had to take what you could get.

7.9 Chapter 8

"Shit!" Desperately rushing around trying to find where, in all the mess of my apartment, I'd last slung my gun and badge, I skidded on a newspaper I'd left thrown on the floor. I came down hard on my other foot, trying to catch my balance without looking where I was standing, and heard and felt the crunch of glass breaking.

7 Past Lives

After dealing with the previous night's vision, I'd seen to my cuts and bruises, then downed about half a pint of whiskey and staggered off to bed at around 6am.

Having spent most of the day comatose, I was now supposed to be dragging myself into work again.

The floor was covered by a sea of unwashed clothes, newspapers, research notes, stakes and other assorted junk, including the odd bottle scattered around into the mix. At times, the drink had been all that got me through the months since Harry's death.

She'd have thrown a fit to see me livin' like this, that was for sure.

I snarled out a curse, my mind retreating from that thought, and avoiding the broken glass - I'd see to it later, if I remembered - I kicked aside the junk, continuing to search frantically. If I was late again this week, Kate really would make good her latest threat to report me, and then my new life, such as it was, would be down the drain before it had barely begun.

I pulled aside another empty bottle that looked promisingly like last night's. The badge was underneath it, and the gun wasn't far away.

I glanced at my watch. I had less than ten minutes to get across town to the station.

Swearing, I added gun and badge to the muted Responsible Little Cop ensemble, ran a hand through my hair in place of a comb, and hurried out the door.

Kate and I were working evenings and nights mostly, and like pretty much the majority of the force we were assigned to trying to track down the gang of cop-killers who were still evading capture. I was sure they were vampires, the way they always hid their tracks with that final slash across their victim's throats, not to mention the fact the visions seemed to be steering me towards them... but I wasn't about to offer that particular piece of information up to aid the enquiry.

I hadn't come close to them yet, and wasn't sure what I'd do when I did. There were at least three of them, from the evidence and reports collected. I wasn't sure I was ready to handle three vampires, alone.

It was a relatively warm evening, and a short walk - well, okay, *sprint* - later I reached the station, sweating, with my jacket over my arm. Kate was already waiting in the car to set out on a case. I climbed in next to her, only a minute or two late after all, hoping Detective Lockley was in a good mood today. Or at least a less bad mood.

I felt hung over, and still sick and shaky from the events of the previous night. I slung my jacket across the back of the seat and, as Kate pulled out, fumbled in the pockets for my lighter and a smoke, in an effort to calm my nerves.

"You just dare light that *freakin'* cigarette, and I will stop this car and personally ram the whole packet so far down your throat you won't need a surgical team to extract it," Kate snarled between gritted teeth.

No, Detective Lockley was not in a good mood today.

Since she sounded pissed off enough to actually carry out that threat, I sighed and moved to replace the cigarettes in my jacket, a home they were leaving with increasing rarity the more time I spent around Kate.

As the vision hit, my hand closed spasmodically around the packet, crushing it and its contents flat.

'Not now!' I thought. So far, I'd managed to keep the visions and work mostly separate, passing off the few I'd had in more public circumstances as dizzy spells. And so far, I'd managed to hide them completely from Kate.

But I was only peripherally aware of those concerns, and of the side of my face hitting the window as the convulsions shook my body, as the vision swept me up. My brain was far too full of the images being forced into it - of a girl who was about to become a meal for a heavily-muscled, tattooed vamp with host of ironmongery pierced through various body parts. The vision closed-up on a street sign before flashing out of my brain again as abruptly as it had arrived.

Kate was swearing and pulling the car in to the side of the street. When she saw I was more or less back in the world again, she snapped, "What the *hell* was -?"

"Don't stop," I croaked. I shook myself, still feeling lousy. "We need to be on 106th street. Trouble's going down, near there. Something we need to -"

The protest had no effect on her whatsoever. The car's breaks screeched as she drew it to a halt. "How do you figure that, huh? We're not going anywhere until you tell me what just happened. You've got some kind of condition you've been hiding from the quacks... boy, is this my lucky day..."

"I heard the radio," I protested weakly. "We gotta -"

"Bullshit! There was nothing on the radio. Come clean, *Doyle*."

The girl could be getting dead even as Kate argued with me. I knew I wouldn't get there in time if I got out of the car and ran, and I certainly didn't have time to talk her around. I didn't have a minute to waste, never mind a millennium.

I lunged head-first into the foot-space in front of the driver's seat, and slammed my hand down on the accelerator. My shoulders wedged uncomfortably, but the car was moving and my weight was crushing Kate's legs back against the seat and blocking her from the pedals.

She yelled as the car shot forward. The hand-brake jabbed into my thigh and I kicked at her as she tried to reach it. "You're going to kill us both!" she shouted, trying to haul me up with one hand while her other swung the steering wheel desperately, throwing us this way and that. I clung stubbornly to her legs.

"Bloody steer, then!" I yelled, as she tried to knee me in the face. "106th! There's a girl about to get ea... killed if we don't get there *fast*!"

Something in my tone, coupled with the insane desperation of my actions, must have convinced or at least made her curious enough to want to find out what all this was about. She did as I asked, although she didn't stop swearing at me.

It was a relief when she finally yelled that we were there and I allowed her to pull up. I did have a momentary concern that she might have driven us back to the station instead, but when I awkwardly clambered out from under the seat I saw we were indeed where we were supposed to be.

"Get *off*!" Kate's fist impacted solidly in the centre of my back as I climbed over her to the passenger seat. The shove propelled me the rest of the way rather quicker than I'd intended. My hand caught the door handle and I fell out of the car to land in a bruised heap on the sidewalk.

I staggered to my feet and ran towards the almost deserted parking lot I'd seen in my vision, aware of Kate yelling after me.

The events from the vision were playing out in the shadow-ridden far corner of the lot. The vamp had the girl backed up against the hood of a car and was reaching for her throat. She was screaming, but there'd have been nobody to hear her, if not for the vision which had brought me...

And Kate. I didn't know if she was following me or not. Hopefully I could dust the vamp quickly before she saw anything and tell her the attacker had run off.

My stake was in the pocket of my jacket... which was slung over the back of my seat in the car. I cursed.

I didn't slow down as I reached them, but ran straight at the vamp, aiming to knock him aside so the girl could make a run for it. My weight only caused him to stagger a bit. He backhanded me across the face and I fell against the side of a nearby car.

Looking beyond his shoulder, I was relieved to see the girl sprinting hell for leather out of there. I was less pleased to see Kate charge through the entrance to the parking lot, with her gun held firmly in both hands and with an extremely pissed off expression painted across her face.

I kicked the vampire where it'd have most effect, and punched him in the face as he curled over. The ironmongery in his nose and lip shredded my knuckles, but it couldn't have felt particularly pleasant from where he stood, either.

Kate was staring at the vamp with amazement and shock. I couldn't say I blamed her; with his twisted, distorted features there could be little doubt he wasn't human.

But... *hell*, explaining to Kate that monsters were real was the last thing I needed.

The vampire spat blood and the metal ring from his lip came out along with the disgusting red glob. That seemed to piss him off all the more. He retaliated with a growl and an awkward, angry punch I blocked easily... a mistake, as it turned out. I was still pretty new to this whole physical combat deal. He changed the direction of his lunge, catching my wrist and twisting my arm around almost to the point of dislocation. Using that leverage, he forced me back, pinning me to the hood of the car. I snatched for the gun with my free hand, hoping bullets might be enough to break the vampire's grip even if they couldn't kill it.

Before I'd even drawn the weapon, though, the pressure on my arm vanished, and the vamp was drifting through the air in an explosion of dust.

On the other side of the dust stood Kate, one arm still outstretched. Her hand was clamped around the sharpened stake she'd thrust through the vampire's heart.

We stared at each other. I imagined the shock I saw in her eyes was mirrored in my own.

Slowly, I stood up, brushing the dust from my clothes.

She *knew*...

I swallowed. One of us was going to have to speak first. "That's one done and dusted, huh?" I managed to joke, somewhat weakly.

Kate opened and closed her mouth a few times, starting to speak and then biting it off. "You *know*?" she said finally, her voice a choked whisper. "About the... vampires?" The last word took a long time for her to force it out.

I flopped back against the car, winding up sitting on the floor in a tired heap when my legs gave way. My head couldn't take this, on top of the fight and the vision.

Kate was massaging her own forehead with her fingers, and from the pained expression on her face, her headache was about as bad as mine.

After a moment, she turned around, her expression full of grim determination.

"Doyle," she said, and I think it was the first time she'd said my name without that sneer in her voice. "We need to have a talk... and a drink."

7.10 Chapter 9

The place we went to was a little bar tucked away from the main streets. We'd both stayed quiet on the way. I know I wasn't sure how to deal with this new realisation - Kate, for all I knew, was just enjoying making me sweat.

She went to the counter to order drinks, and from the way the guy serving chatted to her, she was something of a regular.

She returned with two pints. I could've used something a little stronger, but since she was buying and it was the single friendly gesture I'd ever received from her, I saved the complaint.

The table she'd chosen was hidden away in a dingy corner, about as private as you could get within a public bar. I wondered if she came there often to sit nursing a drink and that pain which coloured her face with bitterness.

She sat down opposite me, and sipped her beer, watching me as though she was taking in everything anew. "Are you hurt?" she asked, after a moment.

It was unexpected, and although her tone was neutral rather than actually concerned, it surprised me enough that all I could muster in reply was a fairly incoherent, "Huh?"

"I said, are you hurt? That fight looked pretty rough." She sounded irritated with having to repeat herself. I tried to scrape what remained of my wits together before I missed whatever small opportunity this might offer to dispel her hostility.

I shook my head. "Bruises. Nothing." I had more from last night. I took a long drink, trying to remember the last time I'd eaten as I felt the alcohol hit my stomach.

After some hesitation, she said, "You seemed to do better fighting that vampire than against any of the human opponents I've seen you attempt to take on... You've had some practice, right?"

"I guess that's true," I said, thinking of six month's worth of nights spent chasing down vamps, both vision-related and not. Six months of beatings and crawling home half dead, for the major part. Certainly in those very early days. "But, something makes me suspect, so have you."

She nodded slowly, clearly as unwilling to share as I was. I'd never thought to have to explain this to anyone. I'd never thought I'd come across anyone I *could* explain it to.

"My wife," I managed eventually, hoarsely. "We were attacked. I survived, she didn't. After that, and knowin' that those things were out there, I had to do somethin', you know. Didn't have much luck goin' it alone, so that's why I joined up. Get some trainin', go kill vamps..." I scratched at the bite scar that was still in evidence on my neck, although hidden at that moment by my shirt collar. It was disappearing, slowly. It would probably be gone entirely within a few more months.

"And guess what, it's not that simple," she finished for me, with heavy irony. Her eyes had noticed the movement and she leaned over the table to snatch my hand away and pull back my collar.

After a second or two, she let go and leaned back in her seat again, eyes wide and tired and slightly freaked.

"They got my father," she said, curtly.

I'd already guessed that much.

"I interrupted them, but it was too late to save him." She continued reluctantly, obviously thinking she owed it to me somehow. I realised then that she'd taken the bite scar as all the explanation necessary as to what had happened in that first attack, and how I'd accidentally survived. I didn't feel like complicating things by explaining what had really happened. Far less did I feel any urge to tell her I wasn't wholly human myself. "I saw their faces, though, and I saw what they did to him. And, hard as it was to accept the myths were real... well, I accepted. And then I hunted them down and I staked them."

I envied her the revenge which lit a flare within her eyes when she said that. I'd yet to find a trace of the particular vampires who'd been responsible for Harry's death.

If she saw anything of that in my expression, she kept quiet about it. She cleared her throat. "So, are you going to tell me what happened to you in the car, and how you knew that girl needed rescuing?"

I explained, hesitantly, about the visions. The little I knew. She listened sceptically, but she couldn't deny the fact that I had known.

"Visions," she repeated. "Oh, hell, if vampires are real I guess I shouldn't scoff at visions. Let's just not mention this to the station psychs, Doyle - either of us." The humour in her voice was weary. I didn't laugh.

"You... didn't stop when you got your revenge, did you?" I asked. That was why the bruises, the strange hours, the snappish temper - all of which, I realised, I had probably borne in evidence as well. "You've kept killin' these things - extracurricular, like."

She nodded. "It wasn't enough, those first few vamps. These creatures are all over this city. The department doesn't know they exist, and how could I ever try to explain to my fellow officers that vampires are real? But... as long as I know they exist, I'm the goddamn Los Angeles Police force Department of Vampire Slaying right here, and I'm gonna make them *feel* the weight of the law."

The passion in her voice was clear, and the volume drew a few stares. She hushed it down a little. "After all, I was the only one who could," she added, quieter. Her eyes had no hostility in them now when they settled on me, it had been replaced with something that looked a lot like hope. I wondered what she was seeing - whether it was the same thing I was, looking at her. "I thought I was the only one who could."

She tried to hide the choked emotion there by downing the rest of her pint in an aggressive motion, but it was in vain.

I understood all too well. We'd both been trying to fight this fight alone for far too long.

7.11 Chapter 10

present day...

I was in a foul mood as I elbowed the office door open and stalked inside.

"Ah. Doyle. Have any luck with your network?" Wesley asked, looking up from a book he was studying. Faith was nowhere to be seen. I'd sent her out to talk to a few of my contacts, so we could cover more ground that way. Wesley got to stay at home, since he would last about a minute in some of the places my sources hang out. I eyed the neat way he had laid a cup of tea, scone and container of jam on a handkerchief next to his book. More like a second.

"Guess," I bit out, tossing my jacket into a chair.

Wesley tried vainly to hide a smug little smile. He'd expressed his displeasure with my information-gathering plan the second it was out of my mouth, not really to my surprise. He'd pointed out the difficulty of finding one vampire in a city like LA. At length. "That's a shame. Still, hardly unexpect - what in God's name is that smell?" He sniffed the air, and frowned with distaste. "Smells like...rotting sewage. Maybe a hint of sulphur."

I pointed at the stain running down my jacket. "Turns out Malagor's been eating curry again."

Damn Frilesh demons and their fragile digestive systems.

Wesley winced. "Oh dear. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Wes," I said irritably. "Having a five-foot demon vomit on me really *is* my idea of how to spend a nice afternoon. I may choose to live in the shower for the next four years or so, but apart from that, I'm tip-top."

His nose wrinkled. "I hope it's a shower far away from here."

Muttering a few choice curses against Malagor and all three of his spawn-mothers, I went to change my shirt. I didn't think anything was going to save the jacket except a flamethrower.

7.12 Chapter 11

By the time I was re-shirted and smelling human, well, half-human, Faith was back, and from the sound of it her afternoon had been as profitable as mine.

"Jeez, where does Doyle get off on sending me round to see his creepy demon friends? I'm a Slayer, I slay. Making polite conversation with people with tentacles sticking out of their forehead wasn't in the job description!" I heard her complain as I dragged the elevator grate open.

"It's only one tentacle," I said curtly to Faith's leather-clad back. "An' Yuzak's very sensitive about it."

Faith fixed a stony glare on me, half-turning in her chair. "Like I care, Detective." Her nostrils flared and she sneezed explosively. "What the hell is that?" she asked, wiping her nose on Wes's impromptu tablecloth.

"Long story," I muttered.

"Frilesh demon. Curry, " Wesley muttered to her.

"Yuck. That's nasty." Faith smirked. "You're sleeping on the floor tonight, mister."

"I don't plan to be doin' much sleepin' at all," I responded. "We have still got a vampire to track and night'll be our best chance."

"Great plan, boss," Faith said, crossing her arms. "Try and find a lone vampire in LA. At night. And oh yeah, we don't even know what he looks like!"

"Or even if it is a he." Wesley observed.

"We'll work somethin' out. He can't hide forever."

"Yeah, the truth is out there. Why the hell are we doing this, anyway?" Faith asked. "It's Blondie's problem, not ours."

"Because a vampire is killing people," Wesley said firmly. "And slaying it *is* in your job description, I think you'll find"

I blinked. Was Wesley actually supporting me in this?

"On the other hand," he said delicately, "while I agree the cause is a good one, I might question our reasons for getting involved with it."

And then again, maybe Hell was getting its own ice rink.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked sharply. "The reasons are the same ones as always. You know, kill vampires, save people? I'm pretty sure those qualify as decent motives, even by Watcher standards."

"Doyle," Wesley said reasonably. "Do you recall your delightful habit of getting shamelessly plastered and engaging in the Late-Night Drunken Cursing Marathon? Well, I haven't actually missed noticing the frequency with which the term 'LAPD' tends to crop up in those aforementioned rants. It does rather beg the question, why are you doing this?"

He studied me intently. Perceptive Wesley had come out to play.

Perceptive Wesley was even more irritating than the regular one.

"So I shouldn't do anythin', because I got a grudge with the department?" I shot back. "What, we start havin' a review board for what jobs we do? Person has to fill in a form before we decide if they're worth helpin'?" I knew I sounded defensive, but hell, I was defending. I was defending Kate, the case, even the thrice-damned department. And the fact he was making me do so was not improving my mood any. There was a vampire out there killing people, and here I was justifying why I wanted to turn him to dust, to a Vampire Slayer and her Watcher, no less.

Wesley shook his head. "No, of course not. Nobody should judge if someone deserves help. But is futilely combing the city for a solitary vampire really going to help anyone?"

I glanced away. "So our plan of action needs a little refining. 'Till you guys get a better idea, we comb. Futile or not."

Faith reversed herself fully in the chair, dangling her arms over the back as she faced me. "I got a better idea. How about we let Blondie go and play super-sleuth. If she finds our boy, we go and slay, stakes all round. This Sherlock Holmes shit is getting us nowhere. I signed on to kill and maim things, not interview every horned slime-ball in town until we find something useful."

"Well, gee, Faith, did you read the sign on the door?" I spat sarcastically. "We're a PI agency. We investigate. That's pretty integral to the whole concept."

Whatever she was about to say next went unsaid, as the phone on Wesley's desk rang loudly. Faith grabbed it off the cradle. "Who the hell is it?" she snarled. I was pretty sure I heard the plastic receiver crack as she listened to the response. "Scully calling for ya, Mr Investigator, sir," she said darkly, tossing me the phone.

I pressed the receiver to my ear. "Kate? What is it?"

She sounded only marginally less angry than Faith. "New body. Morgue. You want in on the autopsy?"

"Shit," I said with feeling. "Who was it?"

"Still working on the ID. She looks about mid-teens."

"Oh, great," I said bitterly. "A kid."

Kate's voice was as harshly sad as my own. "Uh-huh. See you in half-an-hour?"

I nodded, then belatedly realised she couldn't see me. "I'll be there."

"Right. And bring me my damn file back while you're at it."

I listened to the dial tone for a few seconds after she hung up, then followed suit.

"What did she say?" Wesley asked cautiously.

"While we were busy squabblin', they found another body. Teenage girl," I announced coldly.

He sighed, toying with his spindly hands. Faith just sat there, her mouth working like she was chewing on air, staring at nothing in particular.

I glanced at them both, as they sat still like statues, and then scooped up my keys. "Some vampire hunters we are."

7.13 Chapter 12

You leave a place, and you change. It always happens. It's part of living, I guess.

You go out and do things, things are done to you, but you always expect the places you've left behind to stay the same, just like you remember. You store away little memory-snapshots of everywhere you've been, permanent records that will fade, but never alter.

The precinct was so close to my memory that it was shocking.

Some of the faces moving around me were different, but the expressions and emotions that played upon them were all too familiar. Boredom, anger, exhaustion, the same old feelings about the same old crimes and cases.

I nodded to the uniform at the entrance desk as I passed, still staring around me. The twin scents of nicotine and caffeine filled the air of the station house, and the discontented chatter of cops at work enveloped me.

"Doyle," Kate said.

"Uh-huh?" I murmured, still watching the people go past. It was creepy, how familiar it all was, how quickly the little details came back. The paper-crowded desks, the phones that were very seldom allowed to rest in their cradles, the discarded Styrofoam cups of coffee that lay around the chairs of detectives who were pulling all-nighters, and half-a-dozen things I hadn't even realised I had remembered were all there.

"Um...you have to get one of these before we can go any further," she said awkwardly.

I turned. "What? Oh." I stared dumbly at the small white badge in her hand. A visitor's badge. "Right. Of course," I said quickly, flushing as I scooped it out of her hands. The clasp didn't fit properly onto my jacket, so I propped it up in the front pocket of my shirt. "Sorry."

The uniform regarded me with a mix of contempt and amusement. "Okay. Get a move on, this isn't a stinkin' tourist attraction."

"Sorry," Kate muttered as we headed for the morgue, my newly-acquired badge flapping against my chest. "Policy and all."

"Nah, no problem," I replied dismissively. "Should've remembered it the second I walked in the door. My mistake."

I glanced around a second time, my nostalgia slightly dampened. "So, the ol' slave pit doesn't seem to have changed much, huh? Everything still looks like it's workin' fine, even without this particular Defender of Truth, Justice an' whatever the third one was."

"Integrity," she supplied quietly. "Doesn't mean you weren't missed."

Doesn't mean I was, either. Still, Kate was too polite to bring that up, and the situation was awkward enough as it was.

"Lockley! Hey, Kate!"

"Yeah, Fritz?" Kate asked, glancing towards the shortish guy who'd called out, and who was now struggling to keep pace with us.

"They're ready for you in the morgue," he said, studiously ignoring me.

"Thanks. I'm on my way."

"Hey, Fritz, how you doin'?" I asked pleasantly. "Wife still givin' you trouble, or did you ditch that ol' bat?" Fritz's marital troubles were a long-running joke around the stationhouse. They'd been separated four times, but she kept on dragging him back in. Fritz swore that one day he was going to take his .38 home and make her sign the divorce papers at gunpoint.

Fritz's eyes flicked once in my direction and returned to Kate. "Frosty's waiting on you. You know how cranky he gets if he has to mess up his work schedule."

I got the message. I was an outsider now, a stranger, just another random piece of flotsam on the waves of people who cruise in and out of the LAPD every day.

Funny, that. They say that in the army, you're always part of a unit, that even years after your duty ends, you have a bond between each other. It's not like that for the police. Every cop is a solo player, a loner, isolated from his peers. And to this bunch of antisocial misfits, the United States Government issues guns and handcuffs. I never did figure that part out. Most of the cops I knew shouldn't have been given driver's licenses, much less gun licenses. But fragmented and erratic as they were, now I didn't have the badge, I wasn't one of them anymore.

Not that I'd been Mr Popular while I was still wearing blue, that is.

"Sorry," Kate said a second time, as we started walking again. In fact, ever since we'd got inside the department, her entire demeanour had been slightly apologetic. Like she was apologising to me for the coldness of her co-workers.

Or to them, for bringing me here.

"Nah, no problem."

Passing a few more hostile stares from people I'd worked with for three years, I was starting to get sick of the whole affair. It was not unlike being gently whipped with soft string, and about as irritating.

"Well, what have we here?" an expansive voice asked. The string was replaced by big spiky chains.

"Carlson," I said flatly.

Carlson. Six feet of bad attitude, bad temper and bad habits. And, I remembered with a wince, he'd been pals with Newton, too.

He grinned viciously. "Doyle, haven't seen ya around for a while. What're ya doing here?"

"Standin' in a corridor, old buddy. What's wrong, your contacts givin' you trouble again?" I smiled back at him.

Carlson flushed. He always took any reference to his short-sightedness very badly. "You've still got a big mouth, Doyle. Maybe you should keep it shut." Sometimes I think Carlson learnt how to speak from bad gangster films.

I patted him on the shoulder. "Good advice, Blinky. Thanks." School ground, I know, but it was fun.

"You should rein your boy in a bit, Kate," he said threateningly. "Looks like he's forgotten he's on foreign turf now."

"I'll be sure to do that," she said easily. "Goggles."

Growing tired of the game, I brushed past him and continued on. I heard Carlson snarl behind me, as menacingly as any vampire, but even he wasn't stupid enough to let it go any further, not here.

Besides, I could kick his ass, and he knew it.

"You know, I get the impression I'm not exactly welcome here," I remarked to Kate.

"Same old Carlson," she said.

"Big, nasty Rock of Ages," I observed. " But it seems a little more than that. First Fritz in the corridor, and now just about everyone seems to be staring at me like I have big antenna stickin' out of my forehead. A bit more than just general grumpiness, you know?" We turned down the corridor to the morgue before Kate responded.

"The department wasn't exactly...happy about letting someone who wasn't a relative into the morgue to see the bodies. You know how the pencil pushers get."

Especially if the someone in question was me, I added sourly. Still, I couldn't really blame them. I hadn't exactly covered myself in glory when I quit the LAPD. And there were still enough nasty rumours about my less-than-normal heritage to ensure my alienation. I was a fool to think a few months would change that.

Kate sighed. "Sor - "

"Don't even say it."

7.14 Chapter 13

I once heard an old superstition that if you are in a certain line of work long enough, you start to take on some of the...attributes of the field. So a long-time jockey would look like a horse and a fisherman might have a slightly...scaly skin tone and not blink often. The person telling me this particular fable blushed quite red when I asked him innocently what would happen if someone was a gynaecologist for twenty years, but, boy, would he have gloated had he ever met David 'Frosty' Wilson.

To be blunt, had the man crawled out of a grave at three in the morning, I would have staked him without a second thought. He was pale, his skin was waxen and smooth and his fingernails were long enough to put some demons to shame. He'd been the Medical Examiner for longer than I had been a cop, longer than Kate had been a cop, hell, longer than anyone I ever asked in the department had been a cop. But he did have a reflection. I'd checked, just in case.

It hardly required a mental stretch to figure out how Frosty got his nickname. The man looked like he had to chip the ice off his body every morning when he got up. Cops are big on nicknames.

Unsurprisingly, Kate and I had heard every single X-Files joke ever told during our partnership. LA's Mulder and Scully, they called us. I sometimes wondered which they thought was which.

Frosty was hunched over his latest guest's neck as we entered the morgue, his long white-gloved fingers gently probing the white skin that nearly matched his own in shade.

Kate cleared her throat.

"If you're here to fix the air-conditioning, get over to the box at the back right now. The bodies are getting a bit ripe already," he said without looking up.

I sniffed the air. "They are smellin' a bit strong, aren't they?" At first I'd thought it was me, but the smell was different from Malagar's distinctive odour. Which isn't to say it was anymore pleasant.

Frosty looked up, his stretchy features pulling themselves into a smile. "Detective Doyle! And Detective Lockley! How perfectly lovely to see you!" He rushed across and pressed my hand into his own chilly ones.

I fought the urge to snatch it back. "Uh, hey, Frosty. And it's just Doyle now, remember."

"Oh, of course, so sorry," he said regretfully. "Yes, that was a distressing incident, wasn't it? Such a shame, I thought, when you left us."

What a surprise. For the first time in months I had returned to my former workplace of three years, to people who I had worked and sometimes even fought beside, and the only one who was pleased to see me was the weirdo mortician.

"So, Frosty," Kate said firmly, breaking up our little reunion and thankfully causing Frosty to drop my hand, "I hear you have news for us."

"Oh, yes, of course," he said, skittering back towards his desk. "I do hope you don't mind if I eat in front of you, but it's my lunch break," he said, busily unwrapping some kind of cold meat sandwich as he talked. The meat between the slices of bread looked only marginally more appetising than the body on the slab.

"The dead person?" I hinted. "Helpful clues?"

"Right. She was killed approximately three hours before discovery, I place it." Three hours. That would have put the murder just after sunset. "Cause of death - "

"Blood loss," Kate cut in. "Get to something we don't know."

"Actually," Frosty said pointedly, "it wasn't. There was blood loss, true, but not enough to kill. Her neck was broken, too, probably when the killer realised she might survive the bleeding."

I felt my gut twist. Much of the time vampires didn't need to kill to get enough blood to survive. It was just fun if their victims died. "Anythin' else? Maybe a little name tag on her toe so we can figure out who just died for no good reason?" I asked bitterly.

"I'm afraid not," Frosty said with some asperity. "I'm sending off the bite marks for dental records, we'll have to wait and see."

"Dental records?" I asked incredulously. It wasn't like vampires needed a filling or two after a few too many jelly doughnuts, so what the hell was Frosty playing at? I wasn't sure if he knew about the undead, but he had to have seen enough bodies to recognise a supernatural death when he saw one, and to know the regular tricks wouldn't work.

"Why, yes," he said with some confusion, biting into the revolting sandwich.

I pulled the white cloth away from the woman's neck, refusing to look at her face. Instead of the neat puncture wounds I was expecting, there were rows and rows of shallow indentations, all of them in shallow semi-circles, like bloody furrows in a field of white. Not like vampire teeth at all.

But I recognised the bite marks none the less. Frosty's putrid sandwich bore similar ones.

"Human teeth," I said disbelievingly.

"What? You've got to be kidding me." Kate pushed past me and took a long, hard look at the woman's neck. "God. I just skimmed the coroner's report and assumed..." her voice died away.

Human teeth. Which meant whatever - whoever - had killed this woman had gnawed away at her throat until he broke skin and then killed her when his blunt teeth wouldn't do the job properly.

We weren't looking for a vampire, after all. We were looking for an ordinary human being, with a soul and conscience.

God, I hate police work.

7.15 Chapter 14

3 years ago...

"There must be better ways to earn a living," Kate remarked, a slightly self-conscious laugh in her voice, as she tucked in to the culinary creation on the plate in front of her, where salmon and creamy sauce had been arranged in a delicate, elegant design that her fork shoved aside with disregard. "I don't even want to try figure out what percentage of my salary this meal is eating up."

"There must be less expensive restaurants in LA," I shot back, knowing money was the very last reason she had for doing what she did.

"It's a night out. Eat. Enjoy. For tomorrow we eat take-out." She gestured emphatically with her fork, and said with some sarcasm, "Is something wrong with your food?"

"Nothin'. It's fine. Great. There's not a huge amount of it, granted, and I can't fathom why they felt the need to create a master-class sculpture with the vegetables, but..."

Kate smiled. "Doyle, you wouldn't have issues with these surroundings, would you now? I could also mention that if you'd made an effort to dress a little more, uh, formally, perhaps the waiters wouldn't keep watching you so closely." She flicked her head illustratively in the direction of the nearest, who turned away hurriedly. With the movement, a wing of blond hair swept back from her face to reveal the curve of her cheek and the bare skin of her neck.

I turned my eyes down to my plate, conscious of how I'd been noticing how good she looked in that low-cut top and that she was far from unaware of it - and her choice of dress for this evening couldn't be an accident. I felt a stab of guilt. The last and only other time I'd been in a place like this, it had been with Harry, upon our engagement. Come to think of it, Harry's comments over that meal hadn't been too far different from Kate's.

"Hey. Staring off into the distance with that mildly constipated expression on your face is not the way to enjoy our expensive romantic dinner," Kate said, snapping her fingers in front of my nose, beginning to get irritable. "Surely it isn't too much of a chore to eat a nice dinner, especially when it barely consists of enough to feed mice?"

I stared at her blankly, as my mind took in what she'd just said. Romantic. She'd said romantic.

And, okay, she'd said it with an edge of biting sarcasm, but all the same...

I was going to have to tell her sometime soon, wasn't I?

The mere thought of it made me feel ill and closed my throat against any chance of speech.

Even after over a month, I still hadn't worked out how to tell her I wasn't even human - or even if I should. I mean, how do you work a conversation around to "Hey, by the way I'm a demon, I hope you're okay with that"?

The general consensus among the guys at the station seemed to be that weird Detective Lockley had found herself a similarly weird soulmate, and the way most of them treated me now wasn't a whole lot different to the way they'd treated Kate in the beginning. Weird Officer Doyle. Yeah. It was almost funny, from a certain angle. If only they knew *how*...

I was still trying to figure out how to answer Kate when her cell-phone rang. Cursing, she picked it up from where she'd placed it beside her plate, work as ever kept close to hand. "Lockley," she acknowledged, with irritation. A tinny voice squawked at her for a few seconds. "Right. We're on our way."

She lowered the phone and stabbed the keypad with an aggressive finger to end the call. "Come on, you've been reprieved. We have to be elsewhere." She hurriedly returned to her plate to shovel the last few forkfuls into her mouth, and cast a sour glance at what was left on my plate. "Next time, it's the hotdog van," she promised darkly.

"If you say so." I tried to force my mind back to police work. "What was the call about?" I asked as she ushered me out to the car. Her mouth had thinned into a worried line, and there was something in her urgency which was starting to make me suspect this was important. Surely it couldn't finally be...

"They've got them," she said.

"Got? *Them*?" The gang of cop-killing vamps had eluded capture for months now, their killing spree continuing to cut down the ranks of the LAPD. It had begun to look like they would never be stopped.

"In a manner of speaking. Their latest victim managed to get a call out before the attack, thought he was being followed - the team that were sent out managed to catch them with the body. Chased them, but they took refuge in a warehouse with civilian hostages."

"Who -?" I began, my mouth dry.

"Alan Bain. Sergeant. You didn't know him." Her fist thudded into the steering wheel violently. After a moment breathing slowly to collect her composure, she started up the engine.

She said, with quiet venom, "It's way past time these bastards got their due."

7.16 Chapter 15

The scene that greeted us was pretty chaotic. We pushed our way through the huddle of curious spectators which a uniform was trying without much success to usher away, the painfully bright flashing lights forcing me to snatch glimpses of the world through blinks. On the other side of the crowds, an officer stood staring grimly at the frontage of the modern warehouse building. He was looking worried and he fingered a radio in one hand.

"What's going on?" Kate asked crisply.

His expression shrugged, the concern there intensifying. "Cobin and Reilly went in. I wish they hadn't. It's been too long."

Kate and I exchanged glances. They had no idea just what they were dealing with in there. Somehow, I doubted Cobin and Reilly would be coming out.

"How many?" Kate rapped.

"Four, we think."

"Armed?"

"Just knives. Frickin' meat-cleaver blades, but just knives. No range weapons, no guns. They've threatened the civilians inside the building, but if you ask me anyone that was in there was dead already. These shits have got no qualms about killing, and they don't seem to care too much about the consequences."

A few more similarly clipped questions brought us up to date.

"Right." Kate drew and checked her gun. "We're going in."

The harried officer began to stammer a protest, but stopped when he saw the expression on Kate's face, and just looked resigned. It didn't stop him from voicing the quiet statement, "These sick bastards, they get a real kick out of killing cops. I can't help feeling we're giving them just the excitement they want."

"Don't write us off just yet, man," I said. It came out a lot more confident than I felt, and he still looked unconvinced at that.

"Give us half an hour," Kate instructed. "After that... hell, I'd say nuke the place, but I don't see you getting approval for that."

The officer gave a derisive snort in reply to the sarcasm. "You're both mad."

"That would seem the general consensus of the department, yes," Kate agreed. She looked to me. "Ready?"

I swallowed. This was the big one... Mind you, if I got killed tonight it was probably past time, really. "Sure. I guess we'll need to get the, uh, special gear from the car."

"The 'riot' gear," she agreed.

The officer watched us with suspicious incomprehension as we retrieved the real tools of our trade from the trunk of Kate's car - although the stakes, crosses and Holy Water were packed into a discreet bag and he could not possibly see what was within.

7.17 Chapter 16

There was no doubt the warehouse was occupied and in full working order - no abandoned shell, this. It wasn't just the well-kept machinery and well-swept floors that suggested it, because it had even been well night-patrolled. The two bodies dressed in security uniforms that we came across in the worker's lounge off the foyer after we'd snuck in through the side entrance testified to that. For this size building, I imagined they wouldn't be the only ones in the firing line. If these guys had been on their break as the abandoned coffee cups - their contents dashed across the floor alongside the still forms - would seem to indicate, then there'd probably be one or two more somewhere.

Maybe they were even still alive.

There was also no doubt in my mind upon seeing those dead men that this was indeed the gang we'd been chasing for so long. These hadn't been bitten and they hadn't been mutilated; probably the vamps hadn't been able to spare the time. But the neat, ugly slashes across - almost *through* - both chests were drawn by the same kind of cleaving blade that had done so much damage elsewhere, a sight which had become far too familiar.

Kate knelt down beside a body and gripped a wrist. I knew she wasn't looking for a pulse, because both men were obviously way beyond help. "Still slightly warm. They haven't been dead long." She extended her fingers and gently closed two pairs of staring eyes without flinching.

She stood, wiping her hands off on her thighs and drawing her gun again, and we ventured further into the building.

The rooms which greeted us were all very much the same, vast areas of storage and loading space, packed with crates in neat aisles. The occasional hazardous looking heavy-lifting vehicle slept in a corner.

"This could take all night," I said, after we'd quartered the second such maze of stacked wooden boxes and moved on up an elevator and out into a corridor which led to two further rooms.

"You want to split up?" she looked doubtful and to be honest I shared the sentiment, but after a moment, chewing her lip thoughtfully, she nodded. "You're right. We gave the guys outside half an hour, and we really don't need to have to explain what's in here to the department at large." She looked at her watch, then pointed to the doors in turn, "You do that one, I'll do this. Reconnaissance only. Five minutes, then back here. Right?"

I nodded. "No lone heroics - check."

"You better believe it." Gun in one hand, stake in the other, she disappeared through the doorway into her room. After a moment's hesitation, I cautiously stepped across the threshold into mine.

7.18 Chapter 17

I knew when I stumbled across the body of a third security guard that I was on the right track. I probably should've gone back, then, to get Kate - but I continued on, wanting to be sure.

I heard them before I saw them; the long aisle of stacked crates I was walking down effectively blocked me off from the rest of the room. With the sounds of laughter ringing in my ears, and holding tightly onto a stake, I approached the end of the aisle and cautiously peered around the corner into the open space where the noises were coming from.

There were four vamps, and they were clustered near what looked like some kind of foreman's office station at the edge of the room. On the corner of an almost-empty desk squatted the phone they'd used to ring out to the police. The exterior wall was across at the other side of them, and had windows looking out to the front of the building, although their black blinds were drawn firmly down. Not that it would have done any police shooters much good if they hadn't been. Only one of the vamps was making any effort to guard off further police interference; he was crouched near the window, occasionally peering through a crack at the edge of the blind - in between watching what the other three were doing to the unfortunate Cobin and Reilly.

I flinched as a blade flashed, and blood splattered as the guy who was still standing - Reilly, I thought, although I only knew both men very distantly - nearly lost an arm.

The vamps snickered as he tried to hold his shoulder together with his other hand, staggering and finally falling down to his knees.

The floor over there, upon which his partner already lay unmoving, was red and sopping. The red splashed up as the vamp holding the blade stepped forward, his foot coming down forcefully. The two men, the injured one and the one who might very well be dead, were covered in shallow - and a few more not-so-shallow - scratches. Cobin was lying face-down, and I couldn't guess at what damage might be hidden from my sight.

"This is getting dull," another of the vamps snarled, picking up a twin to the blade his fellow held. "Let's finish them."

"Not yet." The one who'd been inflicting the damage, presumably their leader, sneered down at the two bleeding cops in disgust. "They haven't suffered enough yet."

All four of the vamps were youngish men, or rather had been at some point, and they wore gang colours and other identifying paraphernalia. I guessed I understood now what they were about. These were the kind of people who'd probably been at odds with the cops all their lives. Now, some idiot vamp had turned them and given them inhuman strength and immortality, not to mention no conscience to speak of and no more need to fear human law enforcers or their guns.

I was willing to bet the vamp community - if you could indeed suppose there was such a thing - would be considerably less than happy with these four if they'd learned about them. Discretion was important, when your immortality depended on people not believing and not knowing how to kill you. There were a lot more humans in the world than vamps, after all, and indiscrete mass murder was far from wise. These vamps had overstepped the line.

The blade descended again in another shallow arc even as I watched. I shook myself as Reilly gave a choked-out cry and tried to cross his arms over to stem the blood flow from both the near-matching wounds in his shoulders.

I had to do something. If I went back to fetch Kate, it would probably be already too late by the time we both returned.

Remembering something I'd seen on my way across the room, I quietly backed off and retraced my steps.

It was there as I remembered. I climbed into the driver's cab and twisted the key I found there to start the engine. I urged the fork-lift forward as fast as I could make it go, steering clumsily through my unfamiliarity with the controls.

It was going pretty fast as I emerged into the space at the end of the stacked crates, clipping the edge of the stacks and spilling their contents as I turned around the corner. The vamps had inevitably heard it before then, and their tight grouping had dispersed slightly as they looked around in confusion for the source of all the commotion.

The lead vamp was standing over the two cops, so I swung the vehicle aside, aiming for the other three who were a safer distance from their victims.

One leaped aside and I didn't think I'd done more than clip him, causing little if any damage. Another caught the full force of the vehicle right in the face, and the collision at speed flung him back across the room to crush several empty crates in a violent landing. The remaining vamp got skewered through the chest by one of the prongs of the half-raised lifting gear on the front of the vehicle, and such was the force behind the impact that he was left dangling, his face inches from mine on the other side of the window with several feet of blood-stained metal protruding out from his back.

He jerked and thrashed, but seemed to be stuck tight. It wouldn't kill him, of course - the prongs were metal, not wood - but man, that'd gotta hurt.

I shut down the engine, feeling sick and also rather hyper from the adrenaline. The face inches from my own growled and twisted in pain and fury. An arm came up and bashed through the window, reaching for me, and I ducked as glass splinters scraped furrows in the skin of my face. In the same motion I was already kicking the door open and sliding out of the cabin.

A broad, flat blade nearly took my head off. The vamp I'd clipped had been waiting for me.

I yelled and brought up an arm to fend off another strike, fumbling in my jacket for the stake I'd had to put away in order to drive. It caught on the lining; fabric ripped but didn't give when I tugged harder.

I hoped the two I'd incapacitated would stay out of the action a while. And that the leader, blocked from my view at present by the bulk of the lifting vehicle, wasn't even now finishing off Cobin and Reilly before I could get to him.

That thought gave me an extra burst of strength and purpose. I shot a punch into the vamp's twisted face, hard as I could. He snarled and the blade whipped back around, scoring a narrow, stinging slash across my ribs as I desperately breathed in.

I didn't have the time for this. I finally dragged the stake out of my jacket and rammed it forward with clumsy desperation. I almost got myself skewered on the knife and avoided it only by chance because my foot skidded on the floor, changing the position of my midriff enough that the blade slid past my ribs again, this time just scoring on my jacket. But my loss of balance only added to the force behind my original thrust. As the stake hit its target, the resistance of undead flesh vanished and my hand burst out from the other side of a cloud of dust.

My momentum pulled me over and I fell to the floor on hands and knees. My hand landed practically on the handle of the dusted vamp's knife and I tightened my fingers around it.

A sound caught my attention, my gaze darting up to see the lead vamp had rounded the back of the fork-lift. He cast a disgusted glance at his skewered fellow, who was just easing himself off the last foot or so of the thick metal spike. Over by the pile of wrecked crates, I could see a hand scrabbling to emerge from the rubble.

The odds were about to get impossible.

I shot unsteadily to my feet. Blood was seeping through the cut on my ribs, soaking into my shirt. I hadn't initially thought it a deep cut, but... well, those blades were made to do some serious damage.

Holding that thought, I swung back the cleaver *I* held, cutting clean through the neck of the skewered and currently still defenceless vamp. Dust showered over my arm and shoulder as I spun back around to face the lead vamp.

A double-fisted blow to the face sent me flying backwards even as I completed the turn and realised I'd cut it too fine.

The metal of the lifting prong clipped my head as I passed it, and I lost consciousness for an instant.

Then I was several yards further across the room, sprawled on my back. I could feel dampness soaking into my clothes, and after a moment of panic I realised I was lying at the edge of Cobin and Reilly's steadily pooling blood.

I struggled up onto one elbow, looking to see what the vamps were doing. They obviously thought me safely out of the action for the time being, because they weren't paying me any attention at all. The leader was currently engaged in dragging his sole remaining ally out of the mess of mangled crates.

"Doyle...?" a weak voice choked out from behind me - the question in it probably largely due to the fact he wasn't entirely certain that was my name, not knowing me any better than I knew him.

I looked around and found Reilly's agony-filled eyes fixed upon me. He was deathly pale from blood loss, and clearly needed medical help urgently.

"Yeah?" I said. My head ached. I tried to keep one eye on the remaining vamps.

"They ain't human," he rasped.

"They still die," I said, resisting a giddy impulse to say neither was I. "Hang on there, man. Help's on the way."

But his eyes had closed. He'd slipped into unconsciousness again. I hoped he wasn't dying, and tried to figure out with my not-currently-too-clever brain how much of thirty minutes had passed. And surely it must have been over five, now, since I'd parted company from Kate? Where was she?

Probably swearing about me and my curiosity, back where we'd been supposed to meet, I thought sickly.

The remaining two vampires were approaching, their steps quickening as they saw I was conscious. I dragged myself to my feet with some effort, preparing to fight again. They looked mad and, yes, they were both wielding those big scary butcher's knives.

I'd lost the stake and the knife I'd picked up, although I still had my gun, for all the use that was against these particular criminals.

"Gonna arrest us?" The vamp, whose clothing was peppered and pierced with splinters off the wooden crates, obviously wasn't feeling very forgiving. He waved the knife around menacingly, seeming to enjoy the way my eyes followed it.

"Wasn't plannin' on it, no," I said, drawing my gun and aiming at him, starting to press down on the trigger.

He was already lunging forward when I fired, and he only snarled angrily when the bullet sank into his stomach. He continued to swing the knife around and I had to flinch back to avoid being cut. A kick took the gun out of my hand and sent it sailing across the room as I made a somewhat undignified landing, the blood on the floor splashing up around me. I was pretty much drenched red all over by that point.

I dizzily hoped that the sound of gunfire would bring Kate running. Some backup would be nice round about now.

"Officer Doyle, yeah?" I blinked in surprise at the recognition as the lead vamp stepped forward to join his buddy looming over me, toying with his knife. It occurred to me with a chill dread that the position I was in now wasn't far from poor old Reilly's situation when I'd first arrived. "Yeah, we know who you are. You probably know we take an interest in those assigned to take us down. Wouldn't have been long before we decided to take a more detailed interest in you, anyhow. You and that bitch Lockley. Not that you've even come close to us, these past months."

"Really? Cause it looks like I kicked your pals' butts good enough," I snapped, probably unwisely.

I twisted away from the brutal kick that would've shattered bone if it had landed, my hands splashing down in the blood as I flipped to my feet. The other vamp was just finishing the backswing of a slash with the knife I hadn't even seen, but of all the dumb luck it too had missed when I moved.

The lead vamp was sniffing the air suspiciously. He squinted at me. "Strange. You don't smell like a human."

"You don't say." I let the demon surface even as I threw my next punch, hitting him square between the eyes with all the force of the demon's unnatural strength. He staggered back against the side of the lifting vehicle.

The other vamp blocked me before I could press the advantage, and I grappled with him. Getting caught up in close-quarters combat wasn't the best of ideas - he was larger and stronger than I was and I wasn't a practised enough fighter to compensate for it. My arms strained as he twisted them in his grasp, and I did my best to return the favour.

"Demon cops." The leader was getting up, spitting blood and shaking himself, but looking amused all the same. "What will they think of next? Vampire detectives?" He snorted. "What in Hell are you, anyway? I ain't never seen anything like your spiky ass before."

I wasn't about to tell them I wasn't even certain. I shot a kick backwards to keep him away, preoccupied trying to prevent the other from ripping my arms from their sockets. I had a mounting feeling of dread, because I didn't think I could take both these guys in a straight fight.

He grabbed my foot and twisted, in a move that ripped me away from his buddy and practically flung me up into the air. Spinning away from the vamps, I only just managed to control my descent and reclaim my balance to land safely, a few yards from them, facing them both.

"Didn't your demon-momma ever tell you you're s'posed to be *evil*?" he continued, sneering.

I never did get to answer him because right then the familiar voice snapped out, "Don't move. You're under arrest."

Kate was standing by the aisle of stacked crates I'd originally approached from, her gun levelled steadily, but all the same something in her gaze was slightly freaked. The lead vamp predictably ignored her, hefting the knife, and she shrugged and forced a smile. "All right, then. Suit yourself." She opened fire, cutting him down first with the resulting barrage of bullets. I saw her hand reach inside her jacket for the stake she intended to surprise them with.

She was firing somewhat wildly, I noticed with alarm as a line of bullets mowed down the second vamp. If she wasn't careful she was gonna hit *me*.

Then, it occurred to me which form I was wearing at the moment - and that she wasn't trying *not* to.

7.19 Chapter 18

My automatic response was to make the switch back to human immediately. Which was a bad idea, because the bullets had already been fired. I felt them cut through my human shoulder and back an instant after.

Kate's choked gasp of horrified astonishment sounded even as I fell. "Doyle?" she yelled, desperate disbelief in her voice. "I didn't - Doyle! What the *hell*...?"

I couldn't answer. Too busy being in pain. But she was cut off anyway, her attention diverted. Her distraction had cost her the advantage of surprise against the two vampires. The leader, first to recover, hurled himself at her, snarling and bloody. She stood frozen with the stake slackly grasped in full view, her arm dangling unprepared at her side.

She brought the stake up too slowly to be holding it in any position to strike as the vamp barrelled into her. His weight knocked her backwards, and they both fell to the floor, rolling out of my line of sight.

I lay on my back on the floor, feeling numbed by how quickly everything had changed. Even if we survived, things would never be the same.

I'd always known I couldn't get away with not telling her. Not someone whom I worked with so closely. She'd have found out inevitably. I'd just delayed in telling it because I'd never known how to do so, and now I'd lost irrevocably the chance to do it properly, on my own terms, and do it well.

I heard Kate grunt in pain, a reminder for my hazy brain that we first had to live through this before we could start thinking about the consequences of the rest.

My blood was flowing freely from the holes in my skin to expand the pool on the floor yet further, but I didn't want to think too much about that.

If I changed back to the demon, it might lend me the strength to fight on. But even if I could find the energy to make the switch to my other form... I couldn't bring myself to do it, not with Kate there. And as a human, it was all I could do to roll over so I could see what was happening more clearly.

Pushing myself up onto one elbow involuntarily drew a gasp from me as something shifted, setting alight a line of pain right through my shoulder. I managed to drag myself forward all of an inch before it became unbearable.

Helplessly, I sank back and watched Kate throw the lead vamp away from her, adding a savage kick to his belly which propelled him several feet across the room, only to be dragged to her knees as the other vamp launched himself at her and landed with all his weight crushing down on her shoulders, bearing her down. The knife in his hand cut into her arm more by accident than design and she yelled as it drew blood.

Her elbow thrust back brutally, twice, the first blow winding her opponent and the second swipe knocking his grip loose and pushing him aside. She scrambled on hands and knees for a moment, and I shouted a warning as I saw both vamps were getting to their feet, coming back for more.

She looked over to me for the briefest of instants, her eyes just visible through the straggle of blond hair mussed by the fight. Then she shoved off the floor, coming to her feet, and I saw what she'd been scrambling around for.

Her hand was clenched around a fragment of one of the broken crates. It was rather too large and too blunt to make a particularly effective stake, but evidently it was the best there was to hand.

The lead vampire stepped forward with the meat cleaver raised, and she jabbed the improvised stake forward. I could see from where I was that the thrust wasn't nearly powerful enough to force that chunk of wood through flesh - but it was a feint. She slapped the wood aside before it even reached his chest. The broad, flat edge of it hit his hand and sent the knife sailing through the air. It clinked in protest as it hit the wall then clattered to the floor behind the foreman's desk.

Her next thrust bunched every ounce of her strength behind it as she gripped the wood in both arms and drove it forward.

Dust.

Kate spun around, her face stretched into a snarl to match her remaining opponent's, and the other vamp paused, his knife raised. He backed away slightly.

I didn't blame him. She was looking downright dangerous.

For a moment my doubts and worries dissipated. She'd been killing these things for longer than I had, and she was still a better fighter than I was, demon or no. But then the vamp charged forward again, and I realised his hesitation had been a ruse.

She'd known that, and he didn't catch her unprepared. But he was stronger than she'd allowed for, and the blade slammed straight through the piece of wood which she raised to block the blow, splintering it into two and bursting out the other side to sink into her flesh.

I screamed her name, and only realised afterwards that I'd done it.

She gaped and collapsed, her body curling over around her stomach, her legs failing. Even as she started to fall, her arm shot up and clutched the vamp's neck, her fingers fastening tightly, that grip the only thing which kept her on her feet.

The movement of her body had ripped the knife from the vampire's hand, and it clattered to the ground between their feet a second later. My eyes fixed upon the new blood dulling the polished metal of the blade.

The vamp, unconcerned, fastened a hand around her wrist, not trying to shift her grip but holding her in place. He punched his other hand forward low, aiming for the wound. She gasped in pain as it connected, and he brought his bloody fingers to his mouth to lick her blood from them.

The sight of her face twisting in agony while the grinning vamp fed on her was all I needed. It was more instinct than intention that brought the change flooding through me with screaming pain. It brought me lurching to my feet, the movement tearing at the bullet wounds, and carried me the half dozen yards to the combatants. I had enough energy to rip the vamp away from Kate with a drunken, clumsy lunge before my legs gave out. I fell on top of him and tried my best to pin him down.

I heard Kate gasp behind me. The split-second glimpse I caught of her showed her fallen to her knees, one arm held over her side. She was reaching for something on the ground. Then, my attention was back to my own fight as the vampire struggled to throw my weight off. A punch to my face left me seeing stars with my demon form melting traitorously away. Human again, I slumped weakly, and the vamp had no hard task at all to shove me aside.

I rolled, my vision blurring. The room spun once, the floor passing in front of my eyes, before my gaze was back upon the vamp who lay sprawled on the floor.

Just in time to see the knife fall, and part his head from his shoulders.

7.20 Chapter 19

Kate looked at me over the falling dust. She straightened slightly, although she did not get to her feet. I could see now that the wound wasn't so serious as I had feared. The knife's force must have been cushioned by the wood. But even so, that long, shallow cut must hurt like hell.

She hesitated before coming to my side, crawling slowly, easing her body along on hands and knees, wincing at the movement. Her hands flapped helplessly as she rested next to me, her instinct clearly to help, but just as clearly not wanting to touch. Revulsion in her face. Her jaw dropped, making the journey it had never had chance to complete earlier. Agony and guilt in her expression. "You're... what *are* you?" My mind flashed up the image of a different face contorted in pain, and the time I'd heard those words before. "You're... not one of them."

"There are... *other* things," I said with difficulty. "Not all of them evil."

"God!" There were moist streaks beginning to trail down from her eyes. "You're not human! Why didn't you tell me you weren't human?"

"I'm... *half*..." I expelled the word with more force than I'd intended.

She laughed, a thin, high-pitched sound, and there was hysteria there, and pain. She didn't seem to have even registered my protest. Maybe it didn't mean anything to her. Maybe it didn't make any difference. Anything we'd built these last few months was now firmly over.

I sighed and concentrated on breathing and trying to stay conscious, dimly aware that I'd lost far too much blood.

Still choking a few stifled coughs of laughter, Kate brought her radio out, and in quavering tones she called in backup to come and scrape us both up.

7.21 Chapter 20

The lights in the private side-ward that I'd been installed in felt too bright for my eyes and so I kept them closed, mostly, shutting out the view of the stark, white painted walls and the empty room. The lack of 'get well' cards adorning the table beside the bed illustrated exactly the number of people in the world who would have cared if I hadn't pulled through.

Nobody, any more.

I had spent most of the two days since regaining consciousness in that hospital bed trying not to stare at the blankness of that little room. My distractions had been limited. There had been the visits of the Doctors and nurses on their rounds - and the unwanted distraction of desperately trying to field their surprised enquiries about my faster-than-could-be-expected recovery. It occurred to me that if I was ever really seriously hurt, hospital tests might reveal what I was to the scientific and medical world at large and land me in a lab somewhere. Once that thought had taken root, I spent most of the time praying not to sneeze.

The police had also been allowed in briefly, early that morning, to ask questions and explain finally in full what was going on. That had been a weight off my mind, since I'd only previously heard the fragments of information the hospital staff knew.

Among other things, I knew now that Cobin was dead - he'd been dead when the back-up Kate had called in arrived, and there was no way of knowing whether he'd been dead from the start, from when I'd first come across the gang in the warehouse and seen his body sprawled on the ground. Reilly, though, was going to pull through, which was something of a comfort to know.

Kate was in a ward just down the corridor, and well enough to be griping about every moment spent confined to a bed instead of doing police work, apparently giving the hospital staff hell.

I wondered what Kate would do with the knowledge she now had. I couldn't see us continuing to work together, day after day, but nor could I see her getting me canned from the force on account of my being a demon.

Maybe now would be the best time to quietly quit, and go independent. I hadn't learned all that I'd wanted to, but I had some things to take away with me, some skills that might keep me alive for a while longer, fighting this fight. It might be best to go while I was a hero, and before things turned sour.

It was funny that for all there had been no bodies to be found, people had taken it as given that the cop-killers were destroyed. We'd answered no questions on the issue - hadn't been in any state to - but we didn't have to say anything. It had simply been accepted.

People were starting to believe. Maybe they weren't sure what of, precisely, but they were starting to realise there was something.

It was drawing into late evening on the second day I'd been in there - at least according to the clock on the wall which I hoped was correct - and visiting hours had long since finished, when the door of my room finally pushed quietly open.

The figure who cautiously entered wearing a white dressing gown draped loosely around her, the bulk of bandaging pushing the material slightly out of shape around her middle, was the last person I'd expected to see.

She still moved gingerly. She didn't speak, only caught my eye for a second and then looked away again and, thus avoiding my gaze, took a few steps forward and slowly lowered herself down to perch on the end of my bed.

"Hey," said Kate, awkwardly.

"And you." I was confused, and unsure how to react, nursing mixed feelings about what was left of our relationship. On top of the closeness which I'd felt to her not forty-eight hours before, there was now piled so much other complicating baggage. I was in pain, and annoyed because that was down to her, but I was also stingingly, guiltily aware that I had almost gotten her killed by not telling her the truth about myself, and it was I who was ultimately responsible for what had happened, not Kate.

"So. You're a demon, then," she drawled - her gaze, finally ceasing to avoid me, captured and pinned my own. "What's *that* like?" The sharp edge of her sarcasm was unmistakable. I winced, and knew I deserved it.

"Pretty new, actually, if you'll believe me," I answered. "I didn't know, not until Harry _"

"Ah, yes. How you survived," she concluded, cutting me off. "Your blood didn't do anything for them, right?"

"Right... no." My hand went to my neck, where the marks had almost faded. There had been too many half truths told about things already. It was time to dispense with them once and for all. "This happened later, but yeah, that's the general gist."

Kate nodded, her expression unreadable. "The rest, though, that was all true? The dead wife, the mission against vampires, the visions?" It was almost more a statement than a question. I nodded. "And you're not evil?"

"No, I'm not evil, Kate," I sighed. "Just real, real dumb. I should have told you about that along with the rest. But I didn't know how. I'm sorry. Are you all right?"

She grimaced. "I'll live. You too, I've seen the doctors' reports. Remarkable recovery rate, apparently. Shucks. Who'd know, huh?" She fell silent for a few seconds, and then said, more subdued, "I guess I should apologise for shooting you."

"You shot a demon. It's not your fault I didn't tell you enough to know the demon happened to be me."

"I know. I'm still sorry. Doyle, you almost died. Your little guilty secret almost killed you. Not only that, but it almost caused me to kill you. And if I had..." Her face was drawn, and I didn't want to think about what I'd nearly done to her. She had enough to contend with, without adding guilt to the list.

"We wouldn't be having this conversation?" I finished lightly.

She snorted. "Is that all, then?" she asked. "No more secrets?"

"No more secrets."

"Because I might not be so forgiving next time," she said. "Against my better judgement, I might add."

I'd hardly dared hope. My surprise must have been all too obvious, because she relented her anger and shifted a little closer to me on the bed, reaching out and putting her hand over mine where it lay on top of the sheets.

"I've been thinking about this," she said. "For two days, I've been lying in that bed thinking about nothing else. And whatever you might be, I know you. When I first saw that demon, I fired blindly. But even wearing that face, you intervened to save my life, and I knew that was my partner and the... spikes-" she wrinkled her nose "- didn't change that.

"I can't say I would've been able to accept you if I'd know from the start, I don't know that. I resent the fact you lied to me, but I can't say you didn't have your reasons. I know how I felt when I saw - but that's not the point. It happened this way, not any other way, and I don't see any reason why we should let it stop us from continuing to work together.

"I don't see any reason why we should let it stop us from staying... friends."

But - hearing the slight emphasis in her voice, looking into her eyes and seeing the faintest hint of revulsion that remained - I knew that was all, now, we would ever be.

7.22 Chapter 21

present day...

"A... human," Wesley repeated slowly. Something about his voice on the other end of the phone sounded odd, but I wasn't sure if it was just a dodgy connection.

I was leaning against the wall in the police station corridor with the phone hugged to my ear, trying to keep my voice down so that nobody passing would hear me bring yet another outsider in on the case. I was already receiving enough chilly stares as it was.

"Yeah. Pretty bloody unbelievable, huh? Some sick bastard. Anyway, the mortician got some of the other older bodies brought out again - not a smell you wanna experience, let me tell you - an' we got them checked over once more. Turns out, this guy doing the vamp impersonation had been makin' the bite marks with some kind of surgical knife. He must have actually drank at least some of the blood after the incision was made, they found the traces from his saliva on the wounds. Another look at the scene reports does show these bodies were found with a whole lot more blood around them than your usual vampire kill. Kate had just taken it to mean that her vamp was a particularly messy eater. Most of the cops here are used to getting these DBEs with no explanation or conviction ever likely, and these looked too much like more of the same to get examined too closely."

The slightly sickened cough from the other end of the line told me that was probably more information than Wesley particularly wanted to hear. "DBEs?" he asked faintly.

"Deaths By Exsanguination. Anyway," I continued. "This guy who's doing this has gotta be some kind of a nut job. We're workin' on the basis he's seriously wantin' to be a vamp, fantasizes about it, wants to act it out. This time around, with this latest kill, the guy's pushin' his delusion to the next stage. He actually thinks he's *really* a vamp. Thinks his teeth'll do the job for him, without his tools. Thinks wrong, obviously, and gets his fantasy shattered big-time. Goes wild and kills the gal by the most convenient method handy, a quick snap of the neck."

"Doyle, this changes things. I don't know that this is our kind of case any more. I mean, it's hardly demonic..." Wesley began.

I took a breath and ran on, talking over him. I wasn't sure how long I had before somebody wanted to use the phone. "Anyway, the upshot of this is that, yeah, we got DNA traces and we can nab this guy, eventually, and book him official-like - but that takes time, and that means he might kill again before we can get him. Now, I was wonderin' if maybe we might be able to do that just a bit more quickly with some of your expertise with the spellbook... *ack!*"

I broke off as the familiar pain stabbed down through the centre of my skull. The vision slammed my head back against the wall and the phone slipped from my hands. I was minimally aware of Wesley's voice, ridiculously small and high and tinny, shouting through the line, "Doyle? Doyle! What's happening? Are you all right?"

Then I wasn't aware of anything but the dark street, and the demon that slid around in the shadows there, its form an indistinct, bulky silhouette. Close up on the creature's big, drool-dripping, yellowed teeth - the PTB have a dramatic flair, I guess, at least they seem to let it loose on my brain often enough - before flashing up the street name painted directly onto the brickwork on the corner of the warehouse where it laired.

I came out of the vision to find myself twisted up against the wall, with the phone set that was fitted into the plaster digging into my back, supporting a lot of my weight. I slid down the wall to sit on the floor, even as Kate turned around the end of the corridor, saw me, and started running.

The receiver was dangling down, rocking on its cord and bumping against my shoulder, Wesley's voice still yelling from it. I reached out with a shaking hand and caught it on the second try, my co-ordination in pieces. "Yeah?" I said numbly. Kate drew to a halt a few feet away and I held up a hand to stall her response while I cleared things up with Wesley.

"Oh, thank goodness," Wesley said. "I thought something had happened. Erm... what did happen?"

"Vision." I tried to steady my voice. "Some creature that's set up home in a warehouse downtown. Didn't see much of it. What I did see looked big and nasty." I took a breath, and felt recovered enough to pull myself to my feet, leaning against the wall. "We need to figure out what this thing is, and how to kill it. I'll come back and see if I can ID it from the books -"

"Doyle," Kate protested, waving a sheath of papers at me. "We've got a new lead we need to follow up. Will this take long?"

I sighed, and nodded to her curtly: *I'll deal with it.* "Wesley," I said. "I'm comin' back. Wake up Faith, or drag her away from the TV, or whatever. We need to sort this out. I'll see you in about fifteen. Okay?"

I set down the receiver without waiting to hear his answer, and turned to Kate. "Don't worry," I said, "We'll work something out. Can you drive me back to the office?"

7.23 Chapter 22

When we got there I asked Kate to wait in the car, bearing in mind Faith's intense dislike of her and aware that my chances of keeping this quick would be better if I kept those two apart. I hurried inside the office to find Wesley was standing expectantly over a pile of opened books and Faith was laying into a punch bag she'd strung up from a ceiling support, which at least made a nice change from her usual trick lately of laying into *me*.

"Right," I said, snatching at the books. "Big demons. With lots of teeth. Come on, Wes, not a lot of time here - help me on this." I flicked through pages with a lack of regard for the welfare of the fragile old books that prompted a squawk of protest from Wesley.

"What? What do you think you're... Doyle, what do you mean 'not a lot of time'? The demon's going to kill someone?" At that realisation, he lunged for the books in earnest himself, so he missed my shake of the head and I had to explain aloud.

"No, Wes, I don't think the vision's urgent. Far as I could see, the demon was just lairing, there was no sense of immediate danger." I flicked through pages of no-go's. "C'mon, c'mon," I muttered.

"So what's the urgency, then?" Faith asked, between punches, keeping up her assault on the punch-bag with a notable lack of concern.

"Kate's waitin' with the engine runnin' outside."

"What?" Two faces snapped up to glare at me in outrage. The bag swung free and slowly spun to a halt.

"Oh, come *on*, I already got a case on the go here. Wesley - you wanted demon stuff, right? Well, here's some demon stuff. Unless you two don't think you can handle it without..."

Faith pointed one knuckle-wrapped hand at me dangerously, the punch bag completely forgotten in favour of other targets. "Oh, *yeah*? You say it and I break your face, 'Mr Lone Avenger'," she snarled.

My temper snapped. I'd just about heard enough from her lately. The frustration which had been mounting up with every small dig about my failure to kill Darla, every sneering remark about Kate, abruptly came to the fore. "If you mention that *once more*, Faith, I'll break more than your face, slayer or no."

Wesley glanced at each of us and swallowed. I guess it's gotta be an unnerving experience to act as mediator between a demon and a pissed-off slayer, at that. "Now, now, children," he said faintly, taking a - mightily brave, I thought - step forward to place himself even more literally between the two of us. "I'm sure we can resolve this calmly."

"Okay," I said, taking a deep, calming breath and attempting to drag the tone of my voice back to a semblance of 'reasonable'. "Where's the problem here?" As I spoke, I found the demon I was looking for, opportunely quickly for once, and slapped the book down on the table with the creature I'd seen in the vision staring upwards toothily from the opened pages. "You, slayer - here, demon. Go slay."

Faith's lips bared back to show her own teeth, which were almost as scary as the demon's, especially given the expression on her face along with them. "Yeah," she agreed nastily. "Me, slayer - here, demon." Her finger poked me in the shoulder, hard enough to bruise. "Maybe I should be exercising that slayer duty I've been neglecting."

"Faith!" Wesley exclaimed, in shock. "You are *not* going to..."

"No, she isn't," I said, still nonetheless keeping a sharp eye on Faith's movements. I pointed at the book. "Here's the demon I saw." I dug the scrap of paper out of my pocket where I'd scrawled the details of the location. "Here's the place I saw it. Do what the hell you like with it. And if you don't want to deal with it then leave it and I'll go sort it out later."

I was on my way to the door when Wesley snapped out, "Wait!" with a command and a fury I'd never before heard him inject into that mild, cultured voice. The surprise, more than anything else, stopped me in my tracks and made me turn back.

Wesley's face was wearing a stern expression to match. He said, his every word weighted, "This one isn't yours - isn't ours - to do. It's police work, your average human serial killer, and you're as likely to get into serious trouble for interfering with it as anything else, especially given that as you've mentioned you have enemies on the force. It's not your job, Doyle - not any more. You don't have to do it. You don't have to put yourself through this."

"Yeah. Leave police-bitch to sort it out by herself. It's *her* job," Faith put in, unhelpfully, and received a glower from both of us in reward.

"No, you don't understand," I said, my voice emerging choked with unexpected emotion. I hadn't meant for this to hurt them, I hadn't meant for it to become a choice, but I could see that it would and it had. And it wouldn't change what I was going to do - what I had to do. "For three years there was one person in the world, *one person*, who cared whether I lived or died. And that's Kate. You saw how she looked earlier. I can't leave her alone in this. I owe it to her. For three years and a whole hell of a lot more history than you two and I share... so don't ask me again not to do this."

Wesley drew himself up straighter. "I want to help Ms Lockley as much as you do -" In the background, Faith let out a derisive snort "- but right now you have other responsibilities. This demon..."

"The demon kills people. So what? This human guy kills people too. And this case is destroying my friend. I've got my priorities."

"But the Powers - the vision - it's obvious which one of these is meant to be your responsibility. Ms Lockley should have the authorities to back her up. The whole might of the Los Angeles Police Department is on the chase after this fellow. But as far as this demon is concerned, there are only the three of us who can stop it. I'm sorry, but I can't sanction your pursuit of this matter. Faith and I have our responsibilities to protect the world from the things the police can't fight - and so do you, or you wouldn't have these visions of yours. Did they ever point to anybody in trouble from a human threat?"

"Screw the damned visions," I snarled, old venom rising up much quicker than I'd have expected at the provocation. "I never asked for them, I don't know where they sprung from. In fact, I never asked for any of this. If there was ever a rule manual, I wasn't given it. I handle things as I see fit. All I know is that the visions hurt like hell and I've answered every single one that ever came my way and for this one time, I'm sayin' *no*. I got other things to be gettin' on with."

"Like police-bitch?" Faith asked, eyes glittering with malice - and something else. Was that actually hurt I could see there? Surely she couldn't be jealous? It was beyond ridiculous - but it was also, apparently, so. "You had some big old romance with this girl back when, right?"

"No," I said softly. "No. She was my friend. Only ever..."

But there had been a time when I'd wanted more, and that must've shown through, somehow, because my protests didn't get me anywhere. Faith's expression only darkened. "Bullshit," she hissed.

"Faith," Wesley said. "He isn't, you know. He *wouldn't* -"

"Shut up!"

I didn't allow myself to contemplate the very real danger inherent in a slayer who thinks she's being cheated on. This was wasting time, and Kate was outside in the car with the engine running, and this, like Darla, was a duty which ran deeper than my few months' acquaintance with Faith and Wesley.

"I'll see you later," I said, and walked out of the door without looking back.

8 Skin Deep

by Mike, Roseveare, Ellen and Debi

8.1 Chapter 1

The huge Gorgus demon stood by stolidly as each of the items in front of it was briefly bathed in a hellish red light. It rumbled slightly as the last of them was touched by the crimson ray.

Phil smiled brightly, tucking away his laser pointer. "Paper or plastic?"

Behind me, Kate said incredulously, "What kind of place did you say this was again?"

"A supermarket," I said vaguely, raising my hand slightly to catch Phil's attention as we eased into the queue.. I flashed my badge at the skinny fiend behind me, cutting off his protests.

"I can see that," she muttered. "I'm just having trouble believing it."

I couldn't really blame her. Kate might spend her days looking at dead bodies on the streets, but the sight of a clan of purple demons buying toilet paper cranks up a whole new scale of creepy. "Phil runs a... special kind of business."

"No kidding." Kate leaned over, peering down into one of the bags of goods piled on the counter. "Since when do demons need... *talcum powder*?"

"Hey, lady, if you lived in a sewer, hygiene would be an issue for you too," the demon retorted, scooping up his purchases. "And I'd appreciate it if you kept your eyes out of my stuff."

"Uh-huh, I imagine hygiene is very important for a big green monster who sweats slime," she agreed flatly.

The Gorgus looked hurt. "Hey, what's this 'monster' stuff? Do I go around calling you lot 'monkeys'?"

8 Skin Deep

I winced. Typical of Kate: If she had to start an argument, why did she have to start it with the six-foot killer demon, when she could have started one with the skinny guy behind us?

"Bigot," the skinny demon muttered. Well, it looked like Kate had that side covered too.

"I may be a bigot," Kate returned, bristling slightly, "but I'm a bigot with a badge. And if you don't keep your fanged trap shut, I'll shove it up your--"

"Kate," I said warningly. "Please don't pick fights with the demons. We don't want a scene."

The Gorgus lumbered off slowly, playing the offended dignity card to the max, and Kate settled down again, glowering at Skinny.

"Damn, Doyle," Phil shook his head. "I'm trying to run a peaceable business here, and you're bringing in your cop pals on us. It lowers the shop's tone, you know what I'm saying?"

I winced. Phil sold cheaper cigarettes than any regular shops for miles. I really didn't need to alienate my best supply of smokes. Not to mention the fact that his extensive circle of demon pals would happily rip Kate and me into tiny shreds if we messed with their favourite shopkeeper.

"Sorry, just you said that you had something, and it was pretty hot stuff. Kate's my partner; she came along for the ride. Don't worry, she's cool. "

"Actually, she looks pretty hot to me," I heard Skinny say, just brushing audibility. He sniggered. It sounded not unlike someone choking a small squirrel.

Kate smiled sweetly. "I have a gun under my coat. And a second one strapped to my leg. Don't push me."

"Rugar," Phil said sharply. "Knock it off. Go harass a succubus or something. At least she'll be halfway interested."

Skinny shook his head violently. "Yeah, but that whole life-draining thing they do, not exactly fun city. I'm not that desperate to get laid, thank you." He gave Kate a toothy smile. "So whaddya say, babe? Want to broaden your dating horizons?"

Kate gave him that profoundly disinterested look that females of any species display when in the presence of repulsive men. "I think you'll find life-draining a picnic in Disneyland compared to what I'll do to you."

"Meow," Rugar sniggered and sidled away.

"So, can we get down to business?" I asked Kate. "Or are you two crazy kids gonna go off and neck somewhere?"

She shot me a glare and turned to Phil. "Talk."

Kate Lockley, queen of the monosyllabic interrogation.

"Okay, listen," Phil said quietly, leaning over the counter. "I was minding the store yesterday, and Four-Eyes walked in, looking real pleased with himself."

"What was he here for?" Kate asked dryly. "Come to get a new prescription for his glasses? Or maybe to grab a copy of Hustler?"

"Four-Eyes doesn't wear glasses," I said shortly. "What'd he say?"

"You know, he's got that pad up on 4th Street? The old used car store that he's always trying to rent off to some poor sap? Well, he finally landed someone. A bunch of humans bought it off him for more cash than Four-Eyes's seen this decade. He said they were moving in a whole lot of crates. He cracked one open... you know Four-Eyes, way too curious for his own health... and it was stuffed, literally stuffed, with bags of coke. Uncut, too. Pharmaceutical quality. And I remembered how you were telling 'bout those dealers, figured I'd do you a good turn."

Kate's eyes met mine. I was pretty sure the glint of triumph in her eyes was reflected in my own. Two weeks earlier, three detectives had been found gunned down. They were out cruising, just checking out the neighbourhood for trouble, and they ran into a bunch of dealers moving drugs. With cops dead, it had become a priority for the whole stationhouse. We knew the dealers had to be operating in the area, but they were professionals, and they could vanish faster than David Copperfield.

Until now.

The flicker of triumph vanished from Kate's eyes, replaced by hard suspicion. "How come you're telling us this?" she asked Phil curtly. "Guy like you, helps demons with their weekly groceries, hardly seems like the kind to risk ratting on dealers. What's your angle?"

8 *Skin Deep*

"My angle is that these guys are bad news," Phil responded harshly. "For everyone, human or demon. They screw with the neighbourhood, cause trouble," - he raised an ironic eyebrow - "get cops down here hassling me in my own store, and generally trash the place. My customers aren't always of the highest morals, but they've still got standards. These guys peddle drugs to kids. That's low. Eating kids or sacrificing them in dark rituals, that's something demons get. But selling them poisons is a bit much, even for demons."

"Thanks, Phil," I said. Phil's neutrality was famed, so for him to put himself out like this, even if it was just a human matter, meant he really cared about the problem. "We'll flush these guys out."

I slapped him on the shoulder and headed for the door. Kate was already several steps ahead of me.

"You won't find them at Four-Eyes's pad," Phil called after me.

Kate turned, her lips drawing into a thin line. "What? But you said-"

"They're storing the stuff there," he interrupted, his eyes twinkling as an uncharacteristically wicked expression crossed his face, "but they're staying at a hotel. And I just happen to have made a few phone calls..."

I eyed the slip of paper he was twirling between his fingers and smiled tightly.

Bingo.

8.2 Chapter 2

'Bingo' turned out to be a motel just on the edge of town. Room 103, to be exact.

It was in one of those charming districts where you need a GPS tracker to get anywhere, thanks to the residents' habit of knocking over or spray painting all the street signs. I figure we drove past the motel three times before Kate gave in and asked a pedestrian for directions.

That girl sure does hate to admit being lost.

So there we sat outside in Kate's car, listening to the rain drum on the car roof.

Were we biding our time? Keeping watch? Gathering evidence? Nope.

We were hunched over the thrice-blasted police radio, trying to coax some life out of it.

"This is Detective Doyle, and I'm outside the Heartridge Hotel on the corner of Wilcox. Repeat, the corner of Wilcox, Heartridge Hotel. Do you read me?" I shouted into the speaker.

The voice on the other end was distorted with static. "You're kinda fuzzy, Detective Boyle... which street was that?"

"Doyle!" I snarled. "With a 'D'!"

"Hey, cool down, Poyle," the man said defensively, "I'm just trying to do my job..."

I killed the radio. "*Tryin'* bein' the operative word in that sentence," I muttered.

Kate looked equally peeved. "Rain must have got into the electronics or something."

"Then how come the lights are still workin'?" I pointed out.

"Do I look like an electrician to you?" she spat. "Try it and I break your fingers, demon or no demon."

I hastily pushed the cigarettes back into my pocket. "So, what do we do? No way to radio for backup, not much in the way of firepower, and a motel filled with drug dealers fifteen metres away?"

"We go in, flash our badges, and cuff anyone who even *looks* like a perp," Kate said grimly, checking her sidearm.

I snorted. "Yeah, 'cause these guys have shown so much respect for police authority."

She shrugged. "Forget about respect for the police. They're going to respect *my* authority, or they're all going home in bags."

"Bring it on, Rambina," I agreed, opening my door and stepping out into the rain, hiking my jacket up around my shoulders.

"Doyle," Kate muttered as we sprinted through the rain towards the motel.

" Yeah?"

" *Never* call me that again."

8.3 Chapter 3

The night manager at the motel looked like a timid, nervy sort. Being a target for the wrath of an armed, angry, and soaked-to-the-skin Kate did nothing positive for his mental state.

He stuttered out one-word answers to her brusque questions, and practically threw the room keys at us. We rode up the elevator, in silence apart from the sound of water dripping off our sodden clothes.

The hallway was deserted, except for an equally timid cleaning-lady, who ran like hell when we waved our badges.

101... 102... 103. We could hear voices on the other side of the door, and light shone out from under its bottom edge. Bingo again.

Kate glanced at me nervously, and rapped on the door.

An unintelligible but distinctly male murmur answered her.

She held her badge up to the peephole. "LAPD. Open this door."

Nice going, Lockley. Very subtle.

The voice was clearer this time. "Jeez. It's the middle of the night, don't you know that?"

" I have insomnia," Kate replied dryly. "Open up."

" Okay, okay... fuckin' cops..." he grumbled.

Kate took a step back and glanced at me again as we heard the key click in the lock. So far, so good.

It was an honest mistake. Really, it was. After all, the click of a trigger being drawn back does sound awfully like a key in a lock, particularly through a thick door and when you're desperately hoping that everything's going to go down quietly...

The first shot dispelled our illusions. The slug tore through the door in a shower of wood chips and blew a hole in the wall next to Kate's ear. A second would have caught her in the chest, but I shoved her aside and stepped quickly out of the line-of-fire. A third shot.

Training takes over at moments like these. Weapon out, safety off, feet positioned just so, hands moving like so...and I stepped in front of the door and pumped five shots into the wooden barrier. I was vaguely aware of a groan as I brought my foot up and drove it hard into the centre of the door. It shuddered, but held. I shifted aim and put two bullets into the lock. Another kick.

This time the door slammed back and I dodged instinctively to the side as I heard another shot. I caught a blurred, awkward glimpse of the room beyond...a table, two men beyond it, a woman in a corner, another man, flat on his back in a crimson pool...and then my back was against the wall just to the side of the open door. Eject spent clip, *reload*...try to remember to breathe...

Kate was opposite me, her stance a mirror of mine, with the deadly gulf of the doorway between us.

"Throw your weapons out and lie down with your hands on your head. Now!" she yelled, her voice sounding a lot calmer than she looked.

"Screw you!" Different voice this time: younger, female.

Kate and I exchanged grim glances and stepped into the doorway again.

"Freeze! Drop the weapons!" A uniform, seemingly sprung from nowhere, levelled his pistol at Kate's back.

'Back-up', finally having got some kind of a handle on the whole situation, arriving on the scene and getting totally the wrong impression...

"Hold it!" I snapped, raising my badge as I stepped back into cover. "We're cops!"

Kate started to duck back as well...too slowly.

A shot rang out and she collapsed in the doorway, her leg spraying blood.

For a second or two, no one moved. Then the woman spoke again, her voice full of smug satisfaction.

8 *Skin Deep*

"Lose the pieces and step out very slowly, boys. Both of you."

Grimacing, I tossed my sidearm into the room and stepped into the line of fire.

"That's one," the woman said. I saw her clearly for the first time. She had a sharp-featured face, looked no older than nineteen, but the revolver in her hand was rock-steady. She was seated casually on the table, her male pals still half-crouching behind it. "Where's your buddy?"

I glanced in the direction of the uniform. Judging from his dead-white complexion, he wasn't moving. The gun in his hand shook wildly, pointing at nothing in particular. "I'm alone."

"Yeah, right," she sneered. "I heard the third stooge call out, pal. I'm not stupid. Still, if we want to do this the hard way..." She stepped forward and aimed her gun at Kate's head.

I wasn't even sure if Kate saw the weapon, hunched over her wound like she was. I had to do something fast, before Kate, and probably me as well, ended up dead.

Unfortunately, LAPD's tactical training lessons hadn't included much on what to do when disarmed and confronted with three armed felons. 'Pray' pretty much summed it up. Of course, I had options beyond religion.

The woman's eyes popped wide as I let my demon side go, but to her credit she reacted quickly, bringing her weapon up to face me.

Two weeks ago, Kate and I had gone to see a John Woo movie during our day off. In it, the Amazing Super-fighter Guy (whatever his name was) had shown the impressive ability to snatch weapons out of people's hands before they could shoot him.

That was a little too subtle for me. Instead, I let loose the most threatening snarl I could muster, and socked the woman in the jaw. As she went down, I heard the uniform fire, though I wasn't sure if he was shooting at the perps or at me.

A preternaturally swift lunge carried me past the table, and then each of my hands was wrapped around a thug's throat. I smiled politely at them as their guns prodded weakly against my chest.

" Try it. It'll just make me madder." The men exchanged glances, and dropped the weapons. I let out a breath I hadn't realised I was holding, and the demon went with it. I let the suddenly-much-heavier men fall to the ground and glanced over my shoulder at the uniform.

" Cuff 'em." Then I went to tend to Kate.

It was only afterwards, in the car, that I found my hands shaking so badly they needed several nips of whiskey to still them.

The man I had shot was pronounced D.O.A.

I'd drawn my weapon more than a few times on the job, and fired it some as well. But that foolish drug dealer on the floor of room 103 of the Heartridge Hotel was my first kill. A human had died at my own, not-so-human hands. It took a lot more than a few nips of whiskey to wash that away.

Sometimes, I think nothing ever did.

8.4 Chapter 4

In retrospect, it was actually one of the most successful busts of my career. Kate and I brought down four wanted felons, all highly dangerous and implicated as possible cop-killers, which made them the scum of the earth by our definitions. Of course, not everyone saw it that way.

The uniform's stories got wilder and wilder, and though many agreed he was just over-stressed and under-paid, not everyone did. The little pool of dirty gossip about me and Kate got a touch murkier.

The newspapers gleefully seized onto the story and started printing headlines like, " COPS ON DEADLY RAMPAGE - HOTEL DRAMA!" and other equally-subdued articles.

The Lieutenant, true to form, missed all of that. He just focused in on the *details*.

" So, you didn't wait for back-up, didn't have a warrant, and didn't have any reliable evidence, apart from this informant who you're so reluctant to ID? That about *it*?" This last was delivered in a furious bark.

I focused stolidly on the wall behind Lieutenant Harrison's left ear. "Yup."

8 Skin Deep

Harrison glanced down at the sheet of paper on his desk. Bastard even had *notes* for chewing us out. He was a new appointment and proudly referred to himself as a B.B.B. That's a Big Black Badass, according to him. I privately suspected that it stood for Big Braindead Bullshitter. He liked to pretend he was really tough on crime, but it was all just jockeying for position, hoping to catch someone important's eye. Kate hated his guts, so had her dad, and both of them had been pretty public about their dislike. As far as Harrison was concerned, now he was in charge, it was payback time.

Harrison checked his notes again. "And, oh yeah, apparently Doyle here went after some of them wearing a *Halloween mask*! You wanna explain that, Irish?"

"I was tryin' to throw them off-guard. Sir." It's amazing what people will explain away.

"And what happened to procedure, Doyle? They teach you that on the training courses?"

I shrugged slightly and refocused on the wall behind him.

Kate broke in. "Listen, with all due respect," - and her tone made it clear exactly how little respect that was - "there is no procedure for that kind of situation. Doyle played a stupid trick. It was a stupid trick that happened to save my life, so I'd say it worked. Sir. And we *tried* to call for back-up. It wasn't our fault the radio was on the blink and it got delayed. And we had probable cause for our actions."

"Which was?"

"Being shot at, Harrison," Kate snapped. "Remember? With bullets?"

Harrison's face darkened even more than usual. "That's over the line, Lockley. You might have been able to pull this shit with the guy before me, thanks to daddy's rep, but it doesn't happen now. Clear?"

I saw Kate's face twist rebelliously, and hastened to intercede. "Listen, she was-"

"Can it, Doyle," Harrison bit out. Well, tried to intercede. "I'm done with you. Get lost. Detective Lockley and I need to have a little chat." I gave Kate a sympathetic glance and made good my escape.

As the Lieutenant's door clicked shut behind me, I heard the shouting start up again. I rested my head against the notice board next to Harrison's office and sighed.

8.5 Chapter 5

Kate eventually made it out of Harrison Hell twenty minutes later, looking ready to spit nails. So I suggested we perform the time-honoured ritual of stress-relief for police officers: head down the bar which most of the cops frequented, and drink beer in the presence of our colleagues until we fell over.

Actually, we probably would have got a better reception if we'd gone to a demon bar. Everyone kept a careful eye on us as we walked in. They'd obviously heard about Harrison's wrath, and about my own 'Halloween mask' escapades.

After a few desultory greetings and attempts to join conversations, Kate and I gave up and sat alone at the bar. I heard bandages rustling under her trouser leg as she shifted restlessly. According to the doctors the wound was just a graze, and I would have asked if it was still hurting, but something told me she wouldn't have answered

"Same again?" the bartender asked as he took away Kate's third beer. She nodded.

I was definitely the bigger drinker of the two of us, but I was starting to feel overshadowed. "So, what did he say?" I essayed, as she started industriously on the fourth beer.

She smiled bitterly. "The usual. 'Blah, blah... X-Files joke... blah, blah... lawyers are crawling up my ass on this one'..."

I chuckled. "Surprised they can fit past the huge pointy stick there."

Kate didn't smile. Okay, en-route to Depression City. Please keep your limbs inside the vehicle at all times, and keep the wailing down to minimum...

"So which bunch of law-hounds is it this time?" I asked.

Kate chugged beer from cheek to cheek, and then swallowed. "Wolfram & Hart, the usual expensive suits, gold tie-clips. Nothing new."

"It never is with you guys, is it?"

I swivelled on my barstool. "Oh. Carlson," I muttered flatly.

The big man smelt strongly of beer. "Yeah, you're always pulling the same weird shit, aren't you? Funny cases that never get solved, bizarro tip-offs no one can explain... regular Freak Hour."

8 *Skin Deep*

I smiled. "Keeps us interested."

"Anything you want, Carlson?" Kate asked, her voice tired, like she'd used up all her anger on Harrison and had none to spare for him. "Or are you just here to drool and make smart comments?"

He considered this as if it was a deep philosophical query. "Actually...I'm here to buy another beer."

Fortunately, after labourously completing that transaction, he buggered off.

The mention of buying reminded me of my own meagre finances, and when the bartender came around with more beers, I held my hand up in refusal. "Relax," he said. "This one's on Newton."

I glanced down the length of the bar at the figure he indicated. Newton was a quiet sort, a big guy, but not overbearing like Carlson, he just faded into the background wherever he went. True to form, the station wiseguys nicknamed him 'Noisy' Newton. Newton nodded once at me, and smiled quietly.

Nice to see that not everyone had forgotten that we'd made a good bust last night.

Five beers later, Kate fell off her bar stool.

8.6 Chapter 6

I got Kate into a taxi home and then headed back to the station to finish up our report, since she was clearly in no condition to do it. After half-an-hour hunched over my computer, squinting in the gradually shrinking light as more and more cops switched off their desk lamps and went home, I looked at my watch and decided I was in no condition to do it either.

On the way out I passed by Harrison's office, and levelled a solid, if badly-aimed, kick at his door. I leaned against the notice board next to his office for a second time that day, rubbing my aching foot and waiting for the floor to stop swimming as my own not-inconsiderable beer consumption took its toll.

I stared blearily at the notices as I waited for the dizziness to subside. The usual range of mug shots, as well as an envelope of... flyers?

Yup, flyers it was. Richfield Detective Agency, they read.

Richfield had been on the force for a year longer than I had, but he'd got fired during one of Harrison's uglier temper-tantrums a couple of months earlier. Undaunted, Richfield had declared he would go into business for himself. He hadn't told anybody in what line of work.

Now, three months later, I was looking at the result. Cheeky bastard. He probably got one of his old buddies to put the flyers up here, just to stick it to Harrison.

Schmuck. Chasing unfaithful spouses and insurance scams... what kind of a job was that?

It was only later that night, as I tossed and turned in my dark, cold bed in my equally dark and cold apartment, that I found myself wondering...

What kind of a job is this?

8.7 Chapter 7

Present Day

"So... what's our lead, then?" I asked, as Kate's unmarked grey car took a corner at a moderate pace that made my foot itch, sitting in the passenger seat as I was.

"Our lead is Doctor Greg Martin," Kate said. "And he used to head up the psychiatric staff at Sunny View Psychiatric Hospital."

We passed a club where bright lights and music blared out into the night air, and gaudily dressed people stepped up off the edge of the road onto the sidewalk as Kate irritably punched the heel of her hand into the horn and kept it there until the lights of the club were a distant shimmer in the rear-view mirror.

"Doc Martin, huh? I thought that was a shoe?"

She frowned at me and continued, "There was a man, about ten years ago. His case was in all the papers. They thought it was a big funny joke. He bit people. Thought he was a vampire. This was way back before we had any of this shit to deal with on a regular basis, before corpses drained of blood were showing up almost as regularly as the rapes and muggings. Anyway, they arrested him for assault, and he was committed to Sunny View."

8 Skin Deep

After a few seconds, she added, "It was Captain Renson who remembered. I don't remember any of it. I must have heard about it at some point - it was going on while I was in training, and my father had some involvement in the case too. But I didn't remember, I still don't. I guess... it wasn't anything to me, back then. Just another crazy." Her face, flickering yellow and red flashes of headlights throwing her features into stark relief, was set in a grim expression.

It felt odd to me, too, to think back to more innocent times, when a guy thinking he was a vampire could be a media joke. "So you think he could've progressed, huh? Then I guess the question is - what's happened to vamp guy now?"

She nodded grimly. "His name was Ernest Hannoy, but we can't find him on record. He was never convicted, on grounds of insanity, so we haven't any record of his progress. Sunny View itself closed down three years ago. For all we know he could have been out there rehabilitated and working nine to five with a wife and kids for half a dozen years, or he could be locked up in the most secure nut-house in the country. But Dr. Martin runs his own private practice now, and I called his secretary at the precinct when I was checking around: he's working late tonight in his office."

"And you're hopin' he can point us in the right direction." I sighed, staring out of the window at a bunch of guys fallin' down drunk all over the sidewalk, who sure looked to be having a better night of it than us. "For all we know, we're chasin' the wrong guy. This could be a copycat, if the publicity was like as you say, gettin' too involved in his role. Or just a coincidence, plain and simple."

She didn't turn her eyes from the road ahead as the traffic slowed to a crawl for a set of stop lights which were no more than minute flecks of brightness way ahead along the length of the street. "Right. And there really is no reason to assume a person with a slight over-enthusiasm for necking a decade ago would be into killing people now, after several years of professional treatment," she said dryly. "Although at the very least we still need to drag him in for DNA testing to rule him out."

Listening to her speak, I had to shake myself out of an instant's peculiar delusion that the events of the past half year hadn't happened. Kate's clipped tones and our present, familiar companionship took me back to an era of my life that was past and gone.

It was odd, to be together again on a case, after the working relationship established over years had been absent for months. Oh, we'd compared notes, talked, seen each other two or three times most weeks, but this was the first time we'd actually worked together since I left the force. Old habits, old patterns, resurfaced with only a slight trace of awkwardness. And I realised, for the first time since Faith and Wesley had joined up with me and put an end to those lonely months of working solo, just how much I'd missed this.

Faith and Wesley had never had to fight the good fight silent and alone in the face of a world which would probably lock them up as crazy if they ever dared break that silence. They'd never had to worry about how maybe they were crazy, believing these things and having nobody to verify them. They'd never had to stumble along without support because they'd always had their own support net, the Watcher's Council, backing them.

They didn't understand what it was like to be *alone*.

And now I had Faith, and Wesley, and an overwhelming sense of guilt because Kate still didn't have anyone but me. And that, of late, had meant *nobody*.

The car finally drew close to the stop lights. Moving headlights left blurring trails in front of my eyes, after too many hours straight spent awake and working. I tried to blink them away. Blinking brought into focus the girl in leather gear walking past us. She turned around and her dark hair flicked back to reveal a profile I didn't recognise, despite an instant's baited breath.

A different stab of guilt.

Should I really have walked out like that, leaving Faith and Wesley to deal with the danger I'd seen in my vision?

Of course I should, I told myself crossly. Kate had needed me more. They'd be all right.

Yeah - Faith was the Slayer, after all, and more than capable of defending herself from any danger without me. The gal could kick my ass all over the room: seemed to find it greatly entertaining, in fact. I gritted my teeth at the memory of the workout session the previous day and thought sourly that, no, she didn't need me. Never had, except as general mediator and translator between her and Wesley.

Kate gave me a sideways glance, maybe concerned at my silence. Her eyes flicked back to the figure of the leather-clad girl, now almost out of sight in the mirror, and she studied me for a second or so before reluctantly returning her attention to the task of driving. "I'm sorry," she said, "If this has caused problems between you and your employees. I know it didn't help that your girlfriend and I, um, sort of got off on the wrong foot."

I shook my head. "There's no problem," I said determinedly, telling it to myself as much as to her. "After all, it's not as though the arguments are precisely a *rarity*."

8.8 Chapter 8

Doctor Martin ran his private psychiatric practice from a small modern building only a few blocks from where the hospital had been where he'd worked caring for a very different class of patient.

"Apparently, he treats some pretty big names," Kate murmured, as we walked up the drive, with its well-tended exotic plant borders and palm trees, illuminated by strategically hidden garden floodlighting. Somehow I doubted Dr. Martin did his own landscape gardening. I bet that'd cost a pretty penny. The building itself looked purpose-designed too, sporting lots of mirrored glass and odd angles and curves.

"'Shrink to the stars', huh?" I said.

"He sees Kelsey Grammar twice a week, I heard," she murmured conspiratorially.

We went inside past an empty receptionist's station, following signs along a corridor and up a broad, polished pine staircase, at the top of which we found a door with a name plate fixed to it - "Dr. Gregory Martin", with a list of initials underneath it that took up about half the door.

Kate slapped the door back briskly. I followed rather more cautiously through no longer having a badge and official duty to justify my presence there. The man sitting behind a desk with paperwork strewn over it looked up and blinked at us in vague suspicion.

"Good evening, Dr. Martin. You are working late."

Dr. Martin was maybe in his fifties, with balding grey hair and a face that was deeply lined and weathered. His natural expression seemed to be a sour grimace, which he fixed now upon Kate. "I don't believe we had an appointment," he remarked.

"We're not patients," she said dryly. "Although, given our lifestyles, by now we probably should be... but on second thoughts, given our pay cheques, probably not yours." She showed him her badge. "Lockley. LAPD."

Surprise knocked the superior look off his face, though it didn't last more than a second. His attention turned to me expectantly, waiting for the show of a badge. I stuck my hands in my jacket pockets and said nothing. Didn't think it would be too stellar an idea to verify to him that I wasn't a cop.

Kate had more or less told me to let her do the talking. At least, she'd muttered "Bite your tongue in there, for Christ's sake, or I'll arrest you" as we climbed out of the car.

"What do the police want with me?" he asked, turning back to her, although his eyes kept sliding over to me like he was trying to figure me out.

"Our information indicates that you once headed up the staff at Sunny View Psychiatric Hospital. Is that correct?"

"Seven years ago. Yes."

"We're looking for a man named Ernest Hannoy, who used to be a patient there. Do you know the current whereabouts of this man?"

The deep, frowning creases in Martin's face intensified visibly at the mention of the name, although I thought he was trying to mute his reaction. "Patient files are normally confidential," he said evasively, obviously unhappy.

"You know that doesn't apply in cases where the patient may be connected to a crime," Kate shot back. "This man could be responsible for a series of 'vampire' style killings - I trust you remember why he ended up in your care in the first instance?"

Dr. Martin sat very still, purposely not reacting, indication in itself of his shock. "Killings?" he breathed, barely audibly. His expression hardened. "I assure you, that's quite impossible. Mr Han- the patient was cured. He no longer suffers from those delusions. I must strongly suggest you are on the wrong track with this line of enquiry."

He hesitated, studying her intently, and from whatever he saw there he found a weapon. "In fact, you do appear somewhat tired, Detective Lockley. I think you could look into some stress management techniques, or counselling - maybe I should get back to your superiors with that recommendation -"

"Or maybe you could help us on this case and set a lot of people's minds at rest," I interrupted - before Kate had chance to reply in a manner that probably wouldn't do us any favours in persuading the guy to part with whatever information he might have.

I'd had doubts about speaking up and drawing his attention, and they were proven right. Martin turned his hostile glare onto me.

"And who would you be? Another policeman? I don't think so, somehow. Even the LAPD have certain standards. You look more like you work on the other side of the law. What, then? Some independent muscle who couldn't hack it in the force? A vigilante thug little different to the creatures he hunts..."

I winced and quelled an angry response that wouldn't help our case much either.

Kate cleared her throat and cut in for me. "I'll thank you not to insult my colleagues, Doctor. He's Doyle, an independent investigator helping me on this case. Now, Dr. Martin." She leaned forward over his desk aggressively and trapped his gaze with hers. The expression on her face brooked no argument. "I'll ask again. Do you know the whereabouts of a man called Ernest Hannoy, who thinks he's a vampire?"

"He seems human enough to me," he said testily.

"As human as I do?" I snapped.

He gave me a long, odd stare, trying to work out what the hell I could possibly mean. I repressed my twinge of satisfaction at his confusion, and reminded myself angrily what was at stake. The remembered image of the girl stretched out on the examining table, her skin the colour of paper, flashed before my eyes.

"Look, man," I said, leaning forward over Martin's desk, staring fiercely into his eyes. "I see you're not over-comfortable with betrayin' a confidence here, but think about it a moment. If he's not vampin' after people again, then fine - but we need to see him to rule him out as a suspect quick, so we can move on an' stop whoever actually is doin' this. If he is killin' people - well..." I left it hanging, and slowly drew back.

Dr. Martin's expression looked set in stone.

"Every minute we waste is another minute the murderer - whoever they might be - has chance to kill again," Kate said. She kept her distance from Martin, her back straight and her arms crossed, the expression on her face almost impassive. "The last victim was a sixteen year old girl... do you have any family, Doctor?"

Seconds ticked by, while the horror of the brutal truth and the shock of Kate's trademark bludgeon tactics warred with each other for control of the atmosphere in that room.

"All right," he said finally, his voice heavy with bitterness and ragged irony. "Yes, I know where Mr Hannoy can be found. I meet him every Thursday for lunch in a local club, and have done so for several years now. He is an extremely articulate and educated man. In the years since he was discharged, he has earned two degrees and secured a high-placed job. He is completely recovered from the... unusual delusions he was known to suffer in his youth. I helped him to recover, in the years he spent as a patient in my care."

He hesitated. "He was my patient, he is now my friend. And I assure you he *did not commit* these horrible crimes."

"If that's the case," Kate said levelly, "Then neither you nor he have anything to concern yourselves about. A DNA test will settle the matter."

Silence.

"We need the address, Dr. Martin," Kate said softly.

Dr. Martin, grimly loyal to his friend, stared back at her, clearly torn between the betrayals of suspecting or informing.

And after a few seconds, he decided he trusted his friend enough to give us the address.

8.9 Chapter 9

After the euphoria of a successful bust, the next few days were filled with the all-too-familiar frustration of lawyers and paperwork. Kate's leg injury got infected and she took a few days off, leaving to me the delights of report writing and cross-examination from the still unsatisfied legal staff.

Kate came back, with a pronounced limp and a worse attitude than usual, and took to growling in place of coherent speech for another few days until someone at the station had a quiet word with her doctor. Who obliged them by switching her onto a different pain medication and returning her to a comparatively blissful semblance of normal.

Lawyers tried to stamp all over our case, but the testimony of two cops was a hard case to beat. I was however concerned that defending lawyers had a tendency in such instances to dredge the records of the cops involved to find something to cast doubt on their word - and I was horribly aware that digging too closely into my record could throw up all sorts of inconsistencies. Things I'd done that a human shouldn't have been

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able to do; things that, happening every so often over three years could go unnoticed, but all examined together might prove too much of a coincidence to ignore.

I fretted. Kate grouched.

It was pretty much business as usual.

"Damn it," I said to Kate, tossing the file of the lawyers' latest complaints across the desk, where it landed on a pile of papers. The momentum sent it skidding another inch or so after touchdown and, very slowly, the entire pile crawled its way off the edge of the desk to land noisily on the floor, attracting a few glances from neighbouring desks. "If we could only explain to them about our contacts..."

"I suppose Phil and his pals wouldn't be much welcome in a court of law," Kate said dryly, regarding the fallen papers down the length of her nose and not moving an inch to retrieve them. Her hands flexed on the thick file she held and she turned back to me. "But I know what you mean. As far as everyone else is concerned, we seem to have a case based on the fact that these people fired upon us when we went to make routine enquiries without a warrant, and that one of the arrestees *apparently* had a gun which matched the bullets fired at Murphy and Gerrold, but which is mysteriously missing from the evidence room."

"And couldn't you just guess who arranged that. If bloody Wolfram and Hart didn't have half the upper echelons of this division in their pockets, I'd bet anythin' every one of the bastards'd be in jail."

"I hate lawyers." Kate spoke absently, but her hands were either consciously or unconsciously making little strangling motions.

"I hate court rooms. I get all dry-mouthed."

She nodded. "Hate courtrooms. Hate lawyers."

"Yeah."

"Bastards."

"Yeah." The pencil I held in my hand snapped in two and I stared at it. "Okay," I said, frowning, "I think I'm tense."

"You're tense?" She held up the file she'd had in her hands at the beginning of the discussion. It was three inches thick of papers and the spine was bent drastically out of shape. "You know, I think we're both really, really fortunate that you're the one with the demon strength..."

8.10 Chapter 10

"Hey Doyle," Newton said. He was already at the temperamental coffee machine down the corridor when I arrived, good naturedly slapping at the side of it with one of his large hands until it finally gave up the fight, choked indignantly, and vomited a stream of coffee powder and hot water into the waiting plastic cup. Carefully shifting a bunch of papers tucked under his arm, he took the cup and moved aside for me. "You're working late."

"Yeah," I said. "Lawyers. You know the drill."

I pushed the button on the coffee machine and it defiantly did absolutely nothing. I growled a curse and kicked it. It spat out a plastic cup. I waited. It stubbornly stilled once more and refused to budge further. "Shit, when are they gonna stretch to a new one of these?"

Newton laughed. Little seemed to faze him; he was easy-going to a fault, impossible to dislike. In his dealings with Kate and myself, had always treated us no differently to how he treated anyone else, despite our status as a precinct joke in the eyes of those he generally hung around with.

"I think the Department feels they're upholding a grand police tradition by making us drink this stuff," he said, smiling. "So... how's Lockley now? Heard she had a few complications with the leg."

"She's fine," I told him wryly. "Save your concern for the poor souls who hafta work with the woman when she's hurtin' an' pissed off." I gave a fake long-suffering sigh. It turned into a splutter of indignation as the coffee machine finally decided to expel sugar, coffee powder, hot water and cream with a force that blew the cup out from the slot and across the floor, its contents scattering everywhere.

I cursed strenuously. Newton wordlessly handed me paper towels from the table next to the machine and I knelt down to clear up the mess. I waved him off when, depositing his own coffee and his papers onto the table, he moved to lend a hand: "I've got it. You get back to catchin' bad guys. Those prostitute murders, wasn't it?"

"Yeah," he said. "Awful business. The last one was just fifteen years old. *Fifteen*. She'd been working the streets for two years, since her stepfather abused her and her mother threw her out, until somebody decided to kill her because she wasn't pure enough for them." A muscle in his face twitched, hinting at depths of rage which didn't show.

Yeah, Newton had an anger burning behind that mild facade, when he got going. He sure wasn't somebody I'd ever like to have against me. Fortunately, Newton's temper was reserved to deploy against injustice.

"You'll find the bastard," I said.

He nodded, his focus elsewhere, picking up his coffee and papers - grabbing after them as half the pile started sliding down out of his grasp, juggling the coffee cup in his other hand. "I hope so," he said, turning away down the corridor. "See you around, Doyle."

A small white paper rectangle flitted to the ground in front of me in his wake.

8.11 Chapter 11

It was about the size of a business card, I thought, watching it fall, and when I picked it up from the floor I found that it was indeed a business card. "Wolfram and Hart," it said on the front, underneath sodden coffee marks I tried to brush away with my fingers and only succeeded in spreading further across the lettering, "Attorneys at law."

On the back of it there was nothing but a simple phone number, written in blue ballpoint by a steady hand. I didn't know Newton well enough to recognise whether it was his own handwriting or someone else's.

I slowly got to my feet, still staring blankly at the card, the mess on the floor forgotten. I felt slightly winded.

There was no reason, really, that Newton shouldn't have a Wolfram and Hart business card. After all, they were one of LA's major law firms, one of the necessary evils we had to deal with regularly in the course of our business.

But... there were the rumours. Everyone knew they had half the city council and police officials in their pockets. More rarely voiced were the rumours of how they seldom lost a case because the evidence against their clients tended to suffer mysterious disappearances, and witnesses to suffer oddly convenient accidents.

I always knew they'd have their own cops on the payroll - but surely not *Newton*. Newton was a solid guy. Newton was a goddamn saint. *Everyone* knew it.

Grimly, I headed for the nearest phone, and punched in the number that was written on the back of the card.

Someone picked up almost instantly and a smooth male voice with a slightly southern twang said, "Newton, I thought I told you not to ring me on this extension outside office hours?"

I put the phone down, feeling numb.

I walked back along the corridor, coffee forgotten, barely feeling my feet on the ground.

Of all the cops I'd never have expected to be crooked... It had to be a mistake. It *had* to be.

And not just because I personally liked the guy, either. If Newton really was crooked, it was pretty much a certainty that nobody would believe my word on the issue. Maybe not even Kate. Damn the guy, but he was *liked*...

What the hell was I going to do about this?

I halted, suddenly aware of voices nearby. No, not voices. One voice. Newton's.

Through the glass in the door of a nearby office I saw him, then, talking into a cellphone. He must've ducked out of the corridor for some privacy when it rang.

I froze where I stood and I listened: couldn't help myself.

"No, I don't know who else could have gotten this number," he said. "I certainly wouldn't advertise the fact you'd approached me, would I?"

There was a long silence while the person on the other end of the line responded. To my own ears, my breathing sounded so loud I was amazed Newton didn't hear it and catch me listening in.

"No, I haven't decided yet," he said when he finally spoke up again, actually sounding what, from him, passed for irritable. "It's difficult. I-"

8 *Skin Deep*

Another pause.

"You think I don't know that? Hell, I know how they'd react if they knew what I really am, that I'm not completely human. I know they wouldn't give a demon any breaks in this joint. I know I'm not really like them--"

The pause was briefer, this time.

"Yeah," Newton said, sounding weary. "Yeah, I know. I'll think about it, Mac. I'll think about it."

He put the phone away and headed for the door.

I only just collected my shock-scattered wits together sufficiently to duck into another side room in time.

8.12 Chapter 12

Ms. Allen's Wolfram and Hart-provided lawyer looked barely out of school, but his gaze was uncannily sharp. He gave me a smug smile when he caught me looking his way outside the court room during recess.

I was up next. Kate had already been. In her words, they chewed her up and spat her out, but they were only sharpening their teeth in preparation for the main course. Which would be me: the prosecution's most significant witness. The sort of witness cases hung on.

A responsibility I could have done without, all things considered.

"Keep cool," Kate said to me under her breath, joining me in glaring daggers back at the lawyer.

Keeping cool was something I'd found increasingly hard to do, the last few days.

I shot a covert glance towards Newton, where he stood like a shadow to the defendant, Ms Allen, who despite Wolfram and Hart's inevitable protestations that she was a sweet valley girl who wouldn't hurt a fly, was still being considered downright lethal and requiring of a police escort. Her face twisted in hatred when she saw me. Newton turned to see what she was getting all riled up about and I quickly looked away.

I hadn't spoken to him since those words exchanged by the coffee machine.

I hadn't said anything to Kate about the incident, either. Didn't know if she'd believe me. Or perhaps it was more that I didn't know if I'd want her to believe me. If Newton was like me... if Wolfram and Hart were trying to get their claws into him...

They hadn't got to him - yet. But he was part demon and they were using that to reel him in, and it wouldn't be long. He was on his own, trapped amid people who'd no doubt freak if they found out what he truly was. It wasn't an unfamiliar situation.

I could hardly rat him out. My own fear of discovery ran like ice in my veins at the mere thought, reminding me that what we risked was just the same. We were the same.

"Just try to relax and console yourself by thinking of how wasted we're both going to get after this is over," Kate said to me, mistaking my reaction to be trial-related. I didn't correct her.

"Right," I said tightly, looking back at the oblivious Newton, wanting badly to tell her what was going on and biting my tongue. I didn't know what Kate would do. She was barely okay with me being half demon, and that only because she'd gotten to know me before she found out. Asking her to understand what was happening with Newton... I recalled the encounter in Phil's store and winced.

"I'm going to go home and shower," Kate murmured, leaning close to me, as a brief commotion at the far end of the room signalled they were ready to start up again. "I'll meet you back here later.

"I hope the vultures leave some of your entrails intact."

8.13 Chapter 13

The Assistant District Attorney, a mature African-American woman who had a calm, steadying presence, asked me the basic questions about what happened. The Wolfram and Hart lawyer sitting at the defense table looked up abruptly and leaned forward several times as though he were going to object, once going so far as to pick up a pen and stab the air in my direction, then sat back with a patient, long-suffering expression.

I realized after a while that he was putting on a show for the jury. His sudden movements were likely to catch someone's eye and might distract the jurors from my testimony. I tried not to let him distract me.

"What happened next?"

8 *Skin Deep*

"When the door opened, I saw four people."

"Did you recognize any of them?"

"Not then. I'd never seen any of them before."

"Have you seen any of them since that night?"

"Yes." I looked over toward the defense table. "I see one of them right now."

"Objection!" The guy from Wolfram and Hart was on his feet, pen in hand. "No foundation - "

I caught myself frowning slightly. The voice was familiar, but I couldn't place it.

"Overruled," the judge said firmly. "Foundation is where we are, Mr. McDonald. You'll have your opportunity on cross-examination. Counsel," nodding toward the Assistant District Attorney, "you may proceed."

McDonald? I hadn't caught the name before, and tried for a moment to place it. Then I had to turn my attention back to the question.

"Detective Doyle, on the night in question, did you have an opportunity to observe the four individuals in that room?"

"Some opportunity, yes. Some of them more than others."

"Why was that?"

"One man was already on the floor when the door opened. He never moved, so I didn't spend much time lookin' at him."

"And the others?"

"There were two men and one woman. The woman did most of the talking." I heard a juror or two chuckle at that, and felt surprised. I hadn't meant it as a joke.

"What opportunity did you have to observe the woman, Detective Doyle?"

"I was looking straight at her through most of the incident, since she had a gun pointed straight at me."

"Objection. Not responsive to the question."

Annoyed, I turned toward the defense attorney, but with the ease of long practice, the Assistant D.A. stepped between me and the defense table. She didn't have to say anything; the expression on her face telegraphed "Be cool" without a single word.

"Your Honor," she said dryly, "I believe the answer was responsive, since one's attention level might be at least somewhat affected by a gun pointed in one's direction."

"Objection! Unfair comment by counsel."

Now that guy was really starting to bother me, and the nagging familiarity of his voice was driving me crazy. With an effort, I dragged my attention back to the matters at hand.

With excruciating slowness, step by step, the prosecutor guided me through the process of identifying the defendant. In the moment when I was finally allowed to point straight at her and say, "That's her, sitting at that table," I felt a rush of triumph.

The triumph was short-lived. What had taken less than five minutes to happen took over an hour to reconstruct, one small piece at a time.

Finally, the Assistant D.A. concluded her direct examination, and she took her place back at the prosecution table. The defense attorney stood up, stretching just a little like a bored cat finally given a chance to play, and moved toward me.

"Good afternoon, Detective Doyle," he said, his voice a smooth, slightly southern burr. "My name is Lindsey McDonald, and I represent Alicia Allen. I have just a few questions for you."

Everything seemed to go still. I forgot to breathe.
I remembered how I knew that voice.

8.14 Chapter 14

"From start to finish, this whole incident took only a few minutes, isn't that right, Detective Doyle?"

8 *Skin Deep*

"Yes, that's right."

"Yet you claim to remember every moment, in detail?"

"Yes. It made an impression," I added, and McDonald stepped in swiftly to interrupt me. "Just answer the question 'yes' or 'no,' Detective Doyle."

"Yes, I remember."

"Then of course you noticed one of the men putting the gun into Alicia's hand, didn't you?"

"No, absolutely not."

"You missed that? Perhaps you weren't paying such close attention as you claim, Detective Doyle."

"Objection," the Assistant D.A. said, her voice remaining calm. "Counsel is assuming facts not in evidence, and arguing with the witness."

"Sustained."

"You say that you remember everything that happened during this incident. Didn't you notice, Detective Doyle, that the dealers were using Alicia as a shield when you and your partner burst in, shooting?"

"No. That didn't happen."

"How do you know? Do you know what happened before you kicked the door in?"

"I know what happened after."

"Yes or no, Detective Doyle. Do you know what happened before you broke in?"

"No," I said reluctantly.

"Do you know whether any of the others actually put the gun in Alicia's hand, and then hid behind her, just before the door opened?"

"No."

"Do you know who fired the first shots through the door?"

"No."

"So, you have no reason to believe that Alicia did any of the shooting before the door opened, did you?"

"No."

"Did you know before you broke down the door that there was a teenage girl in the room?"

"No."

"So, when you started firing through the door, you had no idea who was on the other side?"

"Someone who was shooting at us," I responded, in as strong a voice as I could.

"Just answer the question yes or no, Detective Doyle. Did you know who was on the other side of that door when you started shooting?"

"No."

"When your partner was shot, you had already ducked for cover outside the door, isn't that right?"

"Yes."

"So, you couldn't possibly have seen which of the individuals in that room fired the shot that wounded your partner. Isn't that right?"

"I saw her standin' there with the gun after--"

"You claim that you saw Alicia point the gun at your partner, but you didn't see Alicia fire the gun, did you?"

"No."

"In fact, Detective Doyle, isn't it true that you never saw Alicia fire the gun at all?"

8 *Skin Deep*

"Yes."

"Isn't it true that you punched this young girl in the face before she had a chance to do anything at all?"

"Before she had a chance to pull the trigger," I answered quickly.

"Detective Doyle, just answer the question yes or no. Isn't it true that she hadn't fired a shot, to your knowledge, when you punched her in the face and knocked her to the floor?"

"I saw her pointin' the gun - "

"Yes or no. Had you actually seen Alicia fire that gun, even once, before you hit her?"

"No."

"Tell me, Detective Doyle, are you in the habit of carrying a Halloween mask when you are on duty?"

"Uh, yeah. . ." I felt my face flush red with the silliness of the statement, but what else could I say?

"Do you have any children?"

"No."

"Uh-huh." There were some quiet laughs from the jury as McDonald gave that sardonic grunt, one of his eyebrows archly shooting up into his hairline. "Detective Doyle, why do you carry a Halloween mask while on duty?"

I mumbled something fairly feeble about it coming in useful to surprise the bad guys, a trick that worked (true enough), which was greeted by another snigger from the jury, and a lawyerly smirk.

"Isn't it true, Detective Doyle, that you put on a mask to scare Alicia because you saw how young she was, almost a child, and you wanted to terrify her?"

"No."

"You didn't put on the Halloween mask in order to terrify this adolescent girl?"

"To startle her - or anybody else - "

"To scare her right out of her wits?"

"Objection," said the A.D.A. "Argumentative. Badgering the witness."

"Sustained. Counsel, it's almost five o'clock," said the judge. "This Court is now in recess. Detective Doyle, you are cautioned not to discuss your testimony with anyone while this court is in recess. This court will reconvene in the morning."

As the members of the jury stood, I noticed a few of them glance at me doubtfully.

The assistant DA walked over to me as people started filing out. Her voice low with grim conspiracy, she said, "Keep it together, Doyle. McDonald's grasping at straws - but given Ms Allen's record, the fact that you're weird isn't going to break this case."

8.15 Chapter 15

Working my way outside, I caught sight of Newton through the milling crowds. The man he was talking to was partially obscured in the crush of people, but a glimpse of the arm and shoulder of a neatly tailored grey suit told me enough. I broke away from Kate and pushed my way closer to them, only in time to hear Newton say, "...more time.. It's not easy, what you're asking me."

"Don't take too long," Lindsey McDonald said, with a hint of threat. Then he was stalking away, his back straight and aloof, his stride businesslike. I watched Newton stare after him.

Newton turned around, and his eyes inadvertently met mine.

His mildly ruffled expression sort of crumpled, and he spun on his heel and hurried away, turning in the opposite direction to McDonald as he exited the courthouse.

8.16 Chapter 16

I ran. Caught up with him cutting down an alley leading to a car park. My hand on his shoulder stopped him in his tracks and spun him around. He greeted me with both fists raised in classic boxer pose and I was uncomfortably reminded that he had about

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twice my own body weight behind him, and who knew how his demon blood might manifest?

He lowered his fists, breathing deep. "Doyle. What are you doing?"

The alley had dark walls and too much shadow, even this early in the evening. Crumbling brickwork in the walls, garbage gathering in clumps at the alley's edges. Tall buildings looming oppressive overhead. No windows looking down from the blank walls which faced inwards towards us.

I drew in a breath, prepared to speak. Ended up biting my tongue on the edge of a lie. *I couldn't do this...*

Harshly, I said, "I know, Newton. I know everything. What you are. What those Wolfram and Hart scumbags are up to with you."

He stared at me blankly. The expression made the large slab of his face look slow, but he wasn't slow. I knew that from experience. "Then you know more than I do," he said, "Because I don't even know what you're talking about. Have you been drinking? I know you've been stressed lately..."

"I ain't drunk and I'm not imaginin' things," I snapped. "You might as well lose the innocent act. You've been careless, Newton. I found your calling card from 'Mac'. I heard you talk to him, on the phone the other day and again just now. I know they're tryin' to get you to go over to their side, and I know why."

"Why's that, Doyle?" he said, no inflection in his voice, neither affirming or denying.

"Because you're part demon." I took a breath. "Just like I am."

8.17 Chapter 17

I waited for his reaction. I was aware that this was all or nothing. That, in extending him this line, I was setting myself up to be dragged down with him if I failed to hold him, because if Wolfram and Hart knew I was half demon I shuddered to imagine how they'd use that knowledge.

Newton's expression had gone blank. He didn't move - not to breathe, not to blink. We stood in silence. I didn't breathe or blink either. My chest felt strangely tight. My eyelids could've been taped back.

A car came past down the alley, cutting a divide between us, the glare of headlights and the irate blare of a horn shattering the atmosphere. I stumbled back. My shoulders hit the brick wall behind me. Newton also backed off, turning his face aside and shielding his eyes with his hand.

Then, the car had passed and the glare and noise were gone, leaving us again with the deathly silent evening.

Newton breathed now: in heavy, harsh gasps. He stared at me across six feet of space, a distance he maintained even though the car occupied it no longer. "You... what is this?" he said. "This is a joke. Funny, Doyle. Very funny."

"It's not a joke, an' if it was it'd be a bloody lousy one," I said. "I'm half demon, an' rumour has it that's somethin' the two of us have in common."

He took a step towards me, hesitantly, disbelievingly. He stopped. He said, "No. No, it's a trick."

I didn't have the patience for this shit. It had been a long day in court and I was near the end of my tether: stretched out, worn out, talked out. With a snarl, I closed the gap between us, dragging my demon aspect out even as I moved.

"Feelin' a bit more inclined to believe me, now?" I growled, holding him - twice my size as he was - pressed up against the wall by his throat.

He nodded minutely, his eyes wide. I relaxed my grip, stood back, and let the demon fade away. Faced him once again as a human.

"You're... for real," he said, hoarsely, hardly audible.

"Yeah." I hesitated. "And now that's established, how 'bout we go get us a drink? I think we got some business to discuss."

8.18 Chapter 18

We went to a small demon bar a few streets away. It wasn't overly busy, which suited both of us just fine. We found a table tucked away in a corner and lined up the shots.

"Lockley - she knows, right?" Newton said.

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I nodded slowly. "Yeah, she knows. But she still ain't what you might call happy 'bout it. Back when, we, you know, sort of had a thing. But then she found out and *then*-" I made a bitter cutting gesture, slashing through the air with my hand. "What about you? How many of those guys you hang out with know about this?"

He just shook his head. "I never told them. Everyone but Wolfram and Hart think I'm normal - and I don't know how they found out. Used it on the job a few times too many, I guess. I try not to use it much." He punctuated the statement by downing a shot of whisky, his face wrinkling up as he did so. He avoided meeting my eyes.

"No skin off my nose," I said. "I'm with you on that one. Came too close to endin' up a popular freak show exhibit a few times myself. Wouldn't have told Kate, except she found out by accident. And shot me."

Newton choked on another shot, set his glass down and stared across the table. "She shot you?"

"It was a mistake." Uncomfortably, I changed the subject - to one only a little less uncomfortable. "When did you find out? What you were, I mean?"

"Find out?"

"That you weren't human."

"Oh, I always knew. My mother made her displeasure with my father's 'secret' pretty obvious. She wasn't too keen to be rearing a kid that could sprout horns, armoured skin and six-inch claws at will, and once he walked off she got tired of trying pretty quickly." He studied me carefully. "Do you mean to say you *didn't* know?"

I shook my head. And thought about that, for the first time, in a different light. At least I'd been spared what Newton had been through. I'd had a shot of normal life. "I just found out a few years ago, man. You could say it was a bit of a surprise."

"Your parents didn't tell you?"

"My mum." I thought, abruptly, of the depth of caring it showed, that she'd even tried, when as Newton proved it would have been so easy to give up. "I suppose I had a few lucky breaks really."

But Newton shook his head. "I can't imagine what it must have been like, to think yourself human, normal, and then - is it easier or harder, to know from the start?" His expression said he didn't know, either.

"I guess we can't know," I said. "But that's the past. What matters is what we do now - an' you can't give in to these Wolfram and Hart people. I knew I had to talk to you, when I found out what was goin' on. I couldn't rat out your dealings with Wolfram and Hart, but I couldn't just stand by and let you do this. You have to know they're only interested in usin' you."

"Using me? You say that like the same's not true for the LAPD. For all the rest of this damn world. Lindsey McDonald's right. They'd kill me if they ever discovered what I am: a monster. They'd do it in a heartbeat. I've been there before, Doyle. I guess you've never had to really face what happens when you're discovered, or you'd know you can't trust anyone not to betray you. Wolfram and Hart, I know what they're after from me - but they know what I am, and they don't care. Or rather they do. It's the reason they're interested in me. I have a place there. I'll always be a misfit here, trying to fit into this world."

His sentiments rang too many bells for comfort. "Newton, pal, they're evil," I protested. "Don't you get what that means? The people you've been fightin' to put behind bars, you'd be fightin' to keep out on the streets. That bastard who was killin' the hookers. Ms Allen and her cronies, peddlin' drugs to fourteen year olds..."

"You're wrong. Wolfram and Hart have their standards. I think Allen's a favour for someone else. Drugs aren't their usual sort of scene, and Allen's small-time for them."

"And how many favours d'you think there'll be, Newton? They're still gonna get those people off to continue doin' what they do."

Newton hesitated, but it wasn't with doubt. His gaze fixed mine, and his eyes were uncomfortably intense. "Doyle. I don't think you're seeing the picture here. Maybe because you were raised human, you don't get it. You're used to thinking of yourself as human, as a part of their world, even if you know you're not. That must be a difficult habit to break, and I don't envy you it. We're not human, though. We're not bound by their laws. We're *different*. You and I, maybe we've both of us been trying to blend in for too long. We're demons. We're supposed to be evil. We're probably bound for hell anyway - who knows if we even have a soul to lose, or any of that shit?"

He leaned in closer to me, looking through me. "Take a look around you. You've got one real friend in the world and even she can't abide the true Francis Doyle. I've seen how the rest of the guys treat you. They treat you like dirt. And you know why they do that? It's *because you're different*. They sense that, even if they have no idea just how different."

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"They don't hate you," I pointed out, trying to keep the tremor from my voice, and to still the tremor in my limbs. Too many truths...

He said, with a trace of bitter irony, "I've spent my life learning to blend in. You've had four years. This isn't me. What you see, what they see. It's just a facade. Me and you, Doyle - our humanity is just skin deep."

"Newton, man," I said, my voice a rasp, a whisper. "Think about this..."

"I have thought about it. You try thinking about it, Doyle. This could be the best chance you ever have. These people, they have an equal opportunity policy regarding *demons*. They have company pensions, no matter how long your life span might turn out to be. I'm not going to give you away to them if you don't want to go, but just think about it. You and me, we'd be among our own kind. We wouldn't have to hide any more. What future do you think you have, going on like this?"

I didn't want to think about it. But I did. Couldn't help it.

And I knew that I had to get away from there, and quick.

I stumbled backwards, knocking my seat over with a crash. Stammered, "I... I have to go, Newton." And I cleared out of there, almost tripping on a table leg in my desperation to get away.

I hurried from the bar, almost running, but he didn't come after. My mind was buzzing and I felt dizzy and disoriented, like someone had just given the world a good shaking then as their grand finale turned it full upside-down.

Newton was right. Not about Wolfram and Hart, perhaps, but about the rest- What *did* I owe the LAPD? What did I owe any of these people who invaded my head with visions of their distress? People who, were they to find out what I was, would see me as a monster.

Hadn't I done enough? What future *did* I have? Revenge could only carry you so far, and Darla had run off into the night... and however many vampires I killed there'd always be more, and they wouldn't be *her*.

I was tired. It had been three years and I was just too damn tired. Tired of working my ass off for no thanks save hostility from the surrounding world. Tired of a fight that never seemed to end. Tired of it all.

And Newton... Newton knew the inside of my head a little too well for both our good.

8.19 Chapter 19

I sidled into the bar the cops used as a hangout. Kate was there, sitting alone on the edge of the counter. She looked up as I joined her. "Where did you get to?"

"I got caught up talking to some of the guys," I said evasively, and felt like a complete shit.

I sat down next to her, ordered a beer, opened my mouth. Soundlessly, I sat there with my jaw hanging, about to speak, not speaking, and I wanted to tell her - but I couldn't.

8.20 Chapter 20

"Detective Doyle, when we recessed I was asking you about that Halloween mask you were wearing during this incident. When did you put it on?"

"After my partner was shot, when Alicia Allen turned the gun toward her. There were three of them still standin' - "

"After your partner was shot," he repeated back, interrupting me in mid-sentence. "You didn't know how badly your partner was injured, did you? You didn't know if it was just a graze, or something life-threatening."

"No, I didn't know."

"But instead of going to your partner's side, to help her, you put on a Halloween mask to scare Alicia and the others, isn't that right?"

"If I hadn't done somethin' to stop them, they would have shot her again. Fatally this time. Allen was threatenin' to-"

"Just answer the question, Detective Doyle. You ignored your injured partner, put on a Halloween mask, jumped at Alicia Allen and punched her in the face, didn't you?"

"It wasn't exactly like that."

8 Skin Deep

Lindsey McDonald stared straight at me, his gaze level and knowing, and I could feel a prickling sensation at the back of my neck, as though my demon might come out at any moment. How much did he really know about me, anyway?

How much did he suspect?

"You didn't feel very threatened then, did you, Detective Doyle, if you had enough time to stop what you were doing, take out a Halloween mask, and put it on?"

"I was threatened. Alicia Allen was pointin' that gun, first at me, and then at my partner - "

"But you took the time to put on the mask anyway, isn't that right?"

"Yes." What else could I say?

"It was a monster mask, wasn't it, Detective Doyle? A green face, and red eyes, and spines poking out?"

One or two members of the jury laughed as I muttered, "Yes." He had described my demon face with surprising accuracy, given that Allen had only glimpsed it for a moment.

"And then you jumped at Alicia, wearing that monster mask, and you hit her in the face. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, but - "

"No further questions," McDonald said.

The assistant DA swiftly returned to the floor. "A few more questions, please," she said curtly, glowering at Lindsey.

"Detective Doyle, you have worked for the Los Angeles Police Department for some three years now - what was your impression of Ms Allen with the gun? Did she seem to you to be nervous? Under duress? Did she seem as though she didn't know what she was doing?"

"No," I said positively. "She looked comfortable holdin' that gun. Like she'd used one before. Like she knew exactly what she was doin'. She threatened us with it. An' it looked very much to me like it was her idea. Her pals were too busy hidin'. She threatened to shoot Kate - my partner."

"You must have seen a lot of things in your time with the LAPD. Do you believe an eighteen year old girl with a gun is any less dangerous than a thirty year old man with a gun?" Her question was loaded with implications of years of feminist struggle as she flickered a sly smile across to Lindsey, who winced.

I shook my head. "No less. More, maybe. A kid - any kid - will more likely shoot out of fear or bravado than calculated necessity."

"And your mask. It's an unusual prop for a policeman. Has it helped you make arrests before?"

Lindsey objected strenuously to that, but the assistant DA argued and he was overruled. I described a case a few months back involving a couple of now-convicted murderers, incidentally also the case which had won me my detective status.

The ADA smiled conclusively and nodded smartly around the jury, before sitting down again.

8.21 Chapter 21

Present Day

When we arrived at Hannoy's house, I was half-prepared for an old gothic mansion, complete with organ music, or maybe a smelly pesthole decorated in over-done layers of black.

In fact, his place of residence was off-puttingly normal, even benign. It was a smallish two-storey building, quite old-fashioned in layout, with an impressively large and well-trimmed lawn by LA standards, complete with two defiantly undemonic garden gnomes.

Okay, the presence of the gnomes was disturbing in and of itself, but not in a particularly vampiric way.

"All it needs is a white picket fence," Kate muttered as we made our way up the path to the front door.

8 *Skin Deep*

"And the Brady Bunch theme song in the background," I returned. "That'd really complete the picture."

"Whaddya think?" Kate asked as we stepped up to the front door. "Keen and Casual?"

I smirked. "Sounds good. Who's who?"

She looked me up and down. I adjusted my rumpled clothing defensively. "Like you have to ask. Do you ever do laundry, Doyle?"

"Not as a matter of course," I admitted, yawning slightly. I'd been on the go for a little too long, and thanks to Faith, it wasn't like I was getting regular, undisturbed sleep at nights.

"Easy, pal," she said half-seriously. "Don't get *too* casual."

"Sorry. Starting to run low on energy, I guess."

Kate didn't respond, rapping sharply on the door. I remembered guiltily that she'd been working on this case for quite a lot longer than I had. Though the firm had its occasionally moments of high activity, often coupled with the risk of being slaughtered by clans of demons, it was no match for the endless grind of police work when it came to exhausting a person.

Frankly, I was amazed Kate could still stand. But she still looked pretty sharp, and I wasn't going to be the one to suggest she take a break. 'Sides, we both knew that if our positions were reversed, I wouldn't listen to her any more than she would to me.

The best thing I could do for her would be to wrap this thing up fast. With any luck, Hannoy was our man, despite his pristine house and psychiatrist friend. If he was, Keen and Casual would trip him up.

With any luck.

A lot of cops work on the old Good Cop/Bad Cop system for handling suspects, despite the fact that anyone who's ever watched a bad crime drama knows that it's a set-up. Kate and I had worked out a variant, nicknamed Keen and Casual.

Kate's job was to be the perfect little detail-obsessed detective, taking notes about everything and following the suspect's every word. My job was to appear bored as hell with the whole affair, and to ignore her and the perp totally, just letting my eyes roam around the room. Ideally, Kate kept the perp on his toes, while I could check out for anything incriminating in the place, using her continual questioning as a cover.

Kate banged her fist loudly on the door a couple of times. I leaned against the wall and admired the gnomes. Come to think of it, Keen and Casual wasn't too different from our behaviour normally.

As Kate raised her hand a third time, the front door opened. The nondescript man on the other side of the threshold smiled politely at us. "Yes? Are you from the shelter? I've got the bags right here..."

"No, sir," Kate said formally. "My name is Detective Lockley. LAPD. We'd like to ask you some questions."

I scratched my neck and gave him my most world-weary stare. "Doyle. What she said."

"Oh." The man seemed taken aback. "Is there something wrong?"

Kate reached into a pocket and pulled out a notepad. She flipped it to a blank page and gazed intently at non-existent notes. "Are you one Ernest Patrick Hannoy?"

The man nodded agreeably, smiling at us. "Yes. I'm sure there must be some kind of mistake...you see, I paid the parking ticket several weeks ago and..."

"Sir. We're not here about the ticket."

Hannoy looked confused. "Excuse me?"

Kate opened her mouth to give an officious response, but I interrupted, drawing my jacket tighter around my shoulders. "This could take a while, pal. Are you just goin' to leave us standing out here like lemons?"

"No, no, come in," Hannoy said, his face still painted with a mix of confusion and concern. "Please, do."

8 Skin Deep

Kate and I exchanged glances as he led us down a corridor and into what looked like his living room. This was starting to look like a bust already. Hannoy was reacting just like any other regular citizen would when abruptly confronted by grim-faced detectives. There wasn't the slightest amount of guilt on his face, only innocent distress at the suddenness of our invasion.

He was a pretty big man, the detective in me noted, which meant it would have been easy for him to pin his victim and break her neck. But then again, the girl in question was a skinny thing. Hell, *Wesley* could have taken her with both hands tied behind his back.

Kate sat down primly on Hannoy's couch. I slouched down next to her, taking in the surroundings while she fumbled with her notepad. Nice, homey surroundings... a lovingly-restored old liquor cabinet with expensive crystal glasses... couple of pictures on the walls, one featuring the good doctor and Hannoy grinning like idiots at the camera, a day-old copy of the paper lying on a table... there was an article about the killing on the front page, but it didn't look like it had received any special treatment. If anything, the detective in me felt it was too normal for a guy with a history of mental illness.

But then again, if he really was cured then I very much doubted he'd want to be near anything that might remind him of his particular fantasy. But then again, the detective in me wasn't sure if it was a façade of normality or real stability...

In case you hadn't noticed, the detective in me is a bit of a suspicious bastard

"Can I get you a drink?" the target of my paranoia asked pleasantly, but with a touch of nervousness.

Hardly surprising, when confronted by Kate's needle-nosed stare. The schmuck looked as eager to please as a puppy, and if Kate wound him up any more, he was going to be useless for questioning.

"Sure," I said easily, just to loosen him up a bit. Besides, maybe there was something decent in that liquor cabinet. And I hadn't drunk out of out anything that wasn't plastic or glass for years.

"No," Kate said sharply, shooting me a rebuking glance that wasn't entirely acting. "We're on duty."

I shrugged sympathetically at Hannoy. "On duty."

He smiled a little and sat down on an over-stuffed chair. "So... what can I help you with?"

Kate checked her notes - unnecessarily, she'd read the file about eight times before we drove here - and cleared her throat. "Mr Hannoy, you were once the patient of a Doctor Martin, correct?"

Hannoy smiled again. "Yes. He was my doctor, and he is still my friend." His brow furrowed abruptly. "Has something happened to Greg?"

"No," Kate said shortly, and continued in her carefully-clipped tone: "You were recommended to his care by the courts, weren't you, Mr Hannoy? For some... incidents in which you were involved."

All expression fled Hannoy's face for a second or two, and then he sighed. "Oh. Oh dear," he said sadly. "It's about this, isn't it?" He picked up the newspaper and turned its cover to face us. **VAMPIRE KILLER STRIKES LA**, the headline informed us.

She nodded. "Yes, it is. Mr Hannoy, we're going to need you to provide your whereabouts for our investigation - "

Hannoy rose to his feet sharply, his face still expressionless, but now I could read disgust behind his stiff features. "I don't know how you got my name and address, Detective, but I assume you would have read Greg's reports before you came here. The... incidents occurred a long time ago. I was a troubled young man; I received counselling, and I have medication now - I take a dose every day. I'm not sick any more. Those reports confirm it. And now, I would like you to leave."

I interrupted before Kate could spout off some section of the penal code in response. "Mr Hannoy... Ernie," I said gently, "Dr Martin told us all of that. He also gave us your address, since he trusts you and knows you didn't do this stuff, and that everything's fine. But we gotta ask the questions anyway, man. Now why don't you sit down, pour yourself a drink, and give us something to put in our report. Then we can all go back to normal, Ern."

Hannoy eased himself slowly into his chair.

"Now, how about that drink?" I said, smiling at him.

"No," he and Kate said together. They blinked. Then Hannoy continued, "I don't think I could keep it down. This... this business just brings back a lot of bad memories, you understand?"

"We sympathize," Kate said, having finally seemed to pick up on my attempts to keep our suspect cool. "Can you just tell us about your movements on the night of November 17th?"

Hannoy closed his eyes. "Uh...I...was working late. I'm in insurance," he added, by way of explanation, "and we had a big new client, an important referral. I don't remember what time I got home; there was some movie on, bad science fiction thing. 'Attack of the Lagoon Creatures', or something. Total trash."

I winced with remembered pain. "'Invasion of the Swamp Beasts', wasn't it?" Faith had insisted on watching it. "Ten-thirty, it started. And yeah, it was trash."

Kate glanced at me with surprise, and scribbled something down on her pad. Probably some carefully-honed jab about bad taste to unleash on me at a later date. Then again, it might have just been the time.

Hannoy nodded in agreement. "That sounds about right. I watched it for a couple of minutes while I heated up something in the microwave, and then I ate, and then I went to bed."

"Uh-huh," Kate said, jotting this down. "Anyone who can verify this?"

"Um...my secretary, Claudia, can tell you about the client, but I was working alone. Sorry."

"All right, Mr Hannoy," Kate told him, writing as she spoke. "Would you mind if we took a look around your house briefly? Again, just a formality."

Hannoy looked alarmed at this. "Don't you need a search warrant for that?"

I did my best to reassure him. "Ernie. We can go out and get a warrant, and then come right back, and it'll just take longer and waste even more of everybody's time. You've got nothin' to hide, I'm sure, Kate's just bein' thorough. We'll be out of here in no time."

"Well, okay...I guess," he agreed, but without much confidence. We all stood, and he led us around.

Kate didn't ask many questions and neither did I. Judging from her expression, she was getting the same 'dead end' vibes as me. Encouraged by our failure to rip up his furniture and peek through his drawers, Hannoy began to talk more about his house, preening a little, showing off his residence as if we were any two ordinary guests.

It really was a nice house, older than most, but nice. As it turned out, one of Hannoy's hobbies was restoring old furniture and architecture, and he pointed out numerous little details to us, like the wooden ceiling that had been untouched since its construction however many years ago, or the finely-painted skirting-boards.

I was bored out my mind by the time Hannoy wound the tour to a close. Hell, I was half-wishing for a *real* vampire attack, just so he'd stop talking. "... of course, with such an old house, and with so much of it being wooden, well, it's perfect breeding ground for woodworm. The ceiling's particularly bad - I'll have to get in an exterminator, one of these days... to say nothing of the damp... oh, and here's the lounge, which, um, you've already seen."

I did my best to turn my sigh of relief into a cough. "Thanks. Nice pad. Cheers." I headed for the front door.

But that wasn't enough for Kate. "What about those stairs, back in the hall?" she asked. "Where do they go?"

"My workshop, where I do most of my furniture restorations," Hannoy said cheerfully. "Do you want to see?"

"Certainly." I quietly cursed my partner - um, former partner. Admittedly, she was supposed to be the keen one, but did she have to take it so blasted far? There is such a thing as over-acting.

"I think I'll pass," I said hastily, as Hannoy headed for the hall, already warming up for Furniture Care 101. "My legs are tired from all that walking."

Hannoy looked slightly disappointed at the halving of his audience, but continued on without comment. I smirked at Kate as she followed, but she didn't deign to respond.

Alone, Hannoy's droning mercifully muffled by the walls, I surveyed the 'lounge'. Whatever happened to plain old 'TV Room'?

My eyes came to rest guiltily on his liquor cabinet. I was tired, bored and desperately in need of some kind of fix. A cigarette would have been best, but there was no way I could finish it before Kate came back. So booze it was.

Just a few sips... I promised myself. After all, I rationalised, Hannoy was probably so obsessed with the ancient cabinet that its actual contents paled by comparison. He'd never know.

8 Skin Deep

I crossed the room and pulled the doors open, selecting a brown whisky bottle and pulling out its cork, sniffing to savour the fluid's rich scent.

My nose twitched. That didn't smell like brandy. In fact, it smelt like...

"Kate," I called sharply, trying to keep my voice under control. "Could you come here a sec?"

I heard footsteps clumping down the hall towards me, and Kate entered the room, Hannoy following behind her, still nattering about furniture.

"Yeah, what is it?" She stopped when she saw me holding the bottle. "Jeez, Doyle, you've got a serious drinking prob -"

I ignored the rest, focusing on Hannoy as he stepped into the doorway behind her. His eyes flicked to me and then to the bottle, and then his face went absolutely blank, just like it had when he first realised why we were there. Like a machine, absorbing new data.

"Doyle?" Kate demanded. "Are you listening to me?"

The empty look on Hannoy's face was abruptly replaced by one of predatory cunning, and then his arm was around Kate's throat. She tried to drag her sidearm from its holster, but he struck it out of her hand with his free arm, tightening his grip on her with the other. My eyes followed the weapon as it slid across the floor and bumped against a wall.

"Don't try anything," Hannoy said, in that pleasant, slightly boring voice of his. "Or I'll break her neck. Like that other little girl."

My hand tensed, reaching for a pistol... that wasn't there.

Hannoy smiled happily, noticing my confusion. "No gun? Leave it in your other pants, did you? Or maybe you aren't a cop at all, then? A would-be Van Helsing to my Dracula?" He giggled.

"I thought you were on medication - a dose a day, wasn't it?" I countered. "Doesn't seem to be workin' very well."

"Oh yes," Hannyoy agreed. "I pour out a dose every day. Makes lovely fertilizer for my garden, you see. After all, there was never anything wrong with me, no matter what Greg said."

"Of course not," I said flatly, shooting a quick glance at Kate's gun. *I could probably reach it...* "You're just Joe Average."

"Oh, I wouldn't go *that* far," Hannyoy said. "But what reasonable person wouldn't revere the masters of the night, and wish to be like them? The ultimate predators, lethal and majestic, culling the mortal herd..."

I shrugged. "This is LA, pal. The vampires haven't got anythin' on the gossip columnists when it comes to feedin' on the weak."

Hannyoy's arm tensed around Kate's throat, and she gurgled in pain, but his face remained calm. "Of course, I wouldn't expect you to understand. Still, at least you didn't immediately leap to the 'There's no such thing as vampires!' defence. There may be hope for you yet."

"Right. Someday I'll grow up to be a certifiable loony just like you. Is that what you're gettin' at?"

He sighed. "None of them understood, you know. It was always so easy, to tell them what they wanted to hear. To pretend to be one of them... move among them, feed off them..."

"Them who? Sane people?" I asked, edging closer towards the weapon.

"Humans," he sneered. "Weak, pathetic humans. And don't think I don't know what you're trying to do, sir. Move away from the gun." He took a step forward towards it, dragging Kate with him. For a moment, his body was moving ahead of hers, just like I had hoped for.

I let my arm whip up, lobbing the whiskey bottle at him in a powerful underarm throw. The glass bottle weaved awkwardly through the air towards Hannyoy and smashed into the wall behind his head, showering him and Kate in dark blood.

Just like I had planned, the abrupt noise and rain of fluid distracted him long enough for Kate to pull free and dive for her weapon. But it didn't distract him the way I had expected. He stared at his blood-speckled hands and began to lick them in a frenzy.

8 Skin Deep

Both I and Kate, coming up from a crouch with her gun ready, hesitated for a second, surprised and disgusted.

Hannoy realised his peril and ducked back into the hallway. Kate fired a shot anyway, and I followed it, bounding after him. I dodged out into the passageway, just in time to see Hannoy scrambling up the stairs to his attic, covered in blood and trembling with rage or fear or desire. Maybe all three.

"You can't stop me!" he shrieked. "No human can stop a vampire!"

His earlier cool demeanour was gone, and judging from his frenzied voice, he was cracking up fast. I wasn't sure what he was running to get from his attic, if it was a weapon or an opera cloak autographed by Bela Lugosi.

I didn't plan to find out.

I changed to demon and leapt straight up, slamming my body against the ceiling. The old, woodworm-riddled ceiling.

Against half-Brachen muscle, it didn't stand a chance. The wood splintered up around me as I smashed through the ceiling and landed on the attic floor next to my homemade entrance. My skin felt like old sandpaper, and the splinters on my head and shoulders made me feel as if my spines had reversed direction, but I was still mobile.

Across the furniture-filled room, a trapdoor started to open. I dashed towards it, dodging around the antiques, as Hannoy flung it open and clambered furiously upwards. He pulled himself upright just as he reached me, and I put the wanna-be vampire down again just as fast. He slid across the floor from my punch and slammed up against a wall.

"Who said anything about *humans* trying to stop vampires?" I growled, advancing on him.

But then I paused, slowed by the expression on his face. Something like worship.

"I knew... I always knew you were out there..." he whispered. "You creatures of the night... not human, better than them, faster and stronger..."

Not human. The words stung like a knife.

"Shut up," I snarled angrily. "You're under arrest."

Hannoy looked...betrayed. That was the only way to describe it. Then the sick sonofabitch threw himself at me, struggling and clawing, trying to get his teeth into my throat.

Brutally, I shoved him backwards. He came back again. I hit him in the face, hard. He got up again, blood running from his mouth. I smashed my elbow into his chest, lifting him off the ground, but he kept coming back for more.

Finally, I threw him back, smashed a chair to splinters, snatched up the largest splinter and -

"Doyle!" Kate snapped. She was standing by the trapdoor, gun levelled. Levelled at me.

I looked down at Hannoy. His face was a bloody pulp, and he was wheezing for breath.

The makeshift stake sounded very loud when it hit the ground.

"Sorry, Kate," I stammered. "I was...I got carried away..."

Kate didn't answer, just tucked her gun away and reached for her radio.

I returned to human, and dropped to my knees to try and keep the person that I had nearly killed breathing.

8.22 Chapter 22

8 Months Ago

"Rough night last night?" Kate asked, appraising my bedraggled self.

We were standing outside a club in a mild drizzle. Above our heads, still lit up in the pre-dawn hours, was a pink neon sign outlining the shape of a naked woman with improbable breasts. A shoot-out in the street of some of the club's more gangland clientele had resulted in half the police force turning up on their doorstep. Most of the trouble was over now, the shootees largely having shot each other, but I could've done without the early-morning wake-up call nonetheless.

"Vision. Vampire. Dust," I said succinctly. My head was ringing. I hadn't had much more than an hour's sleep. "An' it's still last night," I added belligerently.

8 *Skin Deep*

Kate nodded absently.

The paramedics were loading the bodies into the ambulances, and you couldn't move on the street for police tape and chalk marks. Some of the daubs of blood on walls and pavement were a remarkable distance from the chalk outlines. The gang mentality liked a firearm with kick. It was a mess.

Over by the police barrier, a number of the club's clientele and, uh, staff waited to be questioned. A number of the officers seemed to be enjoying taking in the view. Some of those girls must've been freezing. Kate and I sipped at hot coffee from a coffee bar on the wrong side of the police tape which had nonetheless escaped closure. The reporters were hovering over by the tape where Newton was stationed, his task to keep them out. Occasionally he glowered at them and they shuffled nervously. He'd already dragged one back out to the other side of the tape.

All in all, it was precisely the kind of media farce we needed to overshadow Allen's ongoing trial and headlines like 'Teen Addict Victim of Police Brutality'.

Kate still dealt with my visions in much the same way she did with the demon - by ignoring their existence as much as possible. So she surprised me when she said, "Visions. Right. Are you... having any trouble with those?" Her eyes searched my face. "Something you've not mentioned?"

"Huh? No." Taken aback, I wondered what she was getting at.

"It's just that you've seemed distracted, these past few days. Ever since you gave testimony at the trial, in fact. I was concerned it was something to do with your visions, something you might not have told me because, you know, not great with the supernatural stuff." She hesitated, then added, "You can tell me, though. I am your friend. I won't freak."

I shook my head. "Thanks, Kate, but there's nothin' goin' on on the vision front that I've not mentioned."

"Okay." She sipped at the coffee and winced, and blew over the top of the cup aggressively. "Don't let the trial get to you, Doyle. They'll nail Allen. They're just running through the formalities, now. Nobody has any real doubt she's guilty."

I nodded slowly.

"And you can talk to me," she said pointedly. "You don't have to be spending so much time going off and brooding alone."

I didn't tell her that I wasn't.

We took witness statements for the next three hours. As the last of the ambulances left and the police presence started to disperse, Newton caught my eye and I followed him away down a side street.

8.23 Chapter 23

I knew I shouldn't have spoken to Newton again, after what had happened, but somehow I couldn't help myself.

I don't really think either of us consciously planned it, but the night after our conversation, I found myself walking back through the doorway of the bar we'd visited.

I sat down at the table we'd been at, and ordered a beer.

Ten minutes later, Newton walked in.

Over the next couple of days, it became a kind of ritual. There wasn't a formalized meeting time, but we'd be seated by nine-thirty without fail. We didn't speak until we'd each had at least one beer, hell, sometimes we didn't even speak at all.

It was enough just to sit there, and know that the person opposite you *understood*.

Other nights, we talked about whatever came into our heads. . . work. . . sports. . . places we'd been, things we'd done. . .

As it turned out, Newton had been up and down the coast more than a few times, and he had a few really wild stories about demon bars in New York, or the succubus he met in New Orleans.

My tales of "Went hunting. Staked vampires. Drank a bottle of scotch and passed out," paled by comparison. Sometimes I told Newton about my time with Harry, and he sat there, drinking it in, imagining a life that he could have only seen on TV.

The fact that, today, he'd pulled me out to some demon bar in the middle of the morning - and not even our regular one, at that, but the closest: a tiny place stuck behind a laundry, almost empty at this time of day - coupled with the look on his face when he'd caught my eye across the chalk-marked street, told me he had something on his mind. But whatever it was, he wasn't in any immediate hurry to voice it and I didn't ask. In fact, we were halfway through the second round before Newton spoke at all.

8 *Skin Deep*

"You look shitty."

I rolled a mouthful of beer around my mouth and swallowed. "You too, now? Between you and Kate, I'm startin' to feel kinda hen-pecked."

Newton brushed off my flippant comment. "Well, obviously one trait Lockley and I share is the ability to notice the blindingly obvious. What happened to you?"

I shrugged. "Went out huntin', saved someone's life in the process. They ran off shrieking about green-faced monsters. Pretty much business as unusual."

He frowned. "Why do you do that? Risk yourself for no reason, just to kill off some two-bit bloodsuckers?" He paused. "Scratch that, I know why. But *how*?"

"The usual way," I replied. "Stake, heart, poof. It's not really a complicated procedure."

Newton shook his head dismissively. "I meant how do you track them? LA's one hell of a big city for evil to hide in, but you kill what, one or two vamps a night? That's one hell of hunting record."

"I get visions," I said, by way of explanation. "Curt, I know, but I didn't really want to talk about vampire-killing right now. I pretty much just wanted to get smashed and pass out - see if I could catch up on my lost rest that way,

Newton looked at me dubiously. "How many beers did you have before we got here?"

"None, more's the pity," I told him, smirking.

Newton frowned again. "Quit dodging, Doyle. You're killing yourself going out constantly like this, as sure as if you blew your brains out. At least give me the full story - it's not like we haven't done the huge-secret-sharing thing already," he added wryly.

I raised my hands in surrender. "This really isn't a secret on the scale of 'Hey, I'm a demon.' I just get these headaches. They come with pictures and surround sound, and they're usually about some kind of danger or threat, demons, vamps, that kinda thing. Maybe it's somethin' to do with the breed of demons I come from, I don't know. To be honest, I don't really care."

Newton took a sip of his beer, a slightly far-away look on his face as he considered my words. "Well, I'll be damned."

His response was ironic, even trite, but something flickered behind his eyes.

"What do you know?" I asked bluntly.

Newton shook himself slightly, returning from wherever he'd been. "Nothing solid," he replied slowly. "But I've heard things. Demons who get visions of the future, even though they don't come from particularly mystical backgrounds. Seers."

"Seers, huh?" I repeated, unconvinced. "Do they tend to be cranky and buy lots of extra-strength Tylenol? 'Cause then we might be kindred spirits."

"Your guess is as good as mine. I've never met any, but a lot of demons agree that they exist. The real arguments start up when people ask where the visions come from."

Newton's melodrama was starting to irritate me, so I cut to the chase. "Where do they come from then? Major demon television network?"

"The Powers That Be," he answered simply.

I frowned. "Be what?"

Newton laughed softly. "Your guess is as good as mine. But according to what I've heard, and seen, there's definitely something out there, and it's definitely keeping an eye on our kind. How else do you explain your visions?"

I didn't have an answer for that, so I just drained my beer and slumped further down in my seat. Frankly, the thought of something, *anything*, watching over me and using me as some kind mystical radio antenna disturbed me more than I wanted to admit.

Painful as it was to believe myself alone in my crusade, it was far less scary than the alternative.

Newton seemed to pick up on my change in moods, since he let it lie and talked quietly for a few minutes about baseball. I gave non-committal answers and engaged myself in slowly peeling the label off my beer bottle.

8 *Skin Deep*

Newton's semi-serious discussion of baseball trailed off, and I looked up expectantly. He looked uncomfortable in the extreme, his jaw working slightly. Then, finally, he spoke again.

"Wolfram and Hart called me today." His voice was flat and emotionless, and he looked at me intently, as if wondering how I'd react.

We sat in silence as the blue-skinned waiter replaced our drinks. Newton and I hadn't spoken about Wolfram and Hart since our first discussion, and part of me had been quietly hoping he'd told them where to stick their offer. Evidently, he hadn't.

I leaned forward once the waiter moved out of earshot. "What did they want?"

Newton toyed with his beer, refusing to meet my gaze. "Mac wants me to come and meet him - so we can discuss my salary."

I felt sick, and not from the beers. "So you're goin' with them?"

"I don't know," he answered honestly. "I...it really seems like the best deal I'll get anywhere. But..."

"But?"

Newton sighed. "I've never done anything like this before, Doyle. Not even close. I don't want to do it alone." His gaze met mine. "I want you to come with me."

I nearly choked on my beer. "Listen, man - "

"Hang on a minute," he said, raising his hand in a placating fashion. "I know you don't trust them. Neither do I, really. For guys like us, trust is a luxury we can't afford. You know what I mean."

I shook my head in denial, but the memory of how quickly I'd lied to Kate nudged me, laced in guilt.

"Of course you do," Newton continued, his voice low and persuasive. "Our very existence is bathed in lies. I bet your father's name isn't filled in on your birth record, right? From birth, we've been lied to, or we've had to lie to others. Wolfram and Hart's giving us a way out - where the lies aren't necessary any more."

"Those lies aren't necessary any more," I retorted. "I bet Lindsey has a whole new set of ones for you."

"Maybe. But we'll be safe. No more stupid risks...no more 'monster masks' or holding back to avoid out-performing the other cops...it sounds like a pretty good deal to me. Wolfram and Hart takes care of their own, Doyle. They want to help us."

"The LAPD takes care of its own, too," I said defensively. "And they don't put murderers back on the streets."

"When are you going to get it, Doyle?" Newton asked earnestly. "Sure, the LAPD takes care of their own, but we aren't *part of their own*. We're different. Why can't you accept that? The humans can't tolerate us; it just isn't in them."

"Kate tolerates me," I disagreed angrily. "She understands me. What's more, she's my friend. I won't go behind her back."

"Kate tolerates a part of you," Newton retaliated swiftly. "The human part. Be honest. If she could destroy your demon side without taking the rest of you with it, she would do it in a second, wouldn't she? She's a bigot, plain and simple."

"Hell, I'd probably do the same if I could," I growled back. "Does that make *me* a bigot?"

Newton looked directly into my eyes, as if he was reading my thoughts off the insides of my eyeballs. "No. It makes you confused and hurt, loathing yourself but unable to do anything about it."

"You've been there."

He laughed bitterly. "Some mornings, I still am. You know, back when I was fifteen, I actually tried it? Tied a noose up to my bedroom ceiling, stood on a chair, the whole performance."

My throat was as tight as if I was the one being hanged. "What happened?"

"I chickened out. Went demon when the chair tipped over. As it turned out, my demon side was a hell of a lot harder to suffocate than the human. My mother was in the next room, watching TV. She must have heard me gurgling like a clogged drain, because she opened my bedroom door and looked in at me, dangling there in demon form. Then she closed the door and locked it." Angrily, he downed about half his bottle in one gulp, and then slammed it down on the table. "Tell me again how understanding humans can be."

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I shook my head: no words came to mind. I remembered standing at the window of my shabby rented apartment in the early months after Harry's death, contemplating the four floors and street below. But that hadn't been so much about the demon as it had all the rest.

"The court case," Newton said, then, looking at me intently, abruptly breaking the silence. "Wolfram and Hart..."

"What?"

"You won't get a better opportunity to prove your loyalties to them. If you were willing to go back on the stand, to let Mac recall you as a witness, to question you again about some new stuff you 'remembered'..."

He stopped, maybe seeing the reluctance in my eyes. I saw the hint of desperate hope in his. He didn't want to do this alone. I didn't want to let him down. "I - I don't know Newton, I... Kate..." A movement behind him caught my eye and I looked up. "Kate."

She was standing not ten feet away, and from the look on her face, she'd been listening for some time.

"Doyle, what the hell's going on?" she said.

8.24 Chapter 24

Kate was staring at me like she couldn't believe the scene that was in front of her.

"What's - going - on?" she repeated, her voice grating in her throat.

"Just talking, Lockley," Newton said smoothly, setting the 'charm' switch onto full.

She just glared at him. I could've told him that one wouldn't work. "Wolfram and Hart," she said slowly. "So the rumours really are true that they employ demons *other* than their legal staff. And you two - they're making a little recruitment drive on LA's demon population, huh? Do they have to fill an equal opportunities quota on you guys or something?"

The air around us dropped to Arctic temperatures as Kate and Newton faced each other. Newton glanced away.

I was glad the bar we'd come to was so quiet. The only person around was a drunk guy with horns, who slumped oblivious over the counter. The staff had found some pressing tasks to attend to in the back.

Kate strode over to us. She said flatly, "So now I know where you've been getting to lately. Sneaking off to meetings of Demons Anonymous."

Newton got up. He'd paled visibly in the face of the discovery he feared so much. He looked about ready to flee, but he didn't move, just stared at Kate. I stared at Kate too.

"You don't understand," I told her.

She cut me off before I could continue. "Too damn right, I don't. You were talking about throwing this case over to their side. Have you gone nuts? Hello? Don't you recall they're the bad guys? I knew something was going on, but I thought you were in trouble, not... not..." Words failed her. A rare enough event.

I took the opportunity to get a word in edgeways. "Kate, no. It's not about Wolfram and Hart. I mean, he wants to go over to them, sure, and he wants me to go with him. That doesn't mean I'm gonna do it, right? An' Newton, he's got his reasons, his life among humans hasn't exactly been a ball. It's not his fault. He's not a bad guy..."

"Only the *enemy*," she snapped.

"No," I said. Newton looked drawn. "It's not like that - and don't talk about him like that, Kate. You might've heard some of what we were talking about, but I can tell you didn't get any of it. Not in here." I angrily bounced my fisted hand off my chest in the region of my heart. "He's a decent guy. It's just that he has a different perspective on things. He sees so much that others don't."

"Things that you see as well?" she asked, her features set in stone. "Because you're a demon too?"

"Half." But I nodded. "I never met nobody else who knew what it was like, really knew. He's been in the LAPD, tryin' to protect humans, for years - but he's not really one of them. He'll never belong. They'll never accept him as he truly is. He'll always have to hide from them, or suffer the consequences of discovery... and that's all true for me, too."

"When you say 'humans,'" Kate said softly, "You sound like you're talking about the enemy."

8 Skin Deep

"Maybe I am. Kate, what if he's right?"

"Bullshit. When did it become 'them' and 'us' with you, Doyle? When were things ever that simple?"

Newton spoke before I could respond, surprising me. He seemed to have regrouped; he now glared at Kate with intense dislike as he said, "You know, I don't like the attitude you take with him, Lockley. You do this often, do you? Tell him he's not good enough because of his blood? Make him think that he has to repress what he really is, and then call yourself his friend? Three years of crushing everything that's in him that *you* can't accept... is it any wonder he doesn't know who he is anymore?"

I glared. "Thanks a bunch, Newton, pal."

"I'm sorry, but it's the truth," he said. "This... this is what you need to get away from, to give yourself room to grow. And not just you. It's you and me both that I'm talking about, Doyle. We've both let ourselves be overrun by a world tailored to *them*."

Kate glared daggers at him. "I *never* told him he wasn't good enough..." Her eyes sparked fury.

"Perhaps not overtly. But it's all there in your attitude. You can't escape it."

"I never - I..." She stopped, and looked at me, and suddenly she looked doubtful and lost. "You want to be a demon full-time now?" she asked. "Is that what you're saying? 'Cause I always thought you were only slightly more comfortable with that than I am." She slammed both fists down on a table, hard enough to bruise - but apparently she didn't notice the pain. "Three years I've known you, Doyle. Three years. Does he know you better than I do, after a matter of days?"

I couldn't answer but she read the answer anyway from my face. Her features became all the more tight and strained. Behind her, Newton, looking uncomfortable and a little mortified, made a quiet exit, apologetically mouthing across to me soundless words I didn't catch.

Kate said, "If you're looking to fit in, you're looking at the wrong place. You're not a demon, Doyle. Wolfram and Hart isn't your home."

"That's right, but what about Newton? Him and me, we're two of a kind. What you think of him, goes for me."

"Just because you've a lot of common ground doesn't mean he's doing you any favours, or that this weird catharsis you seem to be sharing is any good for you!"

Her muscles were taut with tension, the fists hanging at her sides white-knuckled. "I know it must be difficult, being what you are, but maybe you have to face that you don't really belong anywhere - because, hell, *how many of us really do?* You just have a really peculiar ancestry to blame it on."

"I-"

She silenced me with a glare. "Am I your enemy now, Doyle?" she asked, and there wasn't just anger in her face.

"No, Kate-"

But she'd spun on her heels and was already walking away. I staggered to my feet, tripping over my chair. By the time I recovered my balance, she was already out the door.

"*Damn it, Kate!*"

I ran out and along the quiet street, and turned one corner in time to see her car disappear around the next.

8.25 Chapter 25

I wasted maybe a couple of hours angrily walking the streets kicking at debris on the sidewalk and putting off the moment when I'd have to face either of them again before I made my way back to the precinct.

And when I got back, it was to find the place in turmoil.

I grabbed onto the arm of one of the bodies that was rushing around talking. It belonged to Ed Smith, a homicide detective I vaguely knew.

"What the hell's goin' on?" I yelled, above the noise.

"Doyle. Oh, shit, *Doyle*." He looked flustered. "In the cells - they just found that suspect, Allen - shit, there's gonna be trouble... Harrison'll be waiting to see you."

"Found Allen? What-?"

8 *Skin Deep*

Someone else snagged his arm, dragging his attention away from me. I pushed past him and down the corridor that led to the cells. Stopped short.

They were wheeling her out, uncovered, on a morgue stretcher.

Her body flopped like a broken doll on the stretcher as they wheeled her along. There were black bands of bruises ringing her neck, deep marks sunken into her flesh, the unmarked skin white and puffed around them. Her face was colourless, her expression a grimace in death, and she didn't look even her pitiful eighteen years. Her eyes were open and staring, terror in their glazed depths.

Eighteen years old and she'd hanged herself in her cell - and, somehow, looking at her now, it was easy to forget the things we knew and suspected she'd done, the people she'd hurt, the people she might've killed. I stared at her body and I think I knew, then, that this was it. This wasn't just the end for her.

The stretcher rolled by and Harrison was on the other side of it. He approached me with one hand outstretched; index finger jabbing, pointing viciously. His face, distorted with anger, shouting into mine.

You. My office. Now.

8.26 Chapter 26

Harrison read the note she'd left aloud. When I saw it, later, the note itself was almost incoherent, badly spelt, grammar practically non-existent. But none of that came across right then.

"...I see that spiked, red-eyed face every time I close my eyes, and when I do it doesn't look like a mask, it looks real. He's a monster. I can't stand the way he looks at me outside court; when I'm in my cell. He's determined to see me in prison. I can't rest for the memory of that face, and I can't take it any more."

Harrison finally fell silent and looked up from reading. His gaze on me was hostile in a way that went far beyond the usual pompous irritation. "It's clear to me," he said accusingly, "that you badgered this suspect to the point of suicide."

I opened my mouth, closed it again when words failed me. After working my lips silently for a few seconds, I finally managed to choke out, "I... it can't be - I haven't seen her since court. Not for days. I-" Surely I couldn't have bothered her so much, my demon face couldn't have preyed on her enough that she'd kill herself after days without any direct contact with me. *Surely...*

Lindsey McDonald's protestations came to mind: that she was still a child, still just a girl. My own defence, that a youth was more like to panic, less able to think with calm and logic...

This couldn't be happening.

Did Alicia Allen realise it wasn't a mask she'd seen? That monsters were real? Had my demon killed a girl... without even meaning to?

"This didn't happen for nothing," Harrison was saying, his voice a snarl. "Don't try to worm your way out of this one, Doyle. You're suspended, pending an enquiry. Now get out of here before I have you thrown out. And I want your badge handed in ASAP."

8.27 Chapter 27

I went straight to the nearest bar. There didn't seem to be anything much else to do. Of the two people I might've gone to for support, Newton was nowhere to be found and, in all the uproar and confusion, I didn't know where Kate had gotten to either. Not that she'd probably even deign to speak to me if I did find her. She probably didn't even want to know me any more.

After a drink in that bar, I moved on to the next. And the next again after that. I drank my way across town to the bar which had been Newton's and my customary haunt.

I was working my way through a second scotch when he finally came in. He sat down beside me, looking flustered and harassed, and his hand went straight for the bottle that stood in front of me on the counter.

"I went back to the station," he said. "Shit, Doyle."

I nodded. That was an assessment I agreed with, on the whole. We sat in silence for a time, drinking. Newton breathed heavily at first, like he'd hurried there, but his breaths evened out after a time.

Then, he opened his mouth and, raggedly, told me what I already knew. "Damn it, Doyle, but they've done for you with this. Didn't I tell you they'd get to you - that you'd go down because of your demon side. I just didn't expect it'd be so damned soon. But no way this one slips through an enquiry. Even if you didn't directly do anything to her beyond the arrest. Dead teenagers turn heads, even if they are murderers themselves."

I nodded slowly. The alcohol had anaesthetised me somewhat by that time. I stared blankly into the middle distance, which happened to be the bare brick wall at the back of the counter, seeing not the brickwork but everything falling apart again around me.

"I know, Newton," I sighed. I drank. I reclaimed the bottle from Newton, re-filled, and drank again. "Get your own," I said, waving the bottle at him with half-hearted mirth. "This one's taken. I think I'm just gonna crawl into it and build myself a little home inside there for the next decade."

Newton frowned at me. "There is... another option," he said hesitantly. He stopped, as though he regretted bringing it up again. "I'm sorry, Doyle. I know it's not what you want. You already told me that much. Forget I mentioned it again." He patted my arm in a gesture of consolation, of sympathy. "Let's just get drunk."

He didn't have to outline what he meant, I already knew what it was. And I couldn't help thinking it over again, despite his efforts to move onto other subjects. I'd lost Kate. I'd lost my police career. What was there left? What else was there for me to do?

"You know," I said slowly, doubts dragging my voice, but spurred on by drink and an overwhelming desire not to end up alone again, whatever the cost, nor fighting against the only person I had left that I might call a friend, "I guess I don't have a lot left to lose. Maybe I could just talk to your Wolfram and Hart guy for now, right?"

He nodded, understanding and a warm hint of gratitude in his eyes. "Yeah, Doyle, I can arrange that."

That was when the door of the bar bounced back on its hinges, smacking into the wall with such a fearsome crack that I looked up in faintly nervous anticipation, wondering what demonic terror was about to stride across the threshold.

Kate stomped into the bar, her hands balled into tight fists at her sides and an expression of grim, determined fury on her face that sent nearby demons ducking out of sight behind their tables or scuttling hurriedly out of the back door. Beside me, Newton swore under his breath.

I couldn't tear my eyes from her as she stalked over to our table. I hadn't expected to see her again, not so soon, certainly hadn't thought she'd seek me out after what had happened between us. "Kate?" I asked. "What're you-?"

"Get away from him," she said, in a low, cold voice. I was startled to realise she was talking to Newton. "Right now." She drew her gun and levelled it, seemingly oblivious to the hordes of very angry demons watching her from the room's shadows.

Newton gaped at her. My face must have been a mirror of his.

"Kate?" I repeated stupidly. I knew she didn't think much of Newton, but this was rather excessive, even by her standards.

"He's not your friend." She didn't turn her eyes from him. "Now, stand up, Newton. Stand up and move away from my partner, and keep your goddamned hands where I can see them or I swear I'll blast them clean off."

"Excuse me," an Arreck demon growled pointedly at her, tapping its claws on the top of the table it was sitting at. "We only allow a very exclusive clientele in--"

"Yeah. The warty and the slimy." She still didn't turn. "Shut the hell up unless you want to exchange that ugly mug of yours for a blast crater." Her fingers flexed on the gun with a certain glee. The demon fell silent, and the majority of the bar's clientele started enthusiastically pretending to be oblivious to the three of us. Newton cast me a disbelieving glance that said, *'This is your best friend?'*

I would have shrugged back at him, if I hadn't been too busy trying to figure what Kate could possibly be talking about. Newton not my friend? "Kate, what's goin' on?" I asked somewhat pleadingly.

Newton was looking slightly nervous, Kate was looking more than slightly trigger happy. I moved in front of Newton, interrupting Kate's line of fire with my own body.

She studied us, her expression wary. A jerk of her head flipped hair from her narrowing eyes. Even though it was now pointed at me, she didn't lower the gun. Probably on principle.

She said, "He works for Wolfram and Hart, Doyle."

"Yeah, Kate, I told you--"

"No. I don't mean he's some sap they're just getting their hooked tentacles into. I mean he works for them. For a few years now, I should think."

She took a breath. There was no doubt in her eyes. Maybe a trace of pity, as she finally let her gaze meet mine. "When I left you after we'd argued, I managed to pick up Newton's trail again. I didn't believe his story. Call it prejudice if you like, more than any special instinct. You know how I feel about this demon stuff. It's immaterial in this instance, though. He was talking on a cellphone inside his car when I found

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him. He sat there for a long time, talking. I couldn't hear anything, of course, but the conversation looked pretty intense. When he finally drove off, I tried to follow. Lost him close to the station, and wasted time trying to catch his trail again - when I gave up and returned to the station his car was in the lot outside.

"I found him," she said, her voice hard, "coming back from the cells - and promptly lost him again in the furore that erupted after they found Allen dead." Her implication was clear in her voice.

I didn't know what to think. My grip on Newton's arm slackened but neither he nor I otherwise moved. There had to be some mistake. With Kate's attitude to demons, it could easily be an overreaction. I wasn't just going to let her shoot Newton.

Kate continued. "While everyone was distracted, I did a little digging through your new friend's desk. Some pretty heavy-duty locks on those drawers to keep things from your police buddies, Newton." I'd mused a few times that I'd have liked to know where she'd acquired those lock picking skills. "The papers I found in there are suspect to say the least. Papers about the court case, about Allen, about someone referred to as 'the target' - now who would that be, Newton?"

She said, "I've been looking for you for hours, Doyle, to tell you, and the demon bars I've trolled..." A brief flash of malignance in her eyes before she took a breath and visibly made herself calm. "But never mind that. This whole thing was a set-up. A set-up to lure you in, because they knew you'd fling a direct approach right back in their faces. The whole point of this isn't to get him, they've already got him. It's you. It was always about you.

"Now get the hell out of my way so I can shoot the bastard, huh?"

I didn't get out of her way, but I did turn to Newton, whose expression was stonily blank. He wasn't looking at me, though. He was looking at Kate. He put his hand on my shoulder, squeezed, a friend's gesture of support which he made as though the last few minutes hadn't happened.

"You think this makes any difference?" he told her, his voice calm and reasonable as ever. Nothing was changed. Still Newton. No evil facade uncovered, just the same man I'd been talking to for the last few hours. "It makes no difference, Detective Lockley. He knows now that he doesn't have to live like this, hiding pathetically from the humans around him. That there's somewhere else to go. Another option. People that are like him. You think he's going to turn that down? You are too late, Lockley. You couldn't have been on time. He's already made his choice. It was inevitable."

His confidence made it clear he believed what he was saying, that he couldn't imagine me choosing any other path but his and, watching him, I couldn't see the deception, only the guy I'd come to know with whom I shared so many common experiences, the only person who'd ever really understood.

"So she's right, then?" I said softly. "This was all a bluff? All the time, Wolfram and Hart were after me?"

Newton shook his head. "At first they wanted Allen. You were targeted to win us this case, a way to get to her. We'd suspected you weren't completely human for some time. A few too many miraculous escapes, a few too many off-the-wall cases. It was either you or Lockley. The mask story clinched it. It was me that persuaded the firm you were more important than Allen. That we were going to lose the case anyway, but we had something better to concentrate our efforts upon."

'We', I thought blankly. Wolfram and Hart weren't 'them' to Newton, they were we. Kate was right. The rest took a few more seconds to sink in.

"And Allen," I said, realisation sweeping over me. "Allen was prepared to make a fuss because you were losing her case. So you cut your losses. You decided you had more to gain with her out of the way."

"That's right. That's how important you are to the firm, Doyle. Your demon abilities, your visions--"

"*You killed an eighteen year old girl to set me up so I had no option but to go your way,*" I snarled. My fist came around with all my strength behind it, in a roundhouse punch that stretched him out on the floor.

"No fighting!" growled the demon behind the bar. "I may not be able to call the cops--"

"We are the freaking cops!" Kate barked at him.

He ignored her. "-but I can ask Mollach and his friends to escort you off the premises." A group of four very large demons stood up from a table in the shadows.

I stared at them. If they'd ever made the movie '*Teenage Mutant Ninja Hippos*', the cast would've looked like that - but probably a *lot* less scary. "We'll take it outside," I said quickly, seeing Kate bristle and clutch her gun tighter, and recognising the danger signs.

8 *Skin Deep*

I reached down and snagged Newton's collar. Marched out of the bar dragging him behind me - out into the quiet street which the bar faced onto, dark now, illuminated by a single streetlight some way down and the faint glow escaping from the mostly blacked-out windows of the bar.

A street largely hidden from human view.

I flung Newton away from me. He hit the wall and bounced back off it, but he kept his balance and turned it into a spin round to face me. I was aware of Kate behind me, not interfering, just waiting to see what I would do.

"I know you're angry now," Newton said, wiping blood from his face, "but when you think about it you'll see - I couldn't have done anything else. I know what you've been through. We're the same. I wanted to get you out of this, to give you a real chance..."

"You lied to me!"

I lunged forward to smash his face against the wall again. But his hands shot out to meet mine and we grappled. He had about twice my body weight, leaving me no choice but to call my demon side to the fore.

"You see? It's what you are," he said. "You can't not use it. If you stay in their world, playing by their rules, sooner or later someone's going to discover you. And then you'll be finished. Your only choice is to come with me."

"To do what? Kill junkie kids in their cells?"

"Survival, Doyle. Who knows if their concepts of good and evil even apply to us? Like I said before, how can we be sure we've even a human soul to lose? And you know as well as I do that Allen was a murderer. Not one of those you're so hot to protect. One of the ones you'd protect against. One of the one's you'd have killed yourself, in the line of duty."

The image of the man I'd shot flickered before my eyes. I banished it. Different. It was different. I shook my head grimly, as I shoved Newton backwards, the strength of my demon making a mockery of even his muscular human physique. His back hit the exterior wall of the demon bar. I yanked him forward, then slammed him back again. His head jerked against the brickwork with a dull smack and he choked on a grunt of pain.

"No," I growled. "You guys murder her when she's helpless, and that makes her a victim. You think I'd ever join your people, with methods like that?" His head hit the wall again: punctuation.

It wouldn't take much more to smash his skull completely. But then I hesitated, held back. He looked up bloodily, snaring my eyes with his own.

Time slowed down. I stared into Newton's bleeding face, and thought of all the things we'd shared in so short a time. We'd made a connection - and if all those things had been lies, surely that connection couldn't have happened. In *some* sense, he must have been honest with me.

Minutes ago, I'd understood completely Newton's reasons for going over to Wolfram and Hart. Nothing had changed. The deception only meant that it must have happened earlier.

I knew then that I couldn't do it. Yeah, Newton was the enemy, but I understood all too well how he'd gotten there. He could've been me. He was as human as I was. He *might've* been me.

Newton looking at me must've seen... what? That I wasn't going to kill him. That, whatever he might say now, his methods and his treachery had lost my trust forever. That my decision was made, and I didn't belong to his world.

I barely saw him move - only the brief shimmer as his features blurred and then the pavement as it crunched up into my face.

What-? Newton-? I blinked. The hands on the ground in front of me were human again, which explained why I felt so lousy. Squinting at the concrete wasn't going to solve anything, though. I forced my limbs to move. Small points of light danced over my vision as I staggered to my feet. I almost fell down again. My face hurt about as much as you'd expect it would after being mashed into the pavement. Blood dripped off my chin.

Newton was already running, already about fifty yards away down the alley. I knew he was in his demon form, which I'd never seen. I couldn't see it now - only a vague impression of horns jutting from the side of his head, and a figure more bulky than even his human norm. He was too far away already for me to make out anything much. Kate snapped off a shot and levelled her gun for another - and I lurched desperately across the six feet between us and dragged her arm down, ruining the shot.

8 Skin Deep

In the distance the running figure, which had stumbled at the first shot, righted itself and ran unsteadily on. It disappeared out of sight around a corner, already almost indistinguishable from the darkness it moved through.

I stared at the space where it had been for a long moment, then sat down heavily on the ground. Kate looked at me and swore.

"You look like shit. You know, you *deserve* to look like shit. Why in the hell did you let him go?"

I couldn't muster any more reply than a shrug. I took deep breaths, tried to get a hold of the wreckage he'd left my thoughts in. Choked on the breaths, and couldn't do much with the thoughts either.

Kate regarded me wordlessly. After a moment, she said, "I don't understand why you ever considered his offer to start with."

"I'm sorry," I said awkwardly. "I guess... the urge to belong is stronger than I imagined."

"Even to 'belong' with the bad guys?" she asked, staring flatly back at me.

I nodded slowly. "Even that, I guess."

Her expression remained unmoved. "I'm human. You think I '*belong*'? You think those assholes with their Scully jokes and their 'get laid' jokes think I '*belong*'?" She grit her teeth.

"If you ask me," she said, "You're nothing like him."

I shrugged and turned away. "It's academic anyway. He betrayed me. He played me. I..."

"He's a demon," she grated.

"I'm a demon."

"You're... different. You're you."

"It's not like Newton had any reason to be loyal to humanity. He said that--"

"Spare me the sob story, Doyle. For all you know, it could be just another pack of lies. You can't let yourself believe anything that guy told you."

"No," I protested. "That's not true. There was something there. Something... real."

Kate looked back at me cynically. After a long moment she sighed and reached out, hauled me unceremoniously to my feet. Once there, she gripped both my shoulders at arm's length in about the closest she'd probably ever come to a consoling hug. "It's okay," she said. "They found a weakness and they exploited it. It's okay to want to... to be understood. To belong somewhere. I just wish you'd come to me before letting it get this far."

She just held me like that, in silence, as the seconds ticked by, and I thought of what had happened, and how I hadn't trusted her.

I sighed and I nodded, slowly, finally meeting her gaze.

"Come on," she said. "Let's get back."

But although I nodded again and I followed her, I found my attention drifting back over my shoulder to the street corner where Newton had disappeared.

8.28 Chapter 28

A couple of days later, I went back to Harrison's office.

When I entered the station, I found that walking into an ice factory might have allowed for a warmer reception.

Whatever working atmosphere the place had quickly died once I walked in, churning into an ugly low hustle. It could have been one of those slow-mo shots, like in those old western movie flicks, when the sheriff walks into the saloon before some dramatic showdown and the piano just shuts off.

I knew two things for sure.

One, that I was a sheriff without a badge.

And second...

8 *Skin Deep*

Kate's desk was empty. Hell, her coffee mug was empty. A rarity these days with the workload and everything. I hadn't seen her since my last night with Newton, after she saw me back in one piece and made damn sure I missed the rest of the bars on the way. I couldn't say the same for her when she left.

I unclenched my fist; looked down at my hand and watched the blood return to my whitened knuckles.

It might actually be easier. Facing Kate would be left for another time, a time much less sober. Then, I noticed the edge of something square tucked neatly behind a pile of files.

I unconsciously pushed it further into the paperwork, burying it. She didn't want others to know, but I did. Kate had asked a friend to snap a picture of him at a precinct New Year party. He hadn't ever even known it existed. From what Kate told me about him, he'd only have laughed at her sentiment if he had.

Harrison's office was unnaturally quiet when I reached the door. I could almost feel the stir of hushed voices behind me dying into an echo.

This town wasn't big enough for the both of us.

8.29 Chapter 29

As I began to walk out of the precinct for the last time, I stole one final glance at Kate's desk. The picture, tucked out of sight. Then, letting my gaze slip, the rest of the station I'd spent the last three years growing into.

Family.

Crude, but nonetheless there.

Another life lost. How many did Brachen demons have, anyway?

Newton... I never found out what happened to him. He didn't come back into work, not even to resign. There was a lot of concern for a time - until people forgot, like people do. Maybe Newton's friends weren't too friendly after all. Maybe there was something in what he'd said, about how we were too different, behind the human facade, to ever be really accepted in this human world.

Newton's disappearance was blamed on me in whispers and rumours, but since nobody had anything solid to pin on me, whispers and rumours they stayed.

Kate always maintained to me that she killed him, with that one shot. She claimed she was aiming to: hit him square in the back with a shot that would have killed a human, but probably the demon could stagger on, survive for a little longer. Maybe she's right, and he bled to death in some alley, ending up a John Doe in a morgue, or else in a lab with his demon corpse being prodded by curious scientists. Would he have reverted to human if he'd died?

Would I?

Despite everything, I hope he's still out there. Collecting a three figure salary from Wolfram and Hart's New York branch, or some such.

I guess if you try to suppress something, it'll eventually end up coming back at you - in spades. I spent the first three years of my life since Harry's death pushing to one side most every thought of what I was in favour of revenge. Dealt with the demon in me by not dealing with it at all - hiding it from the world and using it simply as a weapon when I needed it. Pretending it was nothing more than a tool to serve my own ends, and not an integral part of who and what I was. Wolfram and Hart just found the right buttons to press.

I thought Newton and I were two of a kind, and he turned out to be a killer.

Maybe I wasn't so far wrong, after all.

8.30 Chapter 30

Present Day

"Sometimes I think it's easier to fight demons than people," Kate said quietly. She was sitting on the floor, arms hugged around her knees, her gun clutched in one hand even though it was unnecessary now. The paramedics were on their way. The rasps of Hannoy's pained but steady breathing filled the attic room. "Easier to draw a line and declare 'this side good' and 'this side evil' when you're fighting monsters, vampires, whatever."

She looked at Hannoy, lying on the floor in front of her. "But I'm not sure which side of that line he falls on, either."

8 Skin Deep

I stopped my restless pacing of the room. "And what about me?" I asked.

She glanced up, her eyes hollow. "I know whose side you're on. Don't beat yourself up over this, Doyle. Hannoy's going to live. You didn't kill him. Any number of completely human cops might've done the same, given the right circumstances, after seeing that girl's corpse, and they don't have the force of habit from four years fighting real vampires to contend with."

"But they didn't do it. I did. We kill demons because demons kill people. I've killed people. Where's your line?"

I swung around and struck out a punch at the wall of the attic. The plaster crumbled through, my hand sinking up to the wrist.

"Stop it," Kate said. "It's not the same. Yours were duty, trying to stop the real killers. I've killed more people than you have. Hannoy's killed a lot more people than either of us, and his weren't duty, and he meant to do it, and he *enjoyed* it. And he's human - which for some reason I'm not quite one-hundred-percent on right now grants him special dispensation: a trial and a ticket to a secure cell and a lifetime's mental care instead of a swift kill... what are you doing?"

I'd started to pull my hand out of the wall before it registered that my fingers were moving freely through air and space on the other side. I leaned further in, feeling around. The space went back and back, right to the end of my reach. "There's something..."

I wrenched my arm aside, yanking on the edge of the hole I'd made. Half the wall came away as I jumped backwards, crumbly plaster spilling out over my feet. Kate leaped up with an exclamation of surprise.

I leaned forward to look into the hole. About the last two metres of the end of the room had been partitioned off. A little of the dim light from the rest of the attic trickled inside to illuminate the contents of the small den. The gothic paraphernalia. The newspaper clippings. The... mementos from the victims. For the first time I pinned down a faint unpleasant smell which had been present from the start - and its source. This hadn't just been going on for the past few months and it hadn't just been the vampire-style killings. Hannoy had done some diversifying in his grim obsession before working his way back around to his original pet psychosis.

Kate, behind me, made a small sound. I turned: she was staring at the tapestry of clippings that covered almost the entire blocked-off end wall of the attic. I ran my eyes over unsolved brutalities stretching back over the past five or six years.

"Where's that line?" Kate murmured under her breath.

8.31 Chapter 31

Kate was oddly quiet as she drove me back to the office. She drew the car up a little way down the street and killed the engine, and we sat there in silence for several seconds.

Eventually, she said, "There never were any good times, were they? You just get used to things the way they are, and then find you miss them after they're over."

"Oh, I don't know. I reckon we had our moments," I began, but stopped when I saw her expression. Reluctantly, I nodded. Trying to avoid looking at each other, our eyes met anyway in the rear-view mirror.

"I have missed it, though," she said. "Missed not working alone, or with someone I have to make excuses to because I can't tell them what's really going on. I've missed you."

"I'm sorry," I said, inadequately.

"It wasn't your fault."

I said nothing: I rather thought that it was.

"Anyway, you can't go back," she sighed, flexing her hands where they rested on the steering wheel.

I thought about it for a moment, then concluded it really didn't make any difference whether she meant that as a generic 'you' or not. "No. We - I - burned our bridges," I said.

"I think we nuked them," she murmured, with the faintest trace of humour. I knew she wasn't just talking about our history regarding Newton. She turned to me and smiled, a rare genuine smile without a trace of sarcasm or irony. It highlighted all the fine lines in her face that hadn't been there even six months ago. "Things change. Life moves on. I'll be all right. You should worry about yourself, and your people. Your jailbait girlfriend." She gestured to the door, and waited. After a long pause, she asked, "Are you... planning on getting out of this car anytime soon?"

8 Skin Deep

"I suppose I am," I said slowly. I leaned over and touched her shoulder, a parting gesture conveying more than words ever could. Halfway out of the car, I stopped and turned back to her, crouching down to address her through the half-open door. "I can't go back, that's true enough. But you could always come and work with me."

But she shook her head - as I'd known, really, that she would. "It's not just who I am," she said, briefly. Meaning - a cop, always and absolutely. In her blood; a family burden and duty. "It's who you are now. It's not the same. It couldn't be the same. You've... moved on. Found something new. Besides," she added with a snort of laughter, "Your girlfriend looks at me like she's just waiting for her chance to get me."

"Wes likes you, though," I protested, only half seriously trying to defend my offer, because it was true that the thought of Kate and Faith having to work together for any extended length of time made the brain boggle.

She rolled her eyes. "Don't tell him I said this, but I guess he has a certain... goofy, bookish charm." Her expression grew sober again, though, very quickly. "I mean it, Doyle. I know it was rough, those first few months, but you have a new life now. And it has to be better than all that shit we put up with at the precinct. I don't want to intrude. Just remember you can call me when you need me. To watch your back. And I'll... well, I'll remember I can do the same."

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah." I stood holding the door, and didn't move. "They're good people, Kate. More than employees. Actually, the 'employees' label is kinda debatable, at that. It's been a good deal, though. More than I'd dared hope for." I looked along the street to where the dark outline of the office building rose up into the night. The familiar shape of the convertible squatted outside, and the lights were on up on my - our - floor. I winced remembering the circumstances under which I'd last walked out of that place. "Anyway, I guess I better be goin'. I think I've got some major sucking up to do."

"I'll see you around," she said, almost laughing. "Stay alive, huh?"

"You too."

I shut the door as she started up the engine, and stood back and watched her as she drove away.

The initial drops of a rare rain shower started to fall as I turned away and headed along the sidewalk.

8.32 Chapter 32

I could hear their voices as I ascended the stairs to the office, shaking out the droplets of moisture that clung to my jacket. Kate was right - it felt like coming home, coming back here now, knowing there was someone waiting for me. Even the awareness that I was heading into a severe ear-chewing from two sides simultaneously had the feel about it of... family.

It wasn't too long ago that this office had been simply dead space, with nothing to fill it but my own hastily moved in possessions and disillusionment. The loss of my second life had felt like another genuine bereavement for a time, and those months had been dark - the lack of human contact; racking up the kills by night and sleeping at my desk, mostly, by day; snatching only the briefest exchanges with Kate in hurried moments when our now separate schedules allowed, in the guilty awareness that being seen together wouldn't do much for her career.

It was good not to be alone. I took the last few steps two at a time. "Faith?" I called out. "Wesley?" Within the office, the murmured voices had ceased. I walked in, frowning over their silence.

They were sitting in the inner office, Wesley in my chair with a cup of gently steaming tea in front of him, and Faith perched on the desk, a bottle of beer in one hand, with her body angled towards him in concentration. They looked up at me with slightly dazed expressions, as though surprised to be interrupted. The whole tableau looked as though I'd walked in on a fairly intense conversation. I wondered what they'd been talking about.

"What, did I interrupt you two brushin' up on Watcher-Slayer relations with a quick match of tonsil tennis or somethin'?" I asked, with a laugh that struck the atmosphere of the room and sank like a stone.

That was when I noticed Wesley had a large band-aid stuck across his forehead, while Faith had bloody strips of bandaging on her left arm and ankle. *Shit*, I thought. Evidently they'd had a hard time of it with the demon I'd left them to deal with and now they were - understandably enough, I supposed - pissed at me.

"We were talking. Contrary to popular perception, we do that occasionally," Wesley said, although his sarcasm was half-hearted through tiredness... and something else? "Oh, and: 'hello, Doyle - yes, we survived the fight with the demon, thank you for your concern.'"

"Vampire hunt go okay? Or are even the fake ones running rings 'round you now?" Faith put in nastily.

8 *Skin Deep*

Obviously, it was time to start grovelling - at least if I didn't want to be kicked out of my own bed tonight by Faith and to have Wesley frostily declining to speak to me for, oh, at least the next ten minutes.

"Look, guys, about earlier. I'm really sorry," I began. Their faces made me falter, but I pushed onwards anyway. "I shouldn't've just gone off like that, there had to have been a better way to handle things..."

"Better than haring off like a complete and utter lousy bastard?" Faith cut in. "Yeah, I'd go with that."

I studied her. Now, I'd seen Faith mad before, and was aware that it wasn't a sight any sane man would want to see more than once in a lifetime. When a Slayer gets pissed at you, might as well give up on the idea of living or leave the country fast. When Faith slams doors, seismologists all over the city are probably peering at their instruments in consternation.

This wasn't like that. I'd never seen her angry like this, with such a coolness in her eyes, an anger that was calm and cold rather than violent and explosive.

"If I'd died tonight," she said scathingly, "I'm sure you'd have felt real guilty about not being there. I could have, you know. We both could have."

"We could have used an extra body to help out, too," Wesley added.

I took a breath, preparing to try again, but she cut me off before I could even begin. "You can save the apologies," she said. "I'm not much of a one for words, you see. Never have been. The way I figure it, you best judge a person by what they do. And, Doyle, lately what you've been doing is mostly running away from me - from us. I don't think it's too hard to figure out the message behind that."

Wesley took over, his own tones more polite and detached. "What Faith is saying is that perhaps it's time we parted ways. Clearly our presence is becoming wearying to you, and I do realise that this is after all your business and we did fall on you uninvited, so to speak, so of course I'm not blaming you for that--"

"I am," Faith muttered.

He shot her a reprimanding glare and continued. "The original terms of our staying here were that it was a temporary arrangement, until my injury had healed enough for me to resume handling Faith's training myself. Well, my leg is quite recovered, now - or near enough not to make any difference, anyway - and, all things considered, it *is* time to move on."

"What?" I choked, half laughing, half convinced they were just pulling a fast one, trying to give me a scare. I sort of remembered the arrangement Wesley was referring to. We hadn't liked each other all that much at the time, and as things had become more relaxed between the three of us it had all been forgotten because, damn it, we had something here that worked and... "You've gotta be kiddin' me! Everything's fine. Things've been goin' great! You can't *leave*!"

"When your demon boyfriend would rather fight bad guys beside Policewoman Barbie than you, that does not come under the heading 'going great,'" Faith snapped. "Think about it, Doyle. First Darla, now this. Lately, you've been shutting us out of the action every chance you get. What is it about you and freakin' blondes anyway?" Her anger intensified. "You don't get it, do you? I could've died tonight, because you abandoned us. You don't get a second chance on this. You had your choice, and you showed us right where your '*priorities*' lie."

"Faith, I am *not* screwin' Kate, if that's what that's meant to imply," I returned, fighting off unease. As I'd said to Kate earlier, the arguments were no rarity, but this had a bitterness to it that had never before coloured any of our fights. "For one thing, she thinks the demon thing is really, really gross -"

"So you just *want* to screw her, then?" Faith shot back immediately, in a tone that made it quite clear she saw no difference between the desire and the act itself, which was pretty rich, coming from her.

A pattering sound caused all our eyes to turn to the window. The rainstorm outside was gaining momentum. Shining droplets clung to the exterior of the pane until, a fraction of a second later, they were dashed aside as more drops fell, with increasing violence, swiftly growing to thick rivulets running down the windows. Our three figures stared back at us, distorted, reflected pale and transparent on a backdrop of darkness and rain-soaked glass.

"You did make a choice before," Wesley said, uncomfortably dragging our attention back. "And it forced me to reconsider a few of my own choices lately, and consider my own allegiances. This... arrangement we've had here, these last few months - none of us could say it hadn't been an experience. At times it's worked well, at others," he frowned and cleared his throat uncomfortably, "We've shown a remarkable skill for

almost getting each other horribly killed. But, when all's said and done, it isn't the way things are supposed to be, it isn't an arrangement that can possibly last. Imagine what the Watcher's Council would do if they ever discovered what you really are. We're putting you in danger every moment we continue to dally here. Faith has the right idea, if not exactly the same motives as myself. I do agree with her that it is time to leave."

Stricken, I looked to Faith. "Faith...?" My voice was a hoarse whisper. She blinked back at me, dark eyes cool and glassy in the dim artificial lighting. She sifted her stance, one hip jutting defiantly as she leaned and drummed her fingers impassively on the desk.

"A demon and a Slayer, right?" she said roughly. "Hell, whose stupid idea was that, huh? Wouldn't you just know that could never work?"

Behind her, I barely registered that Wesley gulped in a deep breath with an expression like he had bees up his nose and glared at Faith's back as though he'd like to kick her. But he didn't.

"It is better this way," he insisted. "LA's your territory. You have your own mission - your visions - your own contacts. You're perfectly right: you don't need us. And we *shouldn't* need you. It's time we struck out ourselves, the way a Slayer and Watcher ought. And the Council have been saying for some time that they'd like the Slayer to check out recent vampire activity in New Jersey."

I wondered, when had Wesley gotten so sharp? For that matter, when had Faith ever listened to him, let alone obeyed any instructions from him? When had they ever talked to each other for long enough without fighting to successfully plan anything together? How the hell had this come about?

Looking at them together now, united, I knew how.

The world seemed to have receded to a great distance, and I could feel a dull, tearing pain which logic told me wasn't physical but my brain still insisted was concentrated somewhere high up inside my rib cage. I couldn't feel my feet on the ground, and wasn't quite sure just what was keeping me standing upright.

I'd made this happen. I'd done it to myself. I'd bridged the gulf between them, acting as go-between and mediator. It had been the job they'd always needed me for, the one thing they didn't have between them, for all Faith's strength and Wesley's academic skills. They'd still needed a point of contact.

Somehow, I'd missed noticing that the bridge I'd been building had become an independent, at least semi-permanent, structure, maybe still a little rickety and makeshift and beaten by the occasional rough winds, but strong enough, all the same, to do the job.

They didn't need me any more.

And, today, I'd proved it to them.

My brain was in a state of shock, but my lips moved and shaped words anyway, running on defensive mechanisms that somehow worked independently of thought.

The rain outside was coming thick and fast now, assaulting the windows, and from the noise you'd have sworn the office was being battered by sizeable pebbles hurled from the sky, and not mere water.

"Fine," I heard myself say, without much emotion. I looked between Faith and Wesley, saw the surprise on their faces and wondered if they'd been expecting argument. But they'd made their decision - hadn't I always known, really, that it was a short-term arrangement? Deep down, in that bitter little core which never forgot that I'd never had anything I hadn't lost, or sometime wished to lose. "Fine," I repeated. "If you want to get your gear together, I'll give you a lift to LAX tomorrow. No hard feelings, huh?"

I stalked out of the room, slamming the door after me. There was an unopened bottle of Scotch down in my apartment, and it seemed as good a plan as any for the remainder of the evening.

My eyes stung and I blinked angrily, and wished I could scour the stubborn after-image of their faces from my eyes.

And I told myself it was the rain, and not that, which kept me awake through the night.

9 Lightning Lover

by Mike Dewar and Roseveare

9.1 Chapter 1

The steering wheel slipped and slid in my hands as I stared into the darkness ahead of the car, my eyes burning from lack of sleep.

The tires skidded slightly on the road, but I corrected the car's motion with a sharp twist. Neither of my companions commented on the fact that I was driving far too fast on a wet road, in appalling visibility, with no one wearing seat belts.

I think we all just wanted to get to our destination as fast as possible. Get it over with.

Clouds hung thick and dark on the horizon - the only way we'd known the sun had risen that morning was when my alarm clock had gone off. The rain had been falling last night, when we angrily went to sleep - to try to sleep. The rain had been falling when we awoke, and had kept falling throughout the morning, while Faith and Wesley ran around dismantling the pieces of my apartment that had become theirs and packing them away in suitcases. The rain was still falling as I drove a weighted car through a day as dark as night to the airport, making the wet road even wetter, the cold afternoon even colder.

Damn rain.

Wesley sat to my left, his suitcase held tight against his chest. Every now and again, a drop of water would slip through a hole in the canopy above him and drip onto his glasses, prompting an irritated swipe of his sleeve to dry them. Apart from those occasional twitches, he didn't move.

Damn Watcher.

Faith lay sprawled in the back, her boots scraping limply against the back of Wesley's seat, instead of riding up high in their customary position against the window. Usually the constant scratching noise of sole against glass annoyed the hell outta me, but at the moment I missed it.

And I wasn't pleased that I missed it, either.

Damn girl.

So what if they decided they didn't need me anymore? I was damn sure I didn't need *them*. Wesley was right: they'd dropped in on me without asking, and we'd all nearly gotten each other killed more than once.

Wesley had drugged me and left me defenceless in front a clan of demons, not to mention invaded my private space, and totally wiped out my kettle with his constant requests for tea.

Faith had abandoned both of us to go out and party on a number of occasions, more often than not after some spat with Wesley that had left me trying to play peacemaker and getting nothing for my trouble.

I wouldn't have had to worry about *Wesley*, if Faith hadn't decided to run away from her duty in the first place.

Spike wouldn't have tried to kill me if she hadn't been around to tempt him for his hat trick.

Kate might have come to work with me, if Faith hadn't been looming in the distance.

The car's tires skidded again, and I spun the steering wheel hastily to keep the car under control, changing gears as I did so.

Damn rain.

9.2 Chapter 2

I leaned against a vending machine and watched as Wesley talked to the woman behind the desk marked 'Flight Enquiries'.

Faith had planted herself in a plastic chair opposite me, and was munching her way through some bar of processed crap she'd taken from the machine at my back.

She'd been eating a candy bar the last time we were at the airport too, when we were preparing to see off the Council's team of private killers. She'd offered to share it, and then when I'd agreed, she'd-

9 Lightning Lover

I tensed. Wesley was coming back from the counter now, face grim. So this was it.

Better think of something fancy to say. Serious, yet philosophical. Above all, don't break down and start crying like a baby-man, even though you know you want to...

"The flight's delayed."

My brain froze up. My mouth, unfortunately, did not. "H-Huh? What? Oh."

Way to go, Doyle. Articulate, yet concise. I drew in a deep breath, and then realised I still had nothing intelligent to say. "Oh," I repeated dumbly.

Faith seemed to have none of my verbal impediments. "Why?" she demanded angrily. "What kinda delay?"

My heart sank. She sounded so angry that she wasn't already leaving. It cut. I tried to ignore it, but it did.

"The storm, apparently," Wesley said. His voice lacked her irritation. It just sounded tired. "All the planes are grounded." He slumped down into a chair next to her.

"Well, great," Faith said bitterly. "Just great. Pilot's afraid he might get the sniffles, so we're the ones who get screwed over."

"He's probably more concerned that a lightning bolt might blow a hole in his plane," Wesley observed. "One would assume, anyway."

Faith shoved the rest of the candy bar in her mouth and chewed glumly.

"It doesn't change anything," he continued. "We'll just leave a little later than planned. New Jersey will have to suffer unspeakable evils for a short while longer." He looked at me quizzically. "You've lived here longest - how long can we expect the storm to last?"

I wasn't entirely sure that I trusted my mouth, so I engaged my shoulders instead.

Wesley frowned. "You have no idea?"

I shrugged again. "Storms are generally a rarity around here, an' this is the worst I've seen by a long shot." I cleared my throat uncomfortably. "You're welcome to stay with me 'til it clears."

Wesley and Faith exchanged glances. "No, no. Wouldn't want to trouble you," he said politely.

I shrugged a third time. Why quit a winning formula? "It's no trouble."

Wesley shook his head. "No, I think it's best we just get a hotel room. But thank you for the offer."

As they picked up their bags, I realised Wesley was right. This delay hadn't changed anything.

But I couldn't quite shake an indefinable hope that maybe it had changed everything.

9.3 Chapter 3

The sky was no clearer as the car sped back along the road. Rain drizzled down onto the windscreen, making long glistening streams on the glass.

We sat in silence like before. But if anything, this silence was even more uncomfortable than the last. The plane tickets had promised a clean break, painful, but over fast. Now it looked like the break would be prolonged, at least for a few more hours, a slow tearing apart instead of a sharp snap.

Wesley muttered something inaudible and reached across, turning on the radio. The gentle strains of classic music filled the car. I flicked it off again, for no particular reason.

"Sorry, Wes, but I don't feel up to the Bach Brigade this early in the mornin'," I said in response to his irritated glance.

"I was *trying* to find a weather report," Wesley retorted, turning it on again. He spun the tuner knob, and the violins dissolved into static, then wobbled into electric guitars for a moment, before transforming into a bored voice.

"...ditions appear to be worsening. The forecast for the day predicts..." a gentle snort "...sunny and mild, so who knows when this storm'll ease up. I've received reports that-"

Wes shut it off.

Lightning flashed above, lighting the whole car interior white for a second.

9 *Lightning Lover*

"Jeez," I heard Faith mutter in the back. "Kinda glad we're not on that plane."

I blinked, trying to clear my blurry vision as the crash of thunder swelled through the air. The rain intensified until the canopy above us was trembling gently and all I could hear was the soft drone of raindrops on metal and cloth.

Lightning flared again, fierce and bright. Another rumble of thunder.

Abruptly, the road ahead was no longer empty. A pale figure, long red hair streaming behind it, looking directly at us with a face devoid of expression - I stomped on the brake pedal, my nerves clenching as the car fish-tailed violently and then spun.

I was vaguely aware of a surprisingly-high shriek from Wesley, as the world flashed around and around, the steering wheel twisting, trying to break free of my grip. I think I swore as I saw a street lamp rushing up to meet us-

Faith didn't make a sound, not even when we struck.

Gradually, I became aware that I was lying half-sprawled across the back seat. My hands were shaking and green, but I didn't seem to be harmed. The demon had saved me again.

Wesley had no demon to protect him, but he seemed shaken more than hurt.

Faith... Faith wasn't in the car.

I looked around frantically, and saw a crumpled figure lying in the road.

Oh God...

I scrambled out of the car, Wesley staggering after me with an uncharacteristic curse as he struggled to get purchase on the slippery ground.

"Some ride," a voice said from behind us. I spun around and nearly fell flat on the ground, my feet skidding beneath me.

"Faith, you're... you're all right," Wesley said, his voice shaking.

"Sure." She shrugged. "Slayer, remember? Takes more than one little driving incident to see me off." Sure enough, she looked unharmed, though her hands were trembling slightly. She glanced at me. "Nice driving, Doyle." The anger was back, hard and uncompromising, but I noticed that her hands had stopped trembling.

Fine. If hating me was how she dealt, so be it.

I turned my back on her and pointed at the road. "Then who's that?"

I was still demon, so I could hear the woman's heart beating before we were even near her. That saved the embarrassment of checking for a pulse, since she wasn't wearing anything. At all.

"We gotta get her out of the rain," I ordered. "Faith, Wes, lend me a hand."

Faith shot me a resentful glance for my attempt to use non-existent authority, but she bent to help. Wesley just stood there, staring down at the woman's nude form, his jaw twitching slightly.

Faith turned her anger on him. "Come on, Wesley! I know it's been a while, but can't you get your rocks off later?"

Wesley didn't respond. I don't think he even heard her.

"Wes?" I asked. "Lend a hand, huh? We need to get this girl somewhere safe, whoever she is. Now len-"

Wesley's voice trembled when he spoke. "I know who she is. Her name is Charlotte Ambrage. She's a Watcher."

9.4 Chapter 4

Wesley graciously parted with his suit jacket and we gently carried the unconscious woman into the back of the dented car - or at least Faith and I did, because Wesley was too busy turning red. I daresay I looked a little flustered myself. As I helped manoeuvre the woman onto the back seat I was very aware that under the baggy, ill-fitting jacket was nothing but bare flesh. Flesh paper-white with cold. Where my hands accidentally touched her body it was like touching ice. It seemed miraculous that she was still breathing.

9 *Lightning Lover*

While Faith and I were trying to prop 'Charlotte' into a reasonably comfortable-looking position she wouldn't immediately fall over from, Wesley slipped into the driver's seat.

"Hey! What d'you think you're doin'? You don't even have a valid licen--"

"And you shouldn't," Wesley said grimly. "And right now, I don't care. All I care about is getting home in one piece."

Then he looked like he'd almost swallowed his tongue as he realised what he'd said.

Home. He'd said home.

"So we're goin' back to the office now, then?" I asked sarcastically.

"There seems to be little choice. We can hardly carry a semi-naked woman into a hotel to book a room, can we?" he sniped back. "Besides, we have to find out what she's doing here. We may need to make use of your resources one last time... if, of course, you don't mind," he added guiltily.

I grimaced and pulled shut the door as Wesley started up the car. Faith and I were supporting the woman on either side, keeping her from falling forward and mashing her face into the back of the seats in front. Her head lolled back, shifting aside the mass of reddish curls to reveal a face that looked like it had been chipped from ice. Sharp, delicate features, all cut in white. Her eyes were closed. Wesley's suit jacket swamped her slim body, making her look tiny and wasted.

"You sure she's alive?" Faith said. Wesley turned around to glare at her warningly. "Well, I've seen livelier corpses. And yeah, I do mean that literally."

"I heard a heartbeat when we found her," I said shortly.

Faith ignored this. "So what's the story on this chick, then?" Faith prodded Wesley in the back through the upholstery of the driver's seat, making him squirm and making the car veer alarmingly. Both of us yelped, and she quickly sat back with a 'what did I do?' look in her eyes. "She an old flame of yours, Wes?"

Wes was staring forwards into the driving rain and I couldn't see his face, but the tips of his ears very definitely reddened. "Uh, n-no. Not at all. Faith, will you please set your one track mind onto a different track for once?"

She grinned, but as I smirked back at her, sharing the joke, she seemed to remember she was pissed with me and turned it into a glare. I sighed and looked away. Charlotte slumped to one side and I ended up with a mouthful of her drenched hair. Spluttering, I propped her back up.

In front of us, both hands clenched white-knuckled on the wheel, Wesley stared dead ahead in focused concentration, like he was trying to outstare the grey of the storm.

9.5 Chapter 5

Trying to carry an unconscious person inside in the dark was not an occurrence that the designers of my building had planned for - the place was a bloody death-trap. Slippery floors, tight doorways, not to mention the chairs and desks that lurked in shadowed corners to entangle arms and legs...

It wasn't helped by the fact that Wesley had worsened from his usual level of hand-eye coordination - that of a decapitated chicken - to that of a limbless decapitated chicken, forcing us to try and bump doors open with our elbows or rather, in Faith's case, her boot.

I was pretty sure at least two of those doors would never close properly again.

But eventually, after several bruises (mine), one scraped shin (Wesley's), and a banged skull (Charlotte's), we staggered down the stairs and into my apartment.

Faith, annoyingly, escaped injury, and in fact seemed hardly out of breath as she manhandled the still-slumbering Charlotte onto my bed. Without asking, of course.

After the covers had been drawn up around Charlotte's shoulders, and Wesley's jacket had been removed by an impressive feat of sleight-of-hand (and sleight-of-touch) on my part, we all stood in a little semi-circle in my bedroom and watched the sleeping woman.

I glanced at Faith. She glanced at me. We both glanced at Wesley, briefly united in our confusion.

Gradually, Wesley became aware of our fixed stares. "Er," he said vaguely, as if suddenly realising that he had been staring at Charlotte a little *too* intensely. "We should probably try to make her more comfortable. Faith, boil some water."

Faith's stare became an outright glare. "Why?" she asked petulantly.

9 *Lightning Lover*

"For a hot water bottle," I said, at the same time as Wesley said, "For tea, of course."

He blinked. "In retrospect, Doyle may have the better idea. Run along, Faith."

The English in crisis. A strange bunch.

Faith left the room slowly, full of exaggerated resentment, while Wesley ignored her with fixed determination, probably brewing imaginary tea in his mind to calm himself down. And then we were alone together. Except for the naked woman, of course.

"So... Wes," I said stupidly. He didn't respond. "How do you know this filly?"

"Woman," he said automatically, then paused. "Um, we met while we were training to be Watchers in England."

I looked down at Charlotte. "So, what, you were in the same class at Watcher School?"

"Academy, actually," he answered. "And no, she was a year ahead of me." He took off his glasses, frowned slightly at the dirty lenses, and fumbled vaguely for a jacket pocket that wasn't there.

After looking down at where it was, attached to the rest of the sodden jacket, lying on my floor, he decided to abandon propriety and just use his shirt to clean the glasses. Since the shirt was as wet as the rest of him, he didn't achieve much.

"She was - she is the daughter of a very dear friend of my father," his face darkened briefly, "and they were both very keen that we would, ahem, 'get together', so to speak. But Charlotte wasn't interested in the slightest, and I always had my head in a book, so nothing ever came of it."

He didn't say that *he* hadn't been interested, though, I noticed.

"Shortly after graduation, I was sent to work in the archives and Charlotte was sent to France to help with translating some arcane texts - her grasp of medieval French is phenomenal, quite the prodigy actually." Wesley smiled slightly. "And that was the last I saw of her."

"Faith'll be very disappointed," I said wryly. "I think she's expectin' some kind o' sordid romance or some good ol' steamy smuttiness."

Wes shook his head in a self-deprecating way. "Unfortunately not." His face abruptly turned bright red as he realised what he'd just said.

I bit back a chuckle as Faith slunk back into the room. "Water's boiling," she said irritably.

"Ah," Wesley acknowledged, still slightly flushed. "Very good. Thank you, Faith."

"Whatever." Faith glanced at me. "Are you ever going to say anything worthwhile?"

I opened my mouth to respond sharply, and realised she was looking past me. At the bed.

I nearly swallowed my tongue as I looked down and realised that Charlotte's eyes were wide open and that their gaze was focused and steady. She'd obviously been awake long enough to get her bearings.

Wesley, if anything, looked more shocked than I was, and judging from the sudden return of blood of his face, he was fervently hoping she hadn't caught his unfortunate remark. "H-hello," he said.

"Hello." Her voice sounded like a softer, more feminine version of his own with the same precise English syllables and educated inflections.

"I don't know if you'd remember me," Wesley told her, "my name is Wesley Wyndham-Price - we met at the Academy?"

She shook her head. "I'm afraid not."

Wesley deflated. "Really? I-I mean, oh. Are you sure? They, uh, used to call me..." He glanced at me and Faith, flushing again. This was obviously not a good night for Wesley's complexion, which was rapidly becoming more blotched and red by the second. "... 'Wacky Wes'."

"They called you Wacky Wes?" I interrupted incredulously over Faith's sniggering.

"With heavy irony, yes," Wes responded.

Vague, yet strangely disturbing, visions of Wesley at Watcher frat parties vanished from my mind, much to my relief.

9 *Lightning Lover*

Charlotte shook her head again. "I'm terribly sorry to cause offence, but I simply don't recall you."

"No, no offence caused, I assure you," Wesley said, without much conviction. "It's hardly surprising you've forgotten me... it was years ago, after all."

She looked around very slowly, as if she was moving on a slightly different time scale to everyone else, probably an after-effect of the whole nearly-freezing-to-death thing. "Where am I? Who are these people?"

Wesley appeared to remember his manners. "Oh, yes. Forgive me. I'm Wesley, as I already told you, this is Faith, my Slayer, and this is Doyle." His voice appeared to at least partially regain its usual pride and pomposity - I guess having your own Slayer to watch over is a greatly-envied task for a Watcher.

Then again, if you replace 'Slayer' with 'Faith', then I imagine Wesley would be more pitied than envied by his colleagues.

"This is Doyle's apartment," he continued. "We've, um, formed a temporary coalition with his demon-hunting operation." I have to admit, 'demon-hunting operation' sounded better than 'failing PI agency which hunts demons and can't get normal cases.'

Charlotte appeared to slowly digest this information. "Oh. What's a Slayer?"

There was absolute silence for a moment or two.

Predictably, Faith was the one to break it. "Jeez, I'd hate to see what she got on her final Watcher exams," she muttered flippantly.

"Actually, Charlotte passed with honours," Wesley said absently, his mouth obviously operating without any real input from his brain "She scored quite a bit higher than me in Ancient Languages, too." There was a slight touch of bitterness in his voice.

Academic envy. It's never pretty.

I opened my mouth to say something to that effect, but the woman in front of us interrupted me.

"Who's Charlotte?"

This time, the silence lasted quite a lot longer.

9.6 Chapter 6

"She doesn't remember a thing," Wesley said quietly as he closed the bedroom door behind us. "It's as if something just wiped her mind clean of all her past."

"Good thing for your fragile male ego, huh?" Faith commented.

He frowned. "Faith, my male ego, fragile or otherwise, has no part in this discussion. And Charlotte's loss of memory is in no way a 'good thing'," he added primly.

She smirked. "It's a point of view." Wesley's lips thinned alarmingly.

"Speakin' o' points of view," I said quickly, "I've got one worth considerin'. What are we gonna do with her?"

"Well, I imagine we could seek some kind of medical assistance for her. Hypnosis therapy or some such," Wes suggested, diverted from his impending lecture.

For a second, Faith looked ready to continue the disagreement, but then she glanced at me and agreed suddenly, "Yeah. Makes sense. Hell, this is LA. Shrinks grow on trees here."

I shook my head. "So let's say some wonder-doc hypnotises her an' she starts talkin' about vampires an' demons. He'll just turn her over to the Looney-bin. No way she can go to a regular doc."

Wesley nodded thoughtfully. "Good point. I'll try and get in touch with the Council in the morning - I believe they have medical specialists who deal with these sort of things."

Faith looked vaguely annoyed that Wes and I were in agreement, like he'd betrayed the cause or something, but she just nodded. "Okay. I call the sofa."

"Excuse me?" Wesley said.

Faith rolled her eyes. "For sleeping. There's no way I'm climbing into a bed with Red over there; she just ain't my type." She smiled wickedly. "But I'm sure if you ask her real nice she'll share with *you*."

Wesley just spluttered.

9.7 Chapter 7

As it eventually turned out, sleeping locations wasn't that much of an issue. Faith got the sofa, of course - like anybody was going to tell her otherwise - and Wesley declared that he would stay awake to stand guard over Charlotte, in case she suffered any after-effects from her ordeal.

Charlotte seemed quite impressed with this, despite the fact that Faith laughed so hard that she had to go and sit down for several minutes.

Crunched awkwardly into one of the office chairs with a blanket over me, I still heard her snickering carrying up the stairs for a good half-an-hour. That and the rain kept me awake for half the night. The chair's sharp edges took over for the other half

In the morning, my spine feeling as if it had been delicately stroked with a gardening rake and my eyes closed to semi-conscious slits, I staggered downstairs. Much to my surprise, Wesley wasn't dozing gently against a wall. Instead he was hunched over a growing puddle in the middle of my bedroom, gamely manoeuvring a coffee mug to try to catch the drops of water tumbling with monotonous regularity from the ceiling above. Faith was nowhere to be seen.

"Pipes gone again, huh?" I said wearily.

Wesley nodded wordlessly.

My building's plumbing and gutter systems, never marvels of efficiency at the best of times, tended to fail dismally during heavy rain, resulting in leaks and dripping in the most bizarre places. Heavy rain, incidentally, that was *still* falling. In fact, it seemed harder than it had been the night before.

Abruptly, Wesley took the half-full mug out from under the drip and just walked away, leaving the dirty moisture to splatter against what passed for my carpet.

"Hey!" I yelped. Receiving no response from him, I hurried forward (prompting another protest from my back) and cupped my hands under the drip. "Hey, Wes, damn it," I tried again.

Wesley looked around innocently, pouring the filthy water into a kettle. "Yes?"

I stared at him, my hands rapidly filling with chilly water. "Wes, I've got these great inventions, you know. They're called 'taps'."

Wesley looked blankly at me, and then glanced down at the kettle in his hands. "Ah. No, this is for something important," he explained solemnly, and turned around and walked into my kitchen, still holding the kettle of muddy water.

Obviously, lack of sleep had driven the man insane. I looked down at the pool of water that was now joyfully overflowing my fingers and running onto the carpet again. "Wes, can you give me a hand? Wes?"

I looked down at my hands again and silently apologised to my landlord. The water made a huge dark stain on the carpet which began to spread out into a surprisingly symmetrical circle as I followed the possibly-insane Watcher.

Now the crackpot was staring intently at the kettle as it squatted on my stove.

"Wesley?"

"Hmmm?"

"What the hell are you doing?" I asked bluntly.

Wesley nodded wisely to himself. "I am attempting to prepare a magical potion."

"Out of rainwater."

"Precisely."

I sighed. "Why?"

Wesley raised a finger and assumed the Classic Watcher Lecture Position.

"Briefly," I added.

Wesley's hand dropped limply. "While I was guarding Charlotte last night, around midnight, I noticed something unusual."

"You were guardin' a naked Watcher who can't remember her own name... an' you only noticed somethin' unusual *then*?" I asked sardonically.

Wesley waved a hand dismissively. "More unusual than usual, I mean. Red lightning, to be exact."

9 *Lightning Lover*

"How's that?"

"The lightning in the storm outside had developed a distinctly reddish hue, most definitely unnatural in origin," he clarified.

I shrugged. "So? Wes, with the amount of neon lights in this city, I'm surprised the lightning didn't look luminous green. Add that to lack of sleep and-"

Wesley shook his head in vigorous denial. "I assure you, I was, and still am, in complete control of my faculties."

"Sure," I agreed wryly. "By the way, if you're expecting that water to boil, you haven't turned the stove on."

Wesley looked askance. "What?" He flicked the power switch hastily. "That in no way reflects on my testimony."

"Of course not."

"Anyway, the potion should enable us to detect any magical cause or aspect of the storms, thus allowing us to-"

A polite cough interrupted him. "Excuse me?"

"Ah, Charlotte," Wesley said warmly. "You're - Oh. My. God."

He made a strange whinnying noise in the back of his throat. I'm fairly certain I stopped breathing for a second or two.

Charlotte was standing in the doorway, smiling politely at us. Nothing disturbing there. The disturbing factor came from the fact that she was wearing tight leather pants, and a black tank-top that was so small for her that it fit like a second skin. Hell, it fit like her *first* skin. The fact that it had 'Grunge Whore' across her breasts in red was merely the icing on the cake.

To put it simply, while she was wearing considerably more clothing than she had been last night, the overall effect was that she was not only still naked, but also covered in syrup.

Wesley moved past whinnying and onto a strange shrill choking sound.

Charlotte looked down at her clothes with a kind of vague horror. "That sweet girl Faith lent me these, at least until I can get some more."

I was part of the way towards recovering from her outfit (sleeping with Faith tends to wear away at one's inhibitions), but that just pushed me right back into incoherent shock again. The woman had a conversation with Faith for more than ten seconds, and she was still capable of using the word 'sweet' in this same sentence as her name. Either Faith's personality had radically shifted overnight, or Charlotte had severe brain damage in addition to amnesia.

I was tending towards the second option.

Wesley still seemed incapable of speech or most basic motor functions, so I smiled weakly and said, "How nice of her."

The kettle screamed shrilly.

"Oh," Charlotte said, her face lighting up. "Are you making tea?"

Obviously, there were some parts of being English too deeply rooted for even amnesia to erase.

9.8 Chapter 8

With my grudging assistance, Wesley managed to get the boiling water from my kettle (which was now covered in an inch-thick layer of interior grime) into another cup with nothing more than minor burns. The requisite foul-smelling herbs were added, and the newly-brewed potion did nothing at all.

It continued to do this for several minutes.

We watched it. "It may be... ahem, delayed reaction," Wesley suggested weakly.

"Yes, I'm sure that's it," Charlotte said supportively.

Nothing continued to occur with diligent regularity.

Wesley, looking highly embarrassed, retired to the upstairs office with a large spell book, a cellphone, and stock lists from several of his preferred herbalists, while Charlotte and I continued to observe nothing.

9 *Lightning Lover*

Nothing happened.

Wesley returned from the office, enduring my amused glances with admirable fortitude, while the potion sat absolutely still and unreactive.

We were still staring at it, willing it to bubble, or emit a foul stench, or any of the usual things magical potions do, when Faith returned.

"Ya know, my mother used to say, 'A watched pot never boils,'" she observed dryly. "Of course, she coulda been talking about weed."

"Faith," Wesley said impatiently. "Did you fetch the powdered Valorian root I requested?"

Faith shrugged lazily, tossing a bag at him. "All the magic root you could ever need, Wes-ster. Either that, or some green chilli powder - not sure which."

Wesley tugged the bag open and pressed it to his nose. A second later, he recoiled sharply, coughing. "Yes... that would be... oh dear Lord... that would be the correct root."

Taking a pinch of the crumbly powder between thumb and forefinger, he dropped it into our sadly-uncooperative potion. It sank to the bottom of the cup.

Nothing, obviously having too much fun to stop, continued happening.

Wesley's face fell. "Oh dear... perhaps there's something I was missing in the book..."

Wesley stretched out for another of his blasted herbal texts, still holding the bag of impotent Valorian root in his other hand. Until, that is, Faith snatched it out of his fingers and poured half of it into the cup.

"Really, Faith, what on earth do you think you're doing?" Wesley yelped. "That herb is extremely costly!"

"Uh... guys?"

"Quit penny-pinching, book-boy," she shot back.

"Guys..."

"I am not penny-pin - "

"Guys." Before either of them could respond, I pointed at the table. "Looks like we have magic."

The potion had turned from its previous murky brown-and-green sludge into a fiery blue-red mixture. Occasionally, it fizzed slightly, and I could swear I saw lightning crackling across its surface. It looked like the Cocktail From Hell.

"Good Lord," Wesley murmured. "That is unexpected."

"Yeah," Faith shot back. "One of your potions worked. Practically a world-first."

"What exactly does it mean?" Charlotte asked quietly, staring at the fizzing liquid.

Wesley flipped hurriedly through his book. "Um... I'm not exactly sure. Per se."

"Oh, wonderful," Faith growled. "A detection spell which we can't understand. Love that wacky sense of Watcher humour."

Wesley frowned, turning back a couple of pages. "It's very strange... I could swear there was an entry for this kind of event." I reached out and took the book out of his hands, ignoring his bleat of protest.

Carefully, I pulled two stuck pages apart, running my fingers between them to scrape away the dried chewing gum that had sealed them, and then handed the book back to him.

"Faith, we will have words about this," Wesley said darkly, scanning the revealed pages. "Here we are. The crucial page I was looking for and was mysteriously unable to locate."

Faith did her best to look innocent but failed dismally, probably due to lack of practice.

"Storm spirit," he said meaningfully.

"Great," Faith said sarcastically. "Storm spirit. Whoopee. It's all so clear now. Now how do I kill it?"

Wesley looked up at us. "Actually, I'm not entirely sure that you can."

9 *Lightning Lover*

"That would be bad?" Charlotte inquired.

"Most probably," I answered. "Spill the details, Wes."

"A storm spirit isn't exactly an entity, so to speak. It's more of an elemental force, a manifestation of nature." Wesley grimaced. "And it's very powerful. According to several primitive cultures, there are spirits present inside every storm or weather phenomenon, powering and directing them on an extra-dimensional level. As far as the entry reads - it's really rather sparse - there are several methods by which such spirits can be summoned and bound. Usual side-effects of such spells include abnormally violent weather and unusual visual occurrences, like say... clouds gathering themselves into angry faces, or rain becoming boiling hot."

"Or lightnin' flashin' red," I added.

"It definitely fits," he agreed. "It usually requires a lot of magical power to control, since a bond needs to be formed between the sorcerer and his conjuration, a spiritual pact, you might say."

"An' this pact accomplishes what?"

Wesley shrugged. "Just about whatever the sorcerer wants it to. Imagine the amount of power a black magician could tap from something as mighty as a storm, particularly considering the power of this current thunderstorm. If the spirit can command even the slightest fraction of that energy... the damage could be incalculable."

He closed the book with a snap.

"Why couldn't someone summon the spirit of a summer's day?" Faith complained. "I need to get a tan."

But no one laughed.

9.9 Chapter 9

Research. Good ol' dusty, mind-numbing research. The first resort of a demon hunter, or a Slayer, under pressure. And the least favourite.

Wesley had abandoned us to go and hunt for more herbs, for some kind of spirit-tracking spell that might help us out. That left me and Faith. Alone. I didn't need a vision to tell me how much fun *that* was going to be.

Of course, Charlotte was there too, but since she didn't really know anything about us, or herself for that matter, she just sat in one corner and watched the angry silence grow.

I rubbed my eyes as the words in front of me started to swim and dance. "You findin' anythin', Faith?"

"No."

"Oh." I turned a page.

Faith turned a page.

"Anythin' now?"

"No."

I turned a page.

Faith turned a page.

"I found a spell to protect against bein' struck by lightnin'," I announced, "... says you got to bath in lead for three days an' then wrap a strand of cotton around your horns." I frowned. "Somethin' tells me this book wasn't written by a human."

Faith looked up. "Doyle?"

"Yeah?"

"Is it related to what we're looking for?"

"Well... sort of. In a distant, twelfth-cousin-twice-removed kinda way."

"Then I don't want to hear it." She got up and walked towards the stairs. "I'm gonna get some more books."

"You do that."

She clumped up the stairs, leaving me alone with Charlotte. Who spoke, for the first time in hours. "Doyle, I wonder if I might make an inquiry of you. It's rather... personal."

9 *Lightning Lover*

"Shoot," I said, flipping past several drawings of demons, lingering briefly on one of a scantily-clad succubus.

"Are you and Faith, ahem, involved? Romantically?"

I smiled weakly. "Is it that obvious?"

Charlotte shook her head. "No, it's only a touch above blindingly so." She smiled as well.

"We were an item," I said shortly. "Not any more."

"Why not?"

I sighed. "I let her down, her and Wesley. Wasn't there when I was needed. Faith's not the forgivin' type."

"Have you let her try?" Charlotte asked softly.

I laughed. "Jeez, you are in serious denial about that girl, lady. I could crawl through needles, an' she wouldn't forgive me, not unless she damn well chose to of her own free will. An' she doesn't want to."

Charlotte nodded once. "I see. Does she love you?"

I laughed again, this time bitterly. "Faith doesn't do love, Charlotte. Me and her was just sex-capades, nothin' more or less."

"Did you love her?"

I didn't answer that one. Instead, I lit a cigarette and took a long breath of smoke. When I let it out again, a rush of indignation came with it. "Listen, honey, you hardly seem like the one to be counsellin' about love. Wesley's got it bad for you, or at least used to, an' you just ignored him."

Charlotte looked stunned. Just totally stunned, as if something I'd said something she couldn't faintly comprehend, like Wesley was half-chimpanzee or a serial murderer in his spare time. "Pardon?"

I shrugged. "You heard me."

"I don't ignore him," Charlotte said faintly. "I'm polite to him."

"Polite, huh?" I said. "Faith was never polite to me, love or not."

9.10 Chapter 10

Charlotte abandoned me as well, after that, leaving me alone with my thoughts and half-a-dozen arcane books. I vaguely hoped my thoughts would abandon me too, but no such luck.

Faith didn't come down again, which probably meant she'd gone to blow off some steam.

And she was the one complaining about me abandoning her when I was needed, I thought resentfully.

It was getting late, and the storm still wasn't letting up.

I guess I must have dozed off at that point, because the next thing that woke me was the sound of screaming from my room. Where Charlotte was.

I ran to the bedroom door and flung my shoulder against it, shoving it open. White light blinded me and thunder assaulted my ears, and I knew only one thing for certain as I looked inside.

The storm that was raging outside the building had broken into it.

9.11 Chapter 11

Charlotte was convulsing on the bed, screaming. Red lightning crackled around the room. The air, the furniture, the walls, the floor, the woman - all were alight.

My jaw dropped, possibly not so much from shock at the sight of the red lightning as from the sight of Charlotte's body, red-limned, which the light made as visible through the bedclothes as though I was wearing X-ray specs.

"Bloody *hell*."

I turned. Wesley was standing behind me, looking dishevelled. From the streak of white talc in his hair, he'd been back long enough from his foray to have been trying to get some sleep in the bathtub.

9 *Lightning Lover*

"Okay, you're magic-guy. What in hell should we be doin' about this fireworks display?" I asked helplessly.

"We have to stop it, whatever it is. It's hurting her--"

Before I could prevent him, he'd pushed past me into the room, dodging bolts of crackling energy. Charlotte, like the centre of one of those little static electricity globes, fiery red claws radiating outwards from her, screamed louder and her rolling eyes slid over him as though he wasn't there.

"Wes!" I yelped, diving after him. "You're gonna get yourself killed!" I didn't know how much current was running through that woman. Might be more than enough to crispy-fry even a very determined Watcher. I at least had a few more defences than he did. I swatted his hand back as he was reaching out to her and moved to hold her down myself, trying to keep my hands high up on her arms and shoulders and not let her struggles bring them in contact with, um... other places.

The shock from that initial touch rippling through me was enough to tear the demon out. Obviously some portion of how much it damn well hurt was conveyed in my strangled yell, because Wesley did a re-think and flinched back, ducking the lightning bolts with new fear.

I registered, with the portion of my brain that was still up to noticing anything outside of my desperate hold on the convulsing Charlotte and 'ouch', that Wesley had staggered around the bed, tripped over his feet, climbed upright again. I dimly heard him yell, "Hold on Doyle! I'll be right back!" as he disappeared out of the door.

Thank you so much, Wesley.

I grit my teeth as electrical flashes lit up my own bones down the length of my arms and I tried to yell at Charlotte to calm down. I didn't know if all this was her doing and if she could stop it at will, but it seemed worth a try. Her convulsions lessened slightly, though whether because of me or for some other reason was anyone's guess.

Now that it was less frantic, I noticed that her screaming was actually words, the same phrases repeated over and over. Sounded like Latin. It joined forces with the shocks reverberating through my skull, reducing the world to painful noise and light. I tried yelling at her to shut up, but no joy.

Wesley stumbled back into the room with a book open in his hands. Reading from it, he began shouting more Latin, oblivious to a couple of narrow misses from the lightning bolts.

Gradually, the storm energies subsided. Charlotte's face was normal again, but she continued to struggle against me, whimpering weakly, her movements no longer powered by that unnatural, convulsive strength. I remembered which face I was wearing, and would've cursed if I'd had the breath.

As the last of the energies faded, Charlotte's eyes slipped shut and her movements ceased. Her heavy gasps quieted to shallow breathing as she subsided into unconsciousness.

With a groan, I released my grip and collapsed. I fell off the side of the bed and onto the floor with a thud.

Hesitant footsteps. Wesley squinted down at me in concern. "Doyle, are you all right?"

"No. Don't touch me," I managed. Little residual shocks were still running through my body. I rolled over and crouched on hands and knees, watching the remnant red sparks disappear down my arms into the floor. I cautiously let my demon form go, and almost passed out.

"Good God, Doyle," Wesley said with appalled sympathy. I accepted the hand offered to help me up. "Are you going to be all right, now?"

"I think so." My voice was a rasp. I choked a moment, and aiming for levity added hoarsely, "Man, testing how much voltage a Brachen demon can absorb wasn't exactly somethin' I'd have volunteered for, not even in the interests of science." I shook my head, trying to clear it of stars. "What was that you did, anyway?"

"A simple ward spell. I didn't know what else to do. Thank goodness it worked. I wasn't at all sure it would."

I wasn't at all sure it had, thinking back to how gradually Charlotte's convulsions had faded, but I kept the doubt to myself. Wesley's hand clasped briefly on my shoulder before he let go of my arm. After a dubious moment some modicum of balance reluctantly set in. Standing accomplished, I tried to stop shaking, but that was pretty much a lost cause.

"Go get some rest," Wesley said firmly. "I can look after things here."

9 *Lightning Lover*

He moved to examine Charlotte, nervously chewing his lip and clutching his spell book like a shield as he carefully leaned over her still form. As I left, he was tentatively working up the courage to touch her wrist to double-check for the pulse I could've told him was still beating strong within.

According to the clock in the living room it was well after midnight. I staggered into the kitchen to get a strong drink. Glass in hand, I headed upstairs to see what Faith had been up to while Wesley and I almost got killed wrestling a naked woman lit up like a Christmas tree.

The elevator proved unresponsive, which was not really a surprise as rainstorms tended to upset its ancient mechanisms. It was surprising we hadn't yet lost the electrics. As I climbed the stairs, my shocky limbs protesting every step, the roar of the weather outside which had been silent in the basement reached my ears. It's fury pounded against the sides of the building, rain ricocheting off the windows like bullets. If anything, though, it was actually quieter than it had been.

I supposed it was too much to hope that it was slackening off. I wasn't even sure I wanted it to. When the storm departed, it cleared the way for Faith and Wesley to follow.

I wondered if that fireworks display upstairs would've been so much worse if we hadn't been secure from the storm inside the stone box that was the basement apartment.

Faith's irritation hadn't taken her further than the office, thanks to the rainstorm. She was curled up in a chair, oblivious to the world, her mouth open, snoring like a hog. A little vindictively, I poked her awake with a finger in the ribs.

"What the-?" she began irritably. She stared up at me, an extremely strange expression on her face, blinked several times with increasing incredulity, and finally collapsed into shrieks of laughter.

"What?"

She fell off the chair, choking, her fist pounding the floor, gesturing inarticulately at me.

"What?"

Leaving her rolling on the floor, I stomped into the bathroom to glare at the mirror.

My frazzled hair was standing on end, cartoon-style.

9.12 Chapter 12

I stuck my head under the shower and flattened my hair dry with a towel. The sounds of Faith's laughter were still faintly discernable from upstairs as I headed back down to the apartment.

Wesley was still fussing over Charlotte in the bedroom and I supposed that whatever way you chose to look at it he had everything in hand. Hardly able to think for the aches starting to set into my abused limbs as the shock wore off, I ransacked the kitchen, took the dregs of a bottle I found there to keep me company, and lurched through into the living room to collapse on the couch.

When I woke, my watch said it was 6.47am and the bottle still retained its inch or so of whisky. A sorry state of affairs it was indeed when I was too tired to take the cap off the bottle. I returned it to the kitchen empty and made a round of coffees which I carried into the bedroom.

Wesley had pulled a chair across to the edge of the bed to watch over his lady-love, but now he slumped forward on the covers, bent head sprawled atop his arms, his books strewn all around the bump that represented Charlotte's feet. Charlotte... was blinking, very much awake, and regarding with mixed distress and bemused fondness the Watcher snuffling into her ankles. Her posture was stiff, as though she didn't dare move for fear of disturbing him.

I smirked as I set the coffee mug down. "Mornin', darlin'."

She froze at the sound of my voice, and I remembered what she had chanced to see last night. When she looked up, her eyes were fearful, then puzzled. She reached out a hand to Wesley's shoulder, and her touch jerked him to wakefulness. He lifted up his head, looked flustered, and fussed with his crooked glasses, avoiding glancing at either of us. Charlotte continued to regard me with suspicion, but Wesley's conscious presence relaxed her somewhat. Uneasily, I set the mug down on the table next to her, then turned to hand Wesley his.

He swallowed a mouthful without looking and grimaced.

"We're out of tea," I said. "You two drank it all."

He sighed, rubbed his eyes, drained the cup, and blindly thrust it back towards me as he struggled to gather up his books and papers so that Charlotte could move her legs.

9 *Lightning Lover*

She flinched from me when I leaned over her to take the cup, saw my reaction, and her face crumpled in apology. "I'm sorry. I don't know what's wrong with me. I had... such disturbing dreams, last night. Dark tunnels, endless... and then suddenly flashing light, and your face all lit up - only it wasn't your face, it was different. Demonic-" She shivered, and caught something in my return gaze which made her breath hitch. Wesley set his hand on her shoulder kindly, but she didn't notice.

"You're - not human," she said. It wasn't in any way a question.

"He's on our side," Wesley said firmly, with a warming faith. "That's all that matters."

"But you look so normal."

"Hang on." My stressed brain was just getting around to fully digesting her words of a moment earlier, and was in no mood for the whole 'how to explain you're half a demon' thing, act three hundred and forty-two. "You're sayin' you don't remember anythin' else disturbin' happenin' last night? Just dreams, and me all demon-face?"

She nodded palely. Her hands clutched the bedclothes to her. "Why? What's happened? What should I remember?"

I guess I'd be pretty upset too if I couldn't trust my memory and had just discovered I was talking to a demon - although some subconscious awareness of her Watcher's Council training must remain; the existence of demons and magic didn't seem to surprise her in of themselves. I haltingly told her the events of the night, my attention flickering constantly to Wesley, trusting him to warn me if there was anything he didn't think she could handle. He knew her, after all.

After that she sat and chewed at her fingernails while Wesley tried to tell her not to worry; that he'd help; that everything would be all right.

I went out, braving the weather to buy some tea. The rainstorm had given LA the atmosphere of a disaster movie. The water-laden streets were empty and grey and the water streamed down the gutters, flooding the road in places. I saw only a dozen other pedestrians. On the roads, there were barely any cars. Most of the traffic that went past me was emergency services. It took me a while to find a store that was open, not that it made any real difference since I'd been soaked through about five seconds after leaving the office, and there was a point beyond which you couldn't get any more drenched.

When I got back, Faith had come down from upstairs and was lounging around in an overlong T-shirt and nothing else, glowering at news forecasters on the TV who were using phrases like 'worst rainfall in years' and 'potential crisis situation'. I didn't bother talking to her, still somewhat pissed about last night, just walked past bearing tea for Charlotte and Wesley. An arm reached up and snagged the third mug on the tray - mine - as I passed the couch.

I pretended I hadn't noticed.

"Thank you," said Charlotte meekly, as I handed her a cup, though her eyes were still scared.

Dripping self-consciously onto the floor, I asked Wesley if he'd found anything yet.

"Not as such," he said warily. "Have you spoken to Faith at all?"

"Not yet. Have you?"

He nodded, and I waited. 'Not as such' wasn't 'no'. I hesitated a moment, milling over whether or not to voice the obvious, before I frowned at him and prompted, "Last night would suggest a connection between Charlotte here an' the lightrnin' storms."

"Well, it could be coincidence--"

"Come off it, Wes." Faith was at the door, still in just her T-shirt. "I bet Red here's in on it. Maybe she botched the summons for this storm spirit thing and it fried her brain."

"No," Charlotte said, shocked.

"Maybe she did it and she doesn't even remember," Faith said. "Biting off more dark arts whammy than she can chew."

Charlotte said, "No!" again, but she looked very afraid, and I too was afraid Faith had hit the nail on the head. It was an all too likely situation. Which didn't mean I thought Faith shouldn't have had more sensitivity when voicing the possibility.

9 *Lightning Lover*

"Nonsense," Wesley said positively. He enfolded Charlotte's hand protectively in both his own. "Charlotte would do no such thing. I know her. It's far more likely that whoever is trying to control the spirit has set it to come after her for a reason. She is, after all, a highly placed member of the Watchers Council, probably here on Council business. It must have been a previous attack by the spirit which damaged her memory."

Faith snorted, but relented. She'd quite liked Charlotte, I'd thought, but then again it wouldn't be the first time if her friendship was misplaced. Maybe she was remembering Sandy.

"Whatever her connection to the storms might be," I said, "Isn't it a helpful development? I mean, what if we can use it as a way to get to the storm spirit? That's one step closer to doin' somethin' about this than we were before. An' maybe we can get her memories back at the same time."

"Indeed." Wesley was nodding positively. "Instead of two separate problems, it's entirely possible we have two halves of the same problem."

"So that's good, yeah?" said Faith. "Can we eat now? I'm starving."

9.13 Chapter 13

The morning passed. The TV reception fuzzed and flickered, and finally died and didn't come back, and we dragged out the radio for continued updates but the radio masts must've been down, too. It just sat on the table and crackled away to itself, useless.

Faith got dressed. Wesley set himself up with his books at the table with a coffee percolator burbling beside him, and got cranky when I asked him if he wanted an intravenous drip, and crankier still at the remark Faith added after that. Charlotte, somewhat recovered, minced around delicately in Faith's leather gear and I avoided her and the nervousness I now saw in her eyes whenever they fell on me, despite Wesley's attempts to reassure her.

I didn't know Charlotte was in the kitchen when I went in to get a snack. I'd just come down from the office, where I'd been shifting around the last week's paperwork with negligible actual accomplishment.

She was poking through the cupboards, rearranging the contents with the kind of horror of disarray Wesley often showed, multiplied by femininity. At my incautious entry, she dropped a pan on the worktop and spun around, pressing her back to the unit behind her.

"Sorry, didn't mean to startle you," I said lamely. I couldn't very well walk straight out again, so I moved to get the sandwich I'd come in for.

She stiffly resumed her inspection of the cupboards, and I made my sandwich, and we kept our distance. If I hadn't been trying so hard to surreptitiously lean past her without attracting her attention when I needed to get into the fridge at her back, she probably wouldn't have freaked quite so much when I accidentally brushed her arm.

Her whole body flinched. A plate went flying, careening across the worktop and bouncing off the wall. Its fragments showered the floor, pelting my ankles. "What are you?" she shouted. Turning, she slipped and fell against the table. Her frantically grabbing hands found no purchase to balance her, and she slipped down to the floor, where she tried to scramble away from me. "You're not human! You're something else, some kind of creature! What are you?"

There was something strange in her voice, in the way she addressed the question, I noticed through the familiar stab. Wesley... I'd thought Wesley had given her a brief account of my origins, but apparently not. I tried to stammer out calming words, but they didn't reach her.

Wesley skidded through the door, and a moment later Faith appeared, hovering at his shoulder.

"Charlotte, are you all right?" he asked gently, with a suspicious glance towards me.

I shrugged and held out my hands helplessly, mouthing soundless protests, which I only kept soundless because Charlotte was speaking, and Wesley was visibly trying to listen.

Her eyes weren't properly focused, and she clasped her knees in her arms, rocking back and forth, muttering. I heard "Years of service, all for nothing." I heard something about 'demons' and 'power' and 'tap into', and my veins flowed with ice in place of blood.

Wesley knelt down and gripped her shoulders. He shook her, but she didn't seem aware of him, just kept mumbling, kept trying to rock despite his hold. "Treachery?" he asked, half-shouting. "What treachery? What's the matter, Charlotte? Damn it!" He shook her much more viciously, powered by fear.

"I can do that, if you want," Faith offered.

9 *Lightning Lover*

He didn't take up the offer, but it seemed to decide him. His jaw bunched in determination and, drawing back a hand, he delivered a open-palmed slap to the woman's face. I blinked in astonishment. Faith had the bad grace to snigger.

But Charlotte's wide eyes regained some sense of awareness, and her incoherent muttered tirade ceased.

"Charlotte," Wesley said gently, his fingers apologetically brushing her face where his slap had left a reddening mark. "Do you know where you are? Do you know who I am?"

Maybe not the best question to ask an amnesiac, but she nodded.

"You lost it for a moment there, I'm afraid. I'm sorry I hurt you. Do you remember what you were saying?"

"No. Yes. I don't know! I don't know!" She buried her face in his shoulder, sobbing, arms clutching around him. Wesley gaped, stunned, and cautiously flapped a loose wrist to pat her on the back like a hurt child. As I hustled the smirking Slayer out of the room, I could hear Charlotte behind me: "I did it, didn't I? I did it and I don't even remember... I don't even remember..."

9.14 Chapter 14

I frowned down at Wesley's books, scattered open across the table where he'd left them. This... this was impossible. Wes was research-man. This stuff was his scene, not mine. But Wesley was acting as comfort-blanket to a sobbing Charlotte and, much happiness to him and all, but it left Faith and myself somewhat high and dry. Again.

I pointed to Faith and to the second chair at the table. "Sit."

Grumbling, she did, with a resentful glance towards the bedroom where Wesley had carried Charlotte.

I thrust a book in front of her, sat down myself and gathered up another volume that was big enough to be used as a table in its own right. It was open at the page where Wesley had left off, and the text was a baffling mix of middle-English and Latin. Shit.

There were several quiet seconds while we squinted down at pages.

"D'you think they're screwing in there?" Faith asked.

I looked up: her nose was emphatically not pointed towards her book, but towards the bedroom. "No," I said irritably. A few days ago, I might've added more, some reprimand for her base callousness, but I'd lost any rights I might have to criticise Faith, and she might well take me apart if I so much as tried, the way she'd been the last few days.

"Huh. Well, it's not like Wesley gets many chances to get some. Kinda dumb of him to waste it."

"Faith. The woman's a delusional wreck."

"She'd have to be."

A brief silence, then we snickered in unison. We both cut short our mirth and looked up at the same time. Our eyes met, and then slid apart. I tried to concentrate on anything else. A distraction. I needed a distraction... oh, yeah. Research.

I squinted at the doorstop in my hands, and tried hard to read the dense text. It took several minutes for it to dawn on me just what it was I was reading.

"Faith," I said urgently. "Find somethin' to help us translate some Latin."

"What?"

"Just... find somethin'. 'Cause I only understand about every tenth word of this shit, and I think I just hit the jackpot. If this is what I think it is..."

My urgency must've been contagious. She was on her feet and tossing books off the table into a pile on the floor. Wesley would've hit the roof. "No good... trash... crap... bullshit... Damn it, tell me he doesn't do his stupid translations from *memory*-" Her hand fell on another volume and, well into her stride, she'd almost tossed it away over her shoulder before doing a double-take and presenting it to me.

A Latin sourcebook. Big book, complexly laid-out pages, tiny text. Even looking at it hurt my head. I groaned.

"What's so crucial anyway?" Faith asked, watching me squint.

"This Latin stuff in here," I said. "It's what Charlotte was screamin' last night."

9.15 Chapter 15

Charlotte was thankfully asleep when I ventured into the bedroom to drag Wesley out and tell him what I'd discovered. My steps were reluctant as we retreated up into the office, leaving Faith downstairs to watch over Charlotte. Wesley wasn't going to like what I had to say. I didn't particularly want to say it.

"No. You're *wrong*," he insisted, when I'd finished. "This spell - you don't know what's involved. It's a blood rite - an abomination - Charlotte couldn't, wouldn't..." His brief angry tirade trailed away as he saw my expression and he asked plaintively, "You're *sure*?"

I nodded. I supposed it was an encouraging measure of his faith in me that he chose to believe. He was already blanching at his reaction. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean - it's just, you and research-"

"I know this isn't easy," I said. "But she was chanting it last night. The summons for the storm spirit. She obviously performed the rite - screwed it up somehow. Just like Faith said."

"Good God." He looked even more distressed at the idea of Faith having a correct insight than of myself successfully researching Latin. "But she had no memory of it. Surely she couldn't be held accountable?" His worried, distant expression marked the question as rhetorical. He was wondering what the Watchers Council's answer to that would be, not mine.

"What would they do to her?" I couldn't help asking.

He shuddered. "I can't bear to imagine. If she's tried to release these darker forces once, she might do so again. She's not safe. She's Council trained, and with the knowledge she has-"

"Well, actually not, right now."

He shook his head. "They could hardly count on her loss of memory being permanent. It would be an untenable risk. They'd *have* to do something."

I sighed and nodded slowly. "We couldn't - protect her from them somehow, I suppose?"

"Most certainly not!" Wesley said, shocked. "Quite aside from what the Council would do to punish us if we were found out - and you're already in enough danger from them - we could be exposing the world to a terrible threat. The destructive forces she's tried to raise-! We already have to tame one rampant elemental spirit because of her, and I'm not sure you realise the danger of the task ahead of us there. No, the Council would be right. What must be done..."

He sank down on the edge of a chair, resting his head in his hands, and I felt terrible for him. Duty outweighed even... love? Maybe it would've been better if I'd never done that research. Or maybe half of LA would've ended up being levelled when Charlotte regained her memory.

It still might. Wondering if we ought to do anything to keep Charlotte restrained, the sight of Wesley made me bite my lip on the suggestion of tying her down.

We remained there, he sitting distraught, me standing restlessly, until the office door chimed, the blinds flapping as someone briskly pushed it open. Briskly, but not Faith's familiar slam.

Damn it, this was hardly a time for any admittedly much-needed clients to descend upon the agency. Leaving the small office, I moved to intercept the man who was striding purposely through the outer office with my apologies that we couldn't take on his case. His confident, grim smile and his tweed stopped me in my tracks.

"Jacob Carnagan, Watchers Council," he said loftily. "And you would be Wesley Wyndham Pryce?"

9.16 Chapter 16

Wesley was already hurrying out of the office to correct Carnagan and generally toady up before I could reply, and he didn't look much happier to have me mistaken for him than I was to be mistaken.

"Mr Carnagan. I do apologise. We didn't expect you'd arrive so soon. *I'm Wesley Wyndham Pryce.*" It was possible that the way he seized Carnagan's hand to shake was meant to come off as enthusiastic and genial, but mostly it looked flustered. "This is Doyle, a fellow crusader in the fight against the forces of evil."

He beamed at his rather dramatic introduction. In my turn, I unenthusiastically shook Carnagan's hand. "Uh... nice to meet you."

9 *Lightning Lover*

Carnagan was a large man, fiftyish, grey hair thinning, aging but still undeniably powerful both physically and mentally. The canny, hard glint in his eyes concerned me a great deal more than the casual arrogance and aggression of the Special Ops Team had. He loomed over both of us, and you could've fit two skinny Wesley Wyndham Pryce's into the space occupied by his bulky frame.

His air of authority was only slightly diluted by the fact that he was drenched to the skin, and the tatty, dripping umbrella scrunched up in his hand wasn't much of a plus for his image either. He nodded impassively at my greeting. His tweed squelched as he stepped further into the room, head bobbing around interestedly.

"This is your demon-hunting operation, Mr Doyle?" His polite smile had undercurrents. I saw anew through his eyes the shabby repair of the office; the dingy bare brick, the paintwork scuffed and peeling where there was paintwork at all, the disarray of the papers piled over my desk.

"Yeah. Hence the 'Doyle Investigations' sign on the door," I said, forcing a defiant smirk. "Or did you think we were a financial agency?"

His brows bunched up in annoyance at being mocked, which was fine by me. I didn't have any reason to be polite to these people. Wesley's stony glare had more effect. I reluctantly acquiesced to the frantic psychic waves he was sending out telling me to behave.

"I apologise if we're a little cranky, Mr Carnagan," Wesley said. "As you can imagine, we've all been working around the clock to try to deal with the situation. We're all a little overstressed and overtired, I'm afraid."

"Yes."

I watched Wesley clench both fists at Carnagan's acknowledgement, insulting in itself, and then his fingers deliberately unfold one by one until his hands were relaxed again.

"Where's Miss Ambrage, Mr Pryce?"

"Ah." Wesley stuttered a bit. "I'm afraid the situation has changed somewhat since we contacted the Council. New information would seem to suggest that Miss Ambrage's condition is a result of extremely unwise meddling in the dark arts." He outlined the events of the morning.

Carnagan frowned and nodded his way through the explanation. "Indeed," he said as Wesley finished. "A traitor. Excellent work, Mr Pryce. We've been aware for some time that there was a dissenter at work, someone in the inner echelons of the Council. In fact, I was sent here to investigate their activity in this region. But I would never have suspected Charlotte of such a crime." He shook his head grimly.

"Neither would I..." Wesley hesitated. "You know her, too?"

"We worked on some translations together, not long ago. To think of the knowledge we were dealing with then - falling into the hands of someone willing to abuse it. It doesn't bear thinking about."

"We can't be absolutely certain she did abuse it," Wesley said quietly. "There could be another explanation. She might not be guilty."

Carnagan regarded him a little pityingly, but said, "Maybe not, Mr. Pryce, but you know we cannot fail to act on the likelihood."

Wesley avoided his gaze. "That's... Wyndham-Pryce." He looked as though he'd like to say more.

I patted his shoulder. "C'mon, Wes. I'm sure Mr Carnagan wants to get cleaned up, change into some dry clothes. Wouldn't want to meet the lady lookin' like a drowned rat, would he? Besides, another of those lightnin' fits and we'd end up with Kentucky Fried Watcher."

9.17 Chapter 17

We were denied the entertainment of watching Carnagan attempt to walk around squeezed into clothing borrowed from myself or Wesley when he brought in a travel bag he'd left in the hallway. Ultra-efficient bastard. He took it into the bathroom and re-emerged shortly, clad in tweeds indistinguishable from those that had been soaked and now dripped dry on the clothes stand in the bathroom, their pattering reminiscent of the endless rain outside.

Carnagan clanked around in the kitchen, making himself some tea in the kettle from the other day's rainwater experiments. In harmonious glee we had both neglected to point out to him that we'd been using a pan to boil water since then because of the faint purple and brown residue that wouldn't come off.

Wesley smiled faintly as, through the gap in the door, we watched Carnagan raise the mug to his lips.

9 *Lightning Lover*

"I can't say I think much of this guy as one of your Watcher's Council's best and brightest," I said. "I mean, thinking I was you. Do I even *remotely* look like a double-barrel surname?"

"Well, in his defence, it's quite likely the Council's records didn't lead him to have the highest expectations of me," Wesley murmured.

"Now, c'mon Wes, I'm sure they don't think all that badly of-" I began, and choked off indignantly. "Hey! I resent that!"

He tried to look innocent. "Well, what I meant to say, of course, is-"

"I know very well what you meant, thank you very much!"

"This really is very good," Carnagan said, wandering in clutching his mug of tea and cutting short our comradely banter before somebody bought themselves a knuckle sandwich. "A delicious aroma and, to the taste, a little touch of something... I'm not sure what. Interesting, though. What brand is this?"

"Erm," said Wesley.

"Just a cheap deal from the local store," I said noncommittally. "Considerin' Wes here drinks enough tea for ten men, I'm not gonna fork out on the expensive stuff, am I?"

"Not likely," Faith snickered, wandering through from the bedroom, closing the door after her. "Mr. Penny-Pinching here doesn't fork out for anything. Not unless it's at least thirty percent alcoholic, at any rate."

"Thank you, Faith. Now, much as I appreciate your contribution to this discussion, shouldn't you be watchin' over Charlotte?"

"Red's getting dressed. I figured it wouldn't hurt to let her do it in private." She smirked at Wesley. "Feel free to go in and take over from me, though, if you wanna."

Carnagan's eyes were flickering dubiously over her. "And this would be the Slayer?"

He didn't look overly impressed.

She returned his appraisal with scorn. "This would be the new tight-assed Watcher?" The cocky sexuality of her body-language visibly increased even as she spoke. Her smile took on a degree of nastiness I hadn't seen in it for some time.

Wesley, red-faced, spluttered, "Faith!" and she, if not precisely *subsided*, became abruptly tight-lipped.

I'd seen this before. Faith and Wesley's reaction to the Watcher's Council was to pull together in the face of adversity. She'd try not to make him look bad in front of Carnagan, though Wesley might well get it in the neck in double measure when his colleague finally left.

I said quickly, "Faith, this is Mr. Carnagan from the Watcher's Council. Mr. Carnagan - the Slayer, Faith."

They eyed each other warily. Neither made any attempt at a friendly greeting.

"Um. Now that we're all acquainted-" Wesley began uneasily into the silence that had stretched on a little too long.

The bedroom door *clicked* as Charlotte walked through.

She'd abandoned Faith's T-shirt (probably wisely, it might've given old Carnagan heart failure) in favour of one of Wesley's shirts, but had retained the leather pants. The shirt bagged over her slim form. The pants clung, underneath. The effect was curious, and androgynous, and I felt a certain disappointment. The brief 'huff' of air expelled from Wesley's lips suggested his thoughts were along similar lines.

My own breath caught as her gaze skipped over me with its now normal nervous hitch. If she were to say anything to Carnagan about what she knew-

Hugging her arms across her chest, she crossed the room to us. She stopped, with a jolt, still a few feet away, cutting short her impulse to go to Wesley. Her eyes fixed upon Carnagan.

"I... know you," she said, sounding puzzled.

Carnagan drew in a breath, and his chin rose sharply. "You remember me?" He looked around the rest of us.

Wesley perked up at the possibility that her more recent acquaintance with Carnagan might provide a route with which to start restoring her memories. But after a moment, Charlotte sighed and shook her head. "No. No, I don't remember anything. Only that I've - seen you before. I know I have. Maybe it was in a dream."

9 Lightning Lover

"No," he said, smiling gently, reaching out his hands to place them lightly on her shoulders. Wesley, in the background, looked pained. "It wasn't in a dream. I know you, Charlotte. It's Jacob. Jacob Carnagan. We met before, two years ago, working on translations of a series of texts containing ancient resurrection rituals and summoning spells for dark spirits."

A flicker of reaction in her eyes before she caught herself, and shook her head again. No way to tell if that had been memory or simply connection. "I don't remember it." A pause while she studied him further, obviously thinking deeply. "I'm told... you can help me find out. Remember who I am. Discover what I've done."

"Yes, Charlotte. I can do that." His voice was kindly, fatherly almost.

Her jaw set in determination. "Then I'm ready. Do your tests. I want to *know*."

9.18 Chapter 18

The apartment was flooded with the stench of various herbal and magical cocktails for the next several hours. I made the solemn resolution that when Carnagan had gone, I would be buying a new kettle. The smells were enough for me to fervently hope that Charlotte didn't actually have to *drink* any of the concoctions but, not especially wanting to find out, I kept well out of the way of the activity.

Faith went to hang out of a window upstairs, rain or no rain. The smells had risen right through the building, she said when she ventured down later, dripping wet and shivering but without the greenish complexion the rest of us had developed from breathing in the fumes. It was a good thing that nobody else lived in the building, and none of our working neighbours had come into their offices because of the storms.

It all achieved, as far as I could tell, very little. Carnagan, after about four hours, admitted he'd tried just about everything he could think of. Charlotte still had no memories, although she'd been sick twice. The only thing that his investigative efforts seemed to have ascertained was that if Charlotte had tried to summon a storm spirit and lost control of the spell, the backlash could certainly be responsible for her memory loss.

"We need to track the spirit itself," he concluded, pouring away something noxious down the drain. I watched from the doorway, hands over my nose and mouth. My sink hissed and emitted green smoke as the liquid fell on the basin, and I grimaced. The landlord wasn't going to be happy. "Whatever it is that happened, we know they're linked. It's possible that only by returning both to the location of the original rite can we effectively reverse the damage and find out exactly what did happen."

"And it isn't as though we don't have to go after the storm spirit anyway," Wesley concluded. "I believe I have a spell that should track the spirit's emanations to the point where it was summoned. I was going to do some investigating, before the situation with Charlotte erupted." He crossed to the table and sorted through the books and papers there. After a moment, he turned back to Carnagan clutching a manuscript.

"Excellent. Good man." Carnagan picked up his still-soggy umbrella from where it stood on the floor in a corner. "In that case, we've no time to waste, Pryce."

"That's Wyndha- you're going out there?"

"We are." Carnagan pulled on an expansive grey raincoat and started to fasten up the toggles.

Wesley looked at Charlotte who sat, still not looking overly healthy, clutching a cup of tea. She tried to smile at him encouragingly, but the end result looked too sickly for comfort.

He drew himself up taller in decision. "I can't leave Charlotte. I should stay here. She trusts me. Faith--"

I cleared my throat meaningfully, seeing the Slayer's expression take on a distinctly pissed-off cast.

"-or Doyle will go with you," Wesley finished.

Carnagan, unimpressed, said, "If our theories are correct, Pryce, she's still a renegade, a criminal. She certainly doesn't require your coddling."

"Be that as it may, I think it's only humanitarian that I stay. We're not above dealing with our rogues compassionately."

That might've been a small snort of laughter that escaped Carnagan's nostrils, but then again probably not. I think everyone there was well aware that ethical treatment of Watcher's Council criminals-in-custody wasn't what was on Wesley's mind, though.

"Pryce," Carnagan said, with slow intent. "I assume even *your* Slayer is quite capable of watching over an amnesiac woman without your help. The two of us alone here have the training to combat the storm spirit. Get ready. We're going. Now."

"But if she were to have another fit when I wasn't here--" Wesley protested helplessly.

9 *Lightning Lover*

"Wesley Wyndham-Pryce!" Carnagan snapped. "You will do your duty as ordered!"

"Hey!" Faith's eyes were narrowed menacingly. "You don't talk to him like that." Her fisted hands swung at her sides in a loose rhythm, like she was working up to hitting something.

Carnagan didn't look at her. He'd stepped closer to Wesley and leaned into his face so their noses almost touched. "I have seniority here. You know that. Call your delinquent Slayer off."

"I'll be all right," Charlotte said. "I'll be all right here with Faith and Doyle." Her voice shook.

Faith's fists *swished* in the air.

A tiny, tight smile tweaked the corner of Wesley's lips as he nodded to Faith. "Mr. Carnagan is right. Our duty is to work with him."

She rolled her eyes in return, and shrugged, holding her unclenched hands up and out in a humour that was nonetheless also defiant. It was a moment of almost psychic communion between the two, and Carnagan looked annoyed, while I... I realised for the first time that in some ways maybe Faith and Wesley, both very much the black sheep of their respective roles, weren't so different after all.

9.19 Chapter 19

In Wesley's absence, there wasn't a lot that we could do. We sat in front of the defunct TV, Faith swearing as she tried to coax some reception out of it. Eventually she gave up. We waited staring at a blank screen instead of a snowy one. Time passed. I made tea. Time passed. Faith made tea. Proof enough that she was dangerously bored.

"Wanna play cards?" she asked eventually. At least boredom had worn down the abrasive edge of malice that had been in her tone whenever she spoke to me lately.

"All right. Charlotte?"

She nodded, smiling, looking grateful for the offer of a distraction. I wondered what she'd been pondering, locked in her quiet thoughts the last few hours.

We gathered around a small table and the clock hands drew around towards evening and then night. The storm outside increased its fury to the point where we could hear it faintly even in the basement.

"Never thought I'd be hoping for Wesley and The Cardigan to come back," Faith said uneasily as the lights flickered for the fourth or fifth time. "It's not like we know how to handle this magical shit."

The lights flickered again a few minutes later as Charlotte scraped another round's winning across the table towards her. Wesley hadn't been kidding when he said the lady had a brain. She had a cunning mind at least when it came to cards. Faith and I were holding about equal with each other, both some way behind her.

Concerned, I left the game to check on the conditions outside. I didn't like the idea of venturing out of the front door that shivered on its hinges with the force of the wind and rain, so I took the stairs to the top floor landing. I peered out of the window in the hallway outside the locked-up offices of our chiropodist neighbour. Half the city lacked its customary overgenerous sprinkling of lights in the darkness, but was lit up periodically anyway by startling flashes of red illumination that made it almost as bright as day. The noise was deafening. It surprised me that the windows were holding up against the barrage.

I swore, thinking of Wesley still outside - although the thought of The Cardigan, to use Faith's name, out in that brought some measure of cheer.

I headed back down into the apartment. It was only as I descended the steps to the basement that the roar of the weather and its assault upon my ears began to fade and I heard the screaming. I ran down the last of the steps and into the living room.

The scene was much like the previous night. Charlotte screamed and convulsed as Faith held her to the floor, and red lightning flickered around them. The lights in the room had blown and everything was lit up in red.

There was no Wesley on-hand to deal with things this time. My initial rush for the books strewn on the table was stalled by the realisation that I had no idea what spell it was that Wesley had used the previous night, and I probably wouldn't be able to pronounce it even if I could find it. I moved to help Faith instead.

I yelped and went demon as my hands made contact. The jolt wasn't any better than it had been the time before. I took one shoulder and Faith the other, and I only hoped we could ride it out until whatever was getting at Charlotte settled down again. At least,

9 *Lightning Lover*

I hoped it *would* settle down and we wouldn't end up getting electro-shock therapy until Wesley and The Cardigan decided to return.

Faith looked across at me, her face contorted in pain, lips stretched to reveal grit teeth. "Shit, Doyle," she yelled haltingly. "I'm really - sorry - I laughed - yesterday." Another flash lit up her bones and I got an intricate view of Faith's anatomy that I could've well lived without.

Charlotte quieted gradually, the room descending into darkness as she did. I'd had my doubts about whether Wesley's spell had really been what stopped her fits, last time, and was grateful to have them proven founded. As she stilled and lay as if asleep, Faith and I struggled up to kneeling, leaning exhaustedly on each other for support. She was shaking as much as I was. I wrapped an arm around her shoulders and our shudders merged. I couldn't tell whose were whose.

"I'm gonna kill Carnagan," she stuttered, looking more ragged than angry in the faint light trickling from the kitchen's open door.

"It wouldn't have made much difference if Wesley had been here," I said, and explained my reasoning.

She nodded, then, looking over my shoulder, her expression froze. "Doyle. I think you need to be a human 'round about now."

I turned my head and saw Charlotte sitting up, looking at us blankly. Her expression didn't change when I switched back to human. Something in her eyes was... odd.

I reluctantly disengaged from Faith, and was warmly encouraged by her own similar reluctance but it wasn't really a good moment to start with the hopeful thinking about the possible ramifications that had for our deceased relationship.

"Charlotte?" I said, crawling over to her on hands and knees. I waved a hand in front of her face and her eyes didn't track it. "Charlotte?" I snapped my fingers in front of her nose, and her eyes settled on me in irritation, briefly, in an expression I'd seen on Wesley's face, before fuzzing out of focus again.

"Wake up, Red." Faith caught Charlotte's shoulder and shook her, but she remained limp and unseeing.

"Don't slap her," I warned, anticipating her next move. She pulled a face. "Charlotte, come on, talk to me. Pretend I'm Wesley."

"Wesley's human," she said distinctly, and something about the way she said it suggested it wasn't entirely a response to my remark.

"Yeah, and he's not a short, Irish drunkard either," Faith said with wicked humour. "But use your imagination, like the rest of us hafta."

I glared at her shadowy figure, then almost wrenched my neck when Charlotte's next words yanked my attention back to her.

"I remember it now." There was no emotion in her voice. "I remember the summoning rite."

"Damn," I murmured. I'd hoped that the inevitable would be avoided somehow, that the conclusions we'd drawn would turn out to be wrong. I didn't want to think about Wesley. I realised that, somehow, Faith's hand and mine had ended up clasped together, and she was on the verge of breaking all my fingers.

"I remember. . . Darkness. Tunnels. Sewers. Black, all around. The vessel screamed as it was dragged down the tunnel to the chamber. Treachery... treachery. Screaming again when the spell was cast over it. . ."

The specifics of the spell wouldn't have made for all-ages viewing. Faith and I backed off slightly and listened with growing horror to the details Charlotte recounted.

Hell and damnation, Wes, I know you think I'm crazy dating Faith - ex-dating Faith - but she'd never be a party to anything like this. . .

"He lost control, and the magic flowed away. Not enough left to finish the binding into flesh. Finish me. Broken... in pieces... incomplete..." Her chin suddenly jerked up and she let out an ear-piercing shriek of despair. I noticed even in the semi-dark that there was moisture running down from her eyes.

I swore as realisation hit.

"What's wrong?" Faith demanded. "What's she talking about? Who's 'he'? What the hell's going on?"

"She thought she was human," I said numbly. "Now she knows for certain that she's not."

"What?" Faith was moving to help Charlotte as the older woman collapsed into sobs.

9 Lightning Lover

I pulled her back. "Don't. I don't know how much of Charlotte is left in there."

"What the hell?" Faith's hands curled into fists around my shirt collar. "Cut the shit, Doyle, what's happening?"

"She didn't relate the events of that ritual as the caster. She didn't cast that spell." I struggled to unhook Faith's hands, and caught her head in my own hands, turning her to face the moaning Charlotte. "That," I said, "Is our storm spirit."

"That's the storm spirit?" Her eyes were wide in disbelief. "She's the storm spirit? If she's the storm spirit, who the hell performed the ritual?" She had to shout to be heard, because Charlotte was chanting again. I recognised the words and the rhythm and rolled my eyes. I was getting pretty fed up of hearing that spell.

Then I froze, because Charlotte's voice was changing, distorting, as she spoke, and a moment later, it wasn't Charlotte's voice that was emerging from her lips at all.

"You gotta be kidding me," Faith said. "But that's-"

"Jacob Carnagan," I finished.

9.20 Chapter 20

Charlotte rose slowly to her feet, Carnagan's voice still rolling from her lips, rich with its usual arrogant confidence. The red lightning crackled about her again, but it was different from before.

Previously, it had ripped through her body with the force of a hurricane, tearing and scorching. Now, its movements were slower, more languorous, almost playful as it coiled about her body.

"Uh, Doyle," Faith said hesitantly. "Is it just me, or is she not exactly... standing normally?"

I licked dry lips. "It's not you." Charlotte's feet were an inch off the ground.

"Any suggestions, boss?"

Of course. When everything was going her way, she was pissed off with me and wouldn't listen to a word I said. Now, suddenly *I* was in charge?

I took a cautious step towards Charlotte, feeling the hair on my arms rising. "Hey. How ya doin'?"

The lightning twisted and writhed about Charlotte's face, throwing her features into sharp relief. Carnagan's voice rose in intensity and pitch, still in eerie timing with the motions of her lips.

Faith cleared her throat. "You want anything? Blanket, nice cup of tea... battery?"

Charlotte rose another inch or two off the ground, still chanting. The lightning about her flared, and Faith grabbed my shoulder and yanked me back. "Whatta we do, Doyle? Hell, what's *she* doing?"

I glanced at her panicked expression and back at the hovering woma - spirit. "Uh..."

I blinked. It was hard to really make Charlotte out in the bright light from her private thunderstorm, but were my eyes going or was she getting paler... less substantial? A moment later, I was sure. I knew what she was doing.

"She's leavin'."

"Leaving? Where's she gonna go?" Faith asked, her hand tightening on my shoulder. "The only door out is past us..." Her voice trailed off as she realised what she'd said.

"Don't worry," I said, worrying furiously. "I don't think she's plannin' to use the door."

It was clear now - even Faith saw it. Charlotte was fading away before our very eyes, growing less real as the lightning about her grew brighter and brighter.

"We gotta stop her," I said, refusing to think about the practicality of what I was suggesting. "We gotta stop her gettin' out of here."

Faith laughed hysterically. "How? You hiding a lightning conductor under that shirt?"

Charlotte was nearly gone, a bare shadow inside a nexus of electrical energy.

Aw, hell. It's not like I ever come up with smart plans anyway. Might as well stay true to form.

"Get her!"

9.21 Chapter 21

I was everywhere, and I was nowhere. I was in a thousand, thousand pieces, falling over the city streets. I was a flash of energy from sky to ground, I was a swirling potent presence filling the sky.

I was everything, and I was nothing.

There was pain, but it was a pain so distant, and yet so encompassing, that I was aware of it only on a purely analytical level. Faith was with me, *part* of me, and somewhere deep inside I could feel whatever was left of Charlotte's being as well, lost in a deep endless storm of elemental energy.

Lost as I was lost.

I couldn't feel the confines of my own body, just an endless spreading out, a dissipating, across the entire globe, linking every cloud, every rumble of ominous thunder...

There was a tearing, ripping sensation, and my mind went completely blank.

Fearexhilarationangerpainshockwonderlosspainjoypowerhorrorpaincontentmentfurypainpainpa

9.22 Chapter 22

...and I was facedown in filthy water, twitching and shuddering, lightning jolting and burning me, and the pain was inside me like a living thing...

I was vaguely aware of Faith flailing and jerking next to me, flopping in the thin film of dirty water like a landed fish. My muscles refused to obey me, contracting and releasing on someone else's orders... definitely not mine, since all I wanted to do was curl into a ball and scream.

With a titanic effort, I managed to lift my chin from the water, enough to see... a polished shoe.

A shoe which led to the smooth grey cloth expanse of a raincoat, which flowed upwards to form a face...

"Ah. Mr Doyle." Carnagan sounded as calm as a man making polite conversation at a tea party. "This is unexpected." The expensive shoe dug into my ribs and heaved me onto my back, affording me a better view of my surroundings.

I didn't recognise the sewer junction specifically, but I'd probably passed it once or twice, more than likely on the trail of some demon or generically evil beastie.

But even if I had passed it, it definitely wouldn't have looked like it did at that moment.

Wesley lay on his back, his glasses skewed and eyes closed, a couple of meters away. Something was holding him off the sewer floor, something he was tied to with a length of black cord.

I was expecting an altar of some kind. I certainly *wasn't* expecting a pink-and-white folding plastic picnic table. Carnagan noticed my gaze and shrugged almost apologetically. "They were all out of bloodstained altars at the shops."

Great. Budget Human Sacrifice.

"One has to make do with what's available," Carnagan observed. "And often one is rewarded with bonuses beyond what was allowed for. . . like you and the Slayer, for example. I'm fairly certain I corrected my mistranslation, but it helps to know I have a few bodies in reserve."

I tried to force my trembling lips to shape a suitably obscene response, but to no avail.

Carnagan smiled slightly. "Well, I'd love to sit around and chat, but *tempus fugit*, Mr Doyle." His gaze shifted past me. "*Tempus fugit*, indeed. You." He said curtly. "Over there, near the receptacle. We'll do this right, this time, won't we?"

Charlotte was barely even recognisable as human anymore, just a pale, fleshy presence within a crimson inferno as she drifted over to stand near Wesley. "Oh, enough with the drama," Carnagan rebuked. "The glare is hurting my eyes."

The spirit didn't respond, but the lightning thinned away to a red halo about her, Charlotte's body seeming to coalesce out of the light.

Carnagan stepped over to the table, and bent over Wesley. The limp Watcher was nearly as pale as Charlotte, but I could still hear a heartbeat, though it was fairly weak and fluttery.

9 *Lightning Lover*

Hell, my heartbeat wasn't exactly regular.

"Pryce," Carnagan said sharply. "Pryce, wake up." He slapped Wesley twice, the blows quick and impersonal. "Wake up, man. Pryce, I *order* you to regain consciousness."

"Wyndh'm-Pr'ce," Wesley muttered, his eyelids stirring and fluttering open. I watched in pitying sympathy as he realised his position.

"Awake now?" Carnagan said briskly, like a doctor with a patient. "Good." He pulled a wicked-looking knife from beneath his coat and checked the edge with his thumb. I swallowed, with difficulty. It was a very big knife.

For Wesley's part he seemed not even to notice the huge blade, his attention instead fixed on the man wielding it. "You. You're the traitor... not Ch-" Then he noticed the other figure standing by him, and for an unbearable second, his face brightened with hope. "Charlotte! Help me! Char-"

The crackle of lightning about her hair cut him off. I watched his face settle into the stoic Watcher's mask, analysing and calculating. "So. *That's* the way it is." The mask trembled slightly, but held.

Carnagan, who had watched this exchange without expression, nodded. "Well done, Pryce. Glad to see the Council hasn't completely wasted its time on you."

The way Wesley looked at him chilled my blood. I think even Carnagan was taken back by the undiluted hatred in those normally weak and hesitant eyes. He dropped his gaze to the knife, and checked its sharpness a second, unnecessary, time.

I managed to roll myself onto my chest again, and made a futile attempt to lift myself off the ground. The thud as I slumped back attracted the attention of both Watchers, somewhat to Carnagan's relief judging from his expression. "Yes, Mr Doyle? Is something the matter?"

Again my lips failed me. "W - w - w..."

But either Watchers were trained to read lips, or else Carnagan read my mind instead. "Why?"

"Yes, why?" Wesley bit out. "Why turn traitor, why betray the Council and everything you believe in, why throw it all away for your own petty gain?"

Carnagan's expression was dark as he looked down at the younger man. "I threw it all away? *They* threw it away! They threw away the world we had, the advantage we had won against the darkness, because of their own arrogance and pettiness! I am no traitor, Pryce, no more than those fools in England, with their protocols and their policies!"

He snorted in disgust at Wesley's confusion. "Oh, come on, man! Surely you and yours, who are fighting on the front lines, can understand! The endless political manoeuvrings, the pointless academic back-biting and smug moral superiority while the very world crumbles about us? What use is that? The Council has lost its way, lost whatever drive it had to stand against evil. We're anachronisms, Pryce, useless Englishmen with piles of dusty books and encyclopaedic vocabularies."

He glanced at Faith and sneered. "And our vaunted secret weapon? A girl. One silly girl, fickle, adolescent, undisciplined. Weak enough to be killed by a single vampire, all but useless against the greater threats."

"S-screw you, too," I heard weakly from beside me. A warm, if trembling, hand closed in weak grasp over my own.

"So this is your solution?" Wesley retorted. "Dark magic, perversion of the natural order? We'd be no better than the enemy we fight!"

I expected Carnagan to lose it at that, to raise that huge knife and slice Wes apart, ritual or no ritual. But in contrast the fury in his face seemed to melt away, replaced by pleading. "Necessary perversion, Pryce. Necessary magic. I told the Council, you know, back when Sunnydale fell to the Master. I brought the evidence of my studies to them and urged them to take action."

"Necessary action," Wesley said flatly. "Am I right?"

"It was necessary!" Carnagan snarled. "Look at what they did instead! They sent in their weak, ill-prepared Slayer and the vampires killed her! Killed her and continued to kill, hundreds of deaths that could have been avoided if only the Council had accepted my proposal, had provided me with a subject for the spell as I asked!"

"A subject," Wes echoed. "You mean a sacrifice."

Carnagan shook with the force of his passion. "We are at war, Pryce! There are always sacrifices in war!"

"Yes."

9 *Lightning Lover*

The high colour drained from Carnagan's face. "What?"

"Yes," Wesley repeated. "We're at war. I'm a soldier in that war, so are Doyle and Faith, so was..." his voice shook slightly, "was Charlotte."

Carnagan smiled in approval, as if Wesley was a particularly slow student who had finally understood a difficult equation. "Yes. That's right. Her sacrifice was necessary, as yours is."

"But you're not a soldier," Wesley cut him off. "You crossed that line when you took Charlotte's life and gave her body to that *thing*. You're a murderer, and nothing good can come of alliance with murderers."

I watched Carnagan's face with fascination. It just froze up, piece by piece. His smile locked, then the rest of his features. His eyes were the last to go, the heat of his passion buried beneath icy resolution.

Wesley gazed calmly up at the other man, but he blanched at Carnagan's next words.

Because they were in Latin.

My arms lay uselessly by my side as Carnagan's voice rose with power and authority, invoking and binding mystical energy. Charlotte's halo brightened until it was blinding, a searing outline about the dark shadow of her human host.

Desperately, sweat beading on my brow, I tried to force my uncooperative body to move, a familiar sense of helplessness falling over me.

I had been here before. Paralysed by Wesley's poison dart, trapped with the crippled Watcher by a clan of demons. But then Faith had arrived to save us.

Now she lay by my side, as helpless as I was. As we all were.

Carnagan's chant peaked, and he brought the sacrificial knife down. There was a crack like thunder.

Instinctively, my eyes shifted to Charlotte, but she was still.

Carnagan swore, kicking at something by his feet. It took me a moment to process what had happened. The plastic table beneath Wesley had buckled under his weight, dropping him to the sewer floor.

"Shoddy American workmanship," Carnagan cursed, planting a brutal kick between Wesley's ribs. The younger man rolled away as the older shifted his grip on the knife and came after him.

Wes staggered to his feet, the rope about his arms still tying him to the split table. His arms bunched, straining against the rope, but the dark cord held. Obviously Carnagan had got that from a shop with better quality control.

Wes lurched back a step, ducking a knife slash, the dismembered table wobbling wildly on his back. My breath caught in my throat as Carnagan whipped the weapon up towards his face.

There was a crunch, and Wesley stumbled back, blood dribbling from his mouth. Carnagan wiped the blood from his knife's bronze hilt with a white cloth, as fastidiously as Wes might clean his spectacles. "Really, Pryce. This is all most unnecessary and hardly seemly-" Still talking, he thrust the blade out. Wes dodged, and clumsily swiped at Carnagan with a protruding table leg.

The standoff seemed to last for hours, Wesley dodging and retreating, Carnagan advancing with broad, confident sweeps of his knife leading the way. Carnagan's first few swipes were lazy, over-confident, but when they didn't immediately fell his enemy, his eyes narrowed in grudging respect and his attacks became more measured. All the while, I strained useless muscles, trying to come to his aid.

Abruptly, a gentle push rolled me to one side. Faith rose on trembling legs, her face gritted in concentration, and moved haltingly towards Carnagan, stalking him. The rogue Watcher's back was to her, his attention focused on Wesley.

Faith was within a metre of Carnagan now, Wesley a metre away on the other side, trying desperately not to betray her as he dodged Carnagan's increasingly-angry blows. Wesley slipped in the grime, and a cut laid his cheek open. Faith gasped involuntarily at the sight of his blood.

That was all the warning Carnagan needed. He wheeled about and smashed the hilt of his weapon down on Faith's head. She dropped without a sound.

Carnagan looked down contemptuously at the fallen girl. "Some weapon. You see, Pryce, there's really no reason to struggle. It's all for the best." He turned back to his target. "Now would you just-"

9 *Lightning Lover*

Wesley rose off the floor almost vertically, slamming his bloody face into Carnagan's. The older man staggered back, and Wesley kicked him hard, hooking his leg behind Carnagan's. Both men struggled to maintain their balance.

Carnagan went down hard, but Wes somehow managed to keep his other foot on the ground, hopping until he could get both feet planted again.

Guess his time on crutches had really paid off.

Carnagan scrambled for the knife, but Wesley stomped down hard. Carnagan screamed as bones crunched in his wrist. "Don't... insult my... Slayer," Wesley ground out, slamming a savage kick into the other man's ribs.

"Damn you... Pryce..." Carnagan gasped, staggering to his feet. "This is... necessary... we're... at... war."

"I'll show you war," Wesley snarled. The larger man charged him, trying to take Wes's legs out from under him, removing his only method of attack, but Wes counter-attacked with low strikes of his feet, aimed at joints and shins. Fighting dirty.

I felt a stirring of pride, deep within. Some of those moves were mine.

A brutal footsweep (which I recognised as one Faith had used on me once or twice, often for less... conventional reasons) put Carnagan on the ground, Wesley on top of him. Wesley slammed his head down twice, and it was all over. Carnagan lolled back against the floor.

Wesley stood, slowly and awkwardly, and limped across to me. "Terribly... sorry to prevail on you in your current... circumstance, but do you think you could lend me a hand with these... knots?"

I stared up at his bloody, bruised face, and tried very hard not to laugh.

The English. They're really something else.

Wesley's lips started to twitch as well, and we both broke into the laboured laughter of hysteria.

A burst of coughing choked the laughter in my throat, as I tried, again, to stand up. And I saw him.

Saw Carnagan, not unconscious as he'd feigned to be, but instead advancing on Wesley with a knife in hand. His eyes met mine.

"W-W-Wes," I tried to get out, my throat constricting as my mouth struggled to form words.

Still chuckling, Wesley met my gaze. "What?" Carnagan flipped the knife and threw. Wesley's eyes widened in doomed understanding as the knife struck home with a thud.

"No..." I moaned as he stood stock-still over me, with a peculiarly confused expression on his face. He half-turned towards his killer, and I saw the hilt of the knife protruding from his back, blood running down the hilt... No. No blood. I blinked, certain my exhausted brain had short-circuited. The knife was buried in the small of his back, but he wasn't bleeding. It had struck right in the centre, but there was no blood...

I understood. Wesley turned completely to face Carnagan, the knife embedded uselessly in the remnants of the table tied to his back.

Carnagan's jaw twitched in helpless frustration. "Damn you, Pryce..." The larger man charged, barrelling towards him.

Wes met the charge fast and low, planting his shoulder into Carnagan's chest and heaving him backwards. The rogue Watcher staggered, and collided with Charlotte.

For a long moment Jacob Carnagan stood absolutely still, apart from a slight trembling as crimson lightning swept over his body. Wesley was blocking most of my view, but I could still see Carnagan's face, his mouth opening and closing in silent agony, his screams drowned out by the crackle of the lightning. Then there was an explosive boom of thunder, and Carnagan's face disappeared from my view as he fell to the ground. I couldn't see his scorched body from where I lay, but judging from the stink of ozone and burnt flesh, I really didn't want to. So instead I watched Wesley's face, his mouth drawn in a hard line as he looked down at the corpse.

His lips moved. I couldn't really hear the words with my thunder-deafened ears, but I could see the letters his mouth formed. Maybe, like Carnagan had with me, I just knew the thought behind the words.

"It's Wyndham-Pryce. Sir."

9.23 Chapter 23

Wesley kicked Carnagan's knife over to me, and with some difficulty I managed to fold my fingers around it and saw through the ropes securing him to the broken remnant of the table. That accomplished, I slumped back to the floor with a groan. Wesley unravelled the sliced lengths of rope from himself and struggled with a few remaining knots. I stared at the roof of the sewer tunnels and listened to his sigh of relief and to the crash when the loosed table fell to the ground before making the effort to raise my head again.

"Thank goodness," he said, massaging his arms. "And thank you, Doyle." He made as if to lean down, opened his mouth as if to say something else, but then his gaze caught on Charlotte - on the storm spirit, its electricity diminished to nothing, now once again a mere human form - standing silent and motionless on the sidelines as she'd remained throughout his struggles. His head jerked around away from me, and his feet followed.

Grimacing, I forced my limbs to move, rolled over and crawled across to where Faith lay, still unconscious. I poked her under the ribs, trying to distract myself from the choked silence between Wesley and Charlotte. "Faith? C'mon now, Slayer."

Her head rolled to the side, the movement disturbing the fall of her dark hair, revealing blood. Wincing in sympathy, I touched my sleeve to the cut, cleaning around its edges. Eyes closed, she muttered something and her hand rose to swipe at mine. Despite her semi-conscious state, the blow near cracked my wrist. I concluded that Faith probably wasn't going to suffer any lasting damage from her injuries, but if I wasn't careful, I might. "Faith, it's me. You're all right," I said, and said again until her struggles subsided as it sank in that I wasn't an enemy.

I awkwardly sat up against the wall of the sewer and very carefully pulled her into my lap, holding her loosely as she snorted and snuggled in. Her injured state gave a reasonable excuse, and since it might be my last chance to hold her at all, even if she woke up and decked me, it'd be worth it.

Wesley and the storm spirit were looking at each other across three feet of darkness, just far enough to be out of reach, neither making any move closer, neither speaking.

It was the spirit who finally broke the impasse. Wesley seemed beyond all action.

She said, "I have no memories of you beyond the ones made these last days, but... this body remembers you. It trusts you. It will miss you." Taking a single step forward, she placed the palm of her hand against his chest, over his heart.

Wesley swallowed and his mouth worked silently. His hands fluttered around hers as though he'd like to push it off but didn't want to touch it. "Yes," he said eventually. "You - you didn't know-"

"What I was? No. I took on the role you remembered for me, which this form remembered, but it couldn't last. The being that owned this body before is gone. All that remains are traces."

I stroked Faith's hair and she snorted against my wrist. "Hssh."

Something had hardened in Wesley's eyes, his distress transforming into cold determination, but he kept it from his voice and expression. "You wouldn't help me against Carnagan."

"He would have made me whole. I remain damaged - not complete. I would have been sorry if you died, yet we - we would have been complete together." Her eyes glowed. "We would have been one."

"Charlotte would have helped me. As her duty. As a friend. Charlotte would have fought against Carnagan to the last."

I was sure *Charlotte* had. The storm spirit, on the other hand, had no answer for that.

Wesley relented with a sigh. "Perhaps we can reverse the original ritual, to unbind you from this form. I know there's nothing left of the host now - this is just a body - but perhaps it would help *you*."

"It is not necessary. My being repairs itself slowly. What Carnagan lacked was largely control. I will keep this form. It is... alien to me, but already I begin to grow into it. I am sure it will serve me well enough."

Wesley's face twisted with something like revulsion, but only for an instant. Then his bland-face was back as he gently removed the spirit's hand from his breast. His thumb caressed the skin of her hand fractionally before he let it go. It dropped to her side with finality.

"Goodbye," he said.

"Yes."

9 *Lightning Lover*

She stepped back from him as the lightning crept over her form, fading her out, and then she was gone.

Wesley watched stonily the empty place where she'd been, then turned his back on it without a word. The storm might have dissipated, but thunder remained in his expression. I unconsciously tightened my arms around Faith as he cast that gaze on me. At the sight of the two of us, it relented slightly.

"Are you both all right?" cracked a voice that didn't sound much like Wesley's - but it was his lips that were moving.

"Yeah," Faith said, unfolding herself from my grasp and standing up, shaking herself out. I stared at her. She touched her head and her face scrunched up in displeasure. "It's just a bump." After according her Watcher a cautious look, she leaned back down to pull me up and set me on my feet, keeping her face turned aside so I couldn't see her expression.

I leaned weakly against the wall and stammered a response to Wesley that must've been pretty incoherent at best, and Faith made some comment about Slayer recovery versus that of lame-ass half-demons.

As I remained none-too-steady on my feet, they each took a hold under one of my arms and we headed down the tunnel to find an exit from the sewer system, and I was too exhausted to much care about the indignity of it.

"So I guess Carnagan lied," Faith said. "I guess this means *Charlotte* was hunting *him*. He was the rogue all along." A long silence; for myself, speech too much of an effort at present, and as for Wesley...

Her feet scuffed the floor intentionally as she dragged along. With a huff, she tried again, "'Cause, y'know, I'd wondered how he managed to get here so quick, what with the lightning storms and the planes being grounded and all."

As one, Wesley and I stiffly turned our heads to glare at her.

Several minutes ticked by with no sound but our footsteps.

"So... now Charlotte's gone, that's it, isn't it?" Faith's voice was smaller, this time, almost timid. "We're all cleared up here. Everything-"

"Don't call her Charlotte," Wesley interrupted, his voice grating on the air sharply, like something breaking. His next words escaped then in a rush. "Charlotte's *dead*. That thing... that thing isn't her, it was never her. It was something else that set up home in her body."

The hollowness in his tone had nothing to do with the sewer's echo. Charlotte was dead, and he'd loved her, after some fashion, whatever their relationship had been - love, lust, a youthful unfulfilled crush. I remembered the storm spirit saying, *this body remembers you*, and wondered. Maybe Charlotte back then had noticed Wesley after all. Maybe he hadn't been the only adolescent Watcher too shy to confess his feelings. That possibility must be a harsh kick in the teeth for him now.

"Okay. Not-Charlotte, the storm spirit, whatever. Anyhow, what I was saying was, now that--"

"Why'd you let her go?" I mumbled, interrupting.

"Say what?" asked Faith, and I had to repeat myself a couple of times, forcing my still-numb mouth to produce coherent sounds.

I felt Wesley's shrug through the contact of his arm across my shoulders. "Whatever my feelings about the host it destroyed, the storm spirit itself was an innocent, an elemental neither bound by our rules nor a part of our world. Setting it free was the only reasonable option. It's no threat by itself, and the only person who had any means of controlling it is dead." He gave a small embarrassed cough and suddenly, I saw with relief, he was back to the Wesley I recognised. He admitted weakly, "Besides, I had no means at all by which to destroy or capture it. Had I attempted to do so it would most likely have ended with all three of us being toasted to a crisp."

Faith snickered. "Good call, Wes. My vote's with yours against becoming Slayer-saute. But what I was saying--" She stopped abruptly, as though waiting for interruption. As though, now that she had chance to get the words out, she really didn't want to.

After the silence had stretched on much too long for comfort, with neither her nor Wesley making any move to end it, I said them for her.

"You mean it's done, finished, over. Right? The weather will clear up, the planes will be flyin' again, and we can split like we'd planned. There's no more need for you to stay here in LA now, after all."

9 *Lightning Lover*

"Quite," said Wesley, eyes to the floor. "No reason. No reason at all." His eyes flickered up, to run briefly over Faith and myself, then returned to the floor. The knife still held loosely, forgotten in his free hand, tapped proof of his distraction against the wall of the sewer tunnel.

It didn't take long to find a shaft to the surface. Above ground, our feet kicking through drying puddles, we walked home with the night sky clearing overhead.

A home that, very shortly, wouldn't be home anymore for at least two of us.

9.24 Chapter 24

Back at the office, by reason of being the least battered one of us as well as, I suspected, because he wanted any distraction he could get from the events of the evening, Wesley made tea and fussed over Faith's head wound. I collapsed in a chair feeling energy gradually return and watched them both, filing away these moments with the knowledge that they were among the last. Setting to memory the way they moved together now, as he cleaned away the blood and bandaged her head, where months ago there'd been the constant match of acid insults and derision versus cool orders and rigid adherence to the Good Little Watcher rulebook.

Watching Faith. The fall of that dark hair across her face. The emotion hard to read, sunk back in those dark-smudged eyes. The way her body moved, smooth and athletic under the leather, every small motion filled with heartbreaking grace and bonebreaking strength.

"I've been thinking," Wesley said eventually, breaking me out of my trance and flooding me with the realisation of just how long and how intently I had been staring. I tried to pull my eyes away, to look in any other direction but theirs, but it was hopeless. He stopped, and cleared his throat, and puffed out his chest, switching to Important Mode.

I blinked at him and frowned. Faith gave a pretend snore and dropped her head forward onto her arms where they crossed against the tabletop.

"You... often do," I said weakly. "What've you been thinkin' about this time?"

"Us. The three of us." He pursed his lips, looking between Faith and me - which, come to think of it, he'd been doing a lot in the last hour or so. "And leaving..."

Hope raised its head and I slammed it down, too aware that it was likely to be disappointed.

"I mean, really, one little argument is hardly any reason to break up an alliance which has, for the most part, proved extremely successful," he stuttered, losing his momentum but staggering bravely on, under Faith's hard gaze and my own puzzled one. "And if Faith was amenable - and, of course, Mr Doyle, if you were amenable..."

I opened my mouth to reply, and my breath squeaked in the back of my throat and no sound came out.

"But the Council's orders?" Faith said. "Remember, New Jersey? Vampires to slay?"

"There are vampires to slay over the place, Faith. The Council have other agents they can send elsewhere. That is to say, I'm not saying the Council's way isn't the best way to fight the forces of darkness... but here, with Doyle's visions, with the agency, I can see the faces of people we help, instead of just the numbers of demons slain. I believe I've learned to value that. And I think it's possible that, that, that perhaps the Council spend too long looking towards the darker side of our business, instead of the hopeful. Maybe that's what made it easy for Carnagan to decide to sacrifice individual human lives in the name of this fight. Because he's seen too many monsters, and not enough victims. I... don't want to be like him. And I don't want you to be like him, either, Faith."

It was her turn to struggle for words now. In the end she just looked silently at me, her eyes strange.

"So, how about it, Doyle?" Wesley said. "Are you amenable to our staying? I do realise that you'd expected to have your home and your business back to yourself again, and perhaps this interferes with your plans, and isn't really a reasonable thing to ask, but--"

"Doyle?" Faith said challengingly, overruling him with a glare. "Do you want us to stay?"

A strange emphasis on that 'us'.

I swallowed, the back of my throat dry and painful. They were both looking at me, waiting for a reply. I needed to say something. Now.

I cleared my throat casually, and fought to keep my voice steady, striving to not hear the waver that would reveal just how much this meant. "Well, I guess you could," I said airily, "if you really wanted to."

I mean, it's not like I'm doing anything else with the rest of my life.

10 Evidence of Things Not Seen

by Roseveare, Mike Dewar and Ellen

10.1 Chapter 1

A demon sailed neatly over Faith's shoulder to impact with a satisfying splat against the wall, limbs splayed out like in the cartoons. I would have applauded, except I had other things on my mind just then.

Like an opponent who took advantage of my momentary distraction to aim a blow at my neck that would have killed me if I hadn't desperately thrown up an arm to block.

The arm didn't break, but it felt like a close thing. The whole limb went numb and dropped back to my side, a useless weight dragging down on my shoulder.

I reciprocated with a hard jab to the creature's face using my remaining hand. Took out an eye.

The thing just growled and kept coming, as though the gaping hole in its face didn't bother it at all. I found myself on the defensive again, forced to back off, one arm out of action and starting to get seriously worried this was a fight I was gonna lose.

These guys were definitely tough.

There were four of the creatures; kind of a lizard look about them, big and ugly and mean, and like nothing I'd encountered before. I'd had a vision of them causing a massacre in a bar close by the office, so the three of us had headed over to intercept them in a back street before they could get there.

I was aware, in the background, of Wesley getting the crap beat out of him by another of the things. Faith had dealt with one of her two pretty comprehensively - it lay motionless on the ground underneath the demon-shaped indent it had made in the brick wall of the tall building at our backs - and now she was chipping away at the other's defences.

She seemed to be on top of things. Which was definitely a good, because unless she could finish off quick and get to Wesley's aid and mine, we might very well have a serious problem.

I kicked out at the demon and it dodged lazily, with a mocking ease. This was not good. I tried to keep my eyes on the creature while scanning the ground for the knife I'd lost early on in the fight. It *had* to be around somewhere.

Wesley, several metres beyond, was getting his arm wrenched behind him almost to the point of dislocation, and his face bashed into the concrete. He'd lost his glasses somewhere. He needed help bad, and if it wasn't forthcoming from Faith-

Shit. Where was that knife? I couldn't see it anywhere.

My numbed arm was recovering some feeling, for all that it quivered as though still reverberating from the force of the blow, and I used it to search my pockets, keeping the other arm free to defend against the creature.

My fingers touched a stake, not quite so useful for demons of the non-vampire persuasion, but better than nothing. I drew it out and almost fumbled switching hands - couldn't deliver a slap with the right one at the moment, let alone drive a length of sharpened wood through several inches of dense flesh.

The demon laughed. "Do I look like a vampire?" it hissed.

Funny, was it? I thought savagely. I fainted at its heart and then stabbed the stake through its neck, where the scales looked more vulnerably soft. Had to reach quite high to get on target; these things were a good bit taller than me.

Mistake. Left me wide open, and the injury wouldn't kill it quick. With my other arm still as good as useless, I couldn't do anything about the demon's instant retaliatory bash.

It sent me sprawling several yards, seeing stars and turning demon-face, and for a long moment I lay where I landed staring up at the night sky and convinced it had powdered something important inside me.

Damn it.

I wrenched myself up onto hands and knees, then immediately fell back, dizzy. I tried again, making it to my knees this time. The world spun in crazy circles.

10 *Evidence of Things Not Seen*

I stayed demon 'cause if I didn't I thought I was probably gonna end up dead, and for that matter so was Wesley if someone didn't get to him quick.

The creature I'd stabbed was whipping its head around and coughing as though it hoped to dislodge the stake stubbornly stuck in its throat, ends of wood growing out from beneath its jaw and the base of its skull. It hissed in rage as it caught sight of me trying to get up again and started to stagger my way, clearly in its death throes and pretty set upon taking its killer along with it, constantly falling and clawing its way upright again.

I saw Wesley's opponent twine its claws through the Watcher's hair and take a grip on his shoulder - preparatory, I knew, to a twist and snap that would break his neck. Wesley's face was a mask of blood and he looked as though he was only just hanging on to consciousness, barely struggling now.

What was Faith up to? I risked a glance, awkwardly attempting to get my feet under me despite the fact it felt like all the bone in my legs had been switched with rubber, aware of the dying demon trying to reach me.

Faith was still slapping her half-dead opponent around.

"Faith!" I yelled urgently. "Leave off and help Wesley!"

She carried on, oblivious, totally engrossed in what she was doing.

I looked back to Wesley - and spied my knife, then. It was on the ground inches away from where his right hand sprawled limp and unmoving. "Wesley - knife!" I yelled, futilely, knowing he didn't have enough left in him for the advice to do any good. Desperation lent me strength and I finally managed to regain my feet. I lurched unsteadily to his aid.

Didn't get very far.

Should have been concentrating more on lookin' after my own skin. The injured demon had gotten too close. I ducked a swipe of its claws at the last possible moment. In its weak state it overbalanced and fell on me.

I didn't have much in the way of balance just then myself, so I fell too, and the demon landed heavily on top. Crushing me between its weight and the floor, it did more damage by accident than it had yet on purpose. I scrambled to fight it off, aware with a sick horror that Wesley was probably dead by now.

"Faith!" I yelled, a shout that was strangled off by clawed hands on my throat. From my skewed angle of view I could see all too well what was happening with her.

Unfortunately. While Wesley and I were fighting for our lives, *she* was all wrapped up in beating her own already well and truly defeated demon into a small, soggy stain on the concrete.

My head was spinning, consciousness threatening to depart. The demon was a lot heavier than I was and I didn't at close quarters stand much of a chance against it. I managed the leverage to get in a decent headbutt, but my opponent was beyond caring about a couple of superficial puncture wounds in the face. It was already dead anyway. I couldn't breathe around its claws on my neck and without a weapon there wasn't a thing I could do to make it die any quicker.

I realised sickly I was about to get dead and Faith was too busy carving her initials on that demon to care.

Everything disappeared into fuzzy dark.

I couldn't have been out for more than an instant before I was distantly aware of the demon's grip loosening, of being able to breathe again. The creature had become just a lifeless, heavy weight - one which someone quickly pulled off me.

I gasped in air. I could hear my rescuer's own frantic breathing; ragged, pained. It didn't sound like Faith.

I blinked, stared up at the shadow unsteadily standing over me. Features came slowly into focus.

... Wesley?

"Are you all right?" he asked, breathless but as clipped and incongruously polite and proper as usual. He had my knife in his hand and the blade dripped the demons' thick yellow blood. His own face was coated with red.

I recovered enough from my surprise to shake off my demon form, and felt even more tired and battered in the absence of the demon's extra strength. He held out a hand to help me up, but I wasn't in any condition to even try just yet, so I waved him off and stayed where I was.

Wesley said, shakily, "I thought I was dead there for sure. Lucky you saw this." He held up the knife in illustration. Wrinkling up his nose in disgust, he wiped the blade off on the dead demon's back, then extended the knife back to me. His hand, holding the knife, shook ludicrously - even more than mine, accepting it.

He sat down heavily on the pavement. His pale suit was a mess of blood and street-grime. His gaze drifted and fixed on something. I followed its direction.

Faith was still at work on the remaining demon. It was face-down to the concrete, and not about to harm anything in its current condition, but she continued to batter on at it. I turned away, sickened not so much by what she was doing to the demon as by the expression of focused enthusiasm on her face as she did it.

Wesley got up again and staggered over to restrain her, his hands flapping and his voice stuttering his incredulity. "Faith! What do you think you're doing? You almost got us both killed!"

I could tell that approach was never gonna work with Faith. I sometimes wonder if Wesley will ever learn that. She spun around on him, fists raised, her lips drawn back in a fightin' snarl. Still ready to do more damage.

Pity she can't always direct that damage in the right place. Wesley fell back. She relented, and didn't hit him - just as well, since I think he'd had enough for one day.

She laughed and wiped her bloody hands on her pants, then ran her fingers through her hair. She was hardly breathing heavy. The unreasoning excitement of battle dissipated from her eyes as she wound down from the fight.

She frowned at the blood and exhaustion on Wesley, then shrugged. "You look like shit, Watcher," she said, without the slightest hint of concern. Her gaze slid past him to me, and her confident, devil-may-care expression looked a fraction more strained. "Doyle! You all right?" Whether her faint surprise was at my physical state or the fact she cared at all, it was impossible to tell.

Right then, I couldn't bring myself to answer. Unfortunately, Wesley had no such problem. "You almost got both of us killed," he repeated. "Doyle would have died if it hadn't been for my intervention."

"You were so wrapped up in the unnecessary pummelling of that wretched creature, you failed to help us when we needed you. It came that close, Faith-" He held out his hand with his fingers a fraction of an inch apart in illustration. "That close to both of us being killed, and where would that leave you? We will need to have a serious talk about this, later. Indeed we will."

Faith cast a desperate look at me, but I didn't feel like standing up for her right then. Whatever there might sometimes be shared between us when she was feelin' playful, and whether Wesley was being an ass or not - though he was dead right about the content, if not perhaps the method and timing of its delivery.

I met her gaze with expressionless silence and turned away to engage in the difficult process of peeling myself off the ground.

Maybe that was a mistake. But I wasn't feeling too clever right then.

She gave Wesley a glare carrying so much venom it could've knocked him dead on the spot. "Talk. Later. Right." She looked around at the demons, two dead, two groaning, her face a mask of aggressive sarcasm. "Well, I got two, and seems you only got two between the both of you, so I guess that leaves you boys with the clean-up work. Later, guys. You have fun, now." With that she spun on her heel and stalked off. The roll of her hips emphasized that arrogant slayer swagger even more than usual.

On her way she finished off the two downed demons with short, violent jabs of her boot to each scaled neck, punctuated by loud snaps.

Wesley sighed, and walked painfully back to me, just in time to stop me falling over again when I finally achieved a vertical state.

"That girl does try one's patience," he said, in his most pompous tones. Smiling smugly, he retrieved his glasses from the ground and snagged a handkerchief from a pocket to wipe the blood from his face. I noticed now it had mostly come from a long, shallow cut across his forehead and a bloody nose, for all it had looked horrendous.

"Still," Wesley added, "At least this little debacle has proved something." He paused as though it was self-evident, then continued, a fraction irritably but mostly with an inflated arrogance, "A Watcher always comes through in the worst of situations. Perhaps now I'll receive some of the respect around here that a trained member of the Council ought." He smiled like the Cheshire Cat.

Incredulous, I stared at him for long enough to affirm he really wasn't joking.

Then, I followed Faith's example. And walked. Well, staggered, at any rate. Not after her, mind, but towards the nearest bar.

Leaving Wesley to stand airing peeved sighs and muttering to himself in the midst of the carnage.

10.2 Chapter 2

And, yeah, I *know* I should be used to them by now, but it's hard when every time I think we're starting to get somewhere, to make something of this deal we've got going here, they do something like this and remind me how isolated we all still are for all we work close most hours of the day and night fighting evil. After seeing off demons, vampires, elemental spirits and the Watchers Council, you'd think we'd be more of a well-oiled machine by now, but we're still all gears, no mesh - except for the sex, but that's a different question. They say there's no 'T' in 'team,' but for Faith it's the only letter in the alphabet. Sometimes I wonder if she'd even blink if she woke up one morning and Wes and I were gone.

Not that it's just her, mind. There're plenty of other things putting that distance in the way - Wesley's stiff standoffishness hardly having been improved any by recently seeing his would-be-girlfriend consigned to an existence as a host for the aforementioned spirit, and I daresay I got my faults too.

But sometimes, I think Faith's only getting worse.

I don't know if anything I say ever really reaches her. It's like her views are formed in concrete despite her youth; everything's about violence, indulgence, living fast. I don't know where she's going. I can't see her lasting through life like this. When I try to visualize what she might be like in the future, I can't see her at fifty.

Hell, I can't see her at twenty.

And I'm not talkin' about whether she'll survive that long living the hefty-risk lifestyle of a slayer. Though I can't say I don't think about that. A lot. But when you're that unbendable, something's gotta crack sooner or later. When you spend every day only trying to stay alive, when the world is your enemy and your life is run by a stuffy institution who for the most part stay thousands of miles out of your danger... well. And what kind of a life is that anyway?

There's a thing or two I'd like to say to this Council of Watchers, that's for sure.

If I've got anything to do with it, if there's a difference I can make, I'll see her survive in spite of them. I've grown kinda fond of having her around. Too fond, probably. I knew from the start what she was about.

I know our relationship - if you could even call it that - is nothing more to her than a means to assuage her slayer-size appetites.

10.3 Chapter 3

I stayed in the smoky little bar a while, brooding over a couple of drinks. I didn't really have much enthusiasm for the drinking, though, for once.

My shabby, dishevelled state was drawing stares, and after an hour or so the evening was beginning to catch up with me and I felt so tired and battered all I wanted to do was go home and drop. No matter whether I might find Faith waiting in my apartment when I got there.

So I went back. I found my apartment empty, but could hear somebody upstairs in the office. I went up there and stuck my head around the door to see Wesley sat at my desk, working away.

His nose was embedded in a book, and there were volumes and manuscripts strewn all across my desk, half a dozen sets of opened pages gaping up at the ceiling. From where I stood I could spy a rather idealised depiction of one of the demons we'd been fighting earlier.

Ah, research. Diligent guy, Wesley.

He glanced up as I walked in, arching his brows and peering at me through his glasses as though I was some sort of academic curiosity he'd just uncovered. I noticed he'd cleaned up and the only sign now remaining of his earlier sorry state was a band-aid on his forehead and a slightly thick lip. He looked just fine. I wondered what I looked like.

Something the cat dragged in, probably.

He seemed surprised but not displeased to see me back. Which was probably more than I deserved after walking off and leaving him on his own with the clean-up work.

I'll say that about Wes, he doesn't hold a grudge.

10 *Evidence of Things Not Seen*

He held a finger to his lips and pointed across the room. To Faith. My first thought was disbelief that they'd been alone together for any length of time after earlier events without one or the other of them walking out at the very least. But then I saw that Faith rested, snoring softly, in an inelegant sprawl across a chair, and figured she'd probably been sleeping since before Wesley arrived.

She had a couple of empty beer bottles in the crook of her elbow, and an empty tub of ice cream lay discarded on her lap. She looked precisely as young as she was.

Times like this, she messes with my head most of all.

I looked back to Wesley and jerked a thumb over my shoulder, indicating the elevator down to the basement which served as my home. Figured we could have a quiet talk there without waking her, discuss a few of the things that needed to be said.

After a moment's blank incomprehension, Wesley got the message, nodded, carefully put all his books and papers aside very quietly, stood, took one step - and fell over his own feet, landing with a crash.

Faith snorted her way to wakefulness and raised her head, looking around intently, as though she expected to find a demon - some other demon - in the office.

Wesley picked himself up from the floor and said, meekly, "Sorry."

"Nice one, Wes." Faith gave him a sarcastic round of applause then unfolded her slim body from the chair and looked me up and down critically. If there was any concern in there, it was well hidden. "You look better. Not a lot, mind, but better. Doesn't take much effort to guess where you've been."

"Yeah, well. I view almost gettin' dead as a good excuse to down a pint or two."

She took that as an accusation, although I hadn't actually meant it that way. I winced as the look on her face told me I'd started the argument I'd been hoping to avoid.

"Yeah?" she said, aggressively defensive. Her mouth stretched into that crooked, mocking sneer I've come to recognise as a warning I'm about to be verbally worked over by an expert. "Ever think maybe you're in the wrong business, Mr. Backbone? Maybe you should've stuck to teaching little kids. Hell, I reckon most of my teachers were probably demons in disguise anyway, so it's not as though you wouldn't have been in like company."

"Faith," Wesley began. His face and tone were all disapproving father-figure, and I winced, wondering how he could be so oblivious to how much that pissed her off.

"You keep outta this," I snapped. It came out more harshly than I'd actually intended; I was just anxious to shut him up, since Wesley's input into any argument with Faith only makes her worse, however good his intentions.

"Yeah, Wussley," Faith drawled. "It's not like anyone asked you to be here in the first place, Watcher. Hey, that's a good one. You, a Watcher? You couldn't watch a pan of water without letting it burn."

"Faith. . ." Oh, man, now I was doing it. I snapped my mouth shut, too late.

"Why can't you guys just loosen up?" she spat back. "You both look alive to me. Five by five, no harm done! You think you can't handle yourselves? - fine, don't come with me. If I look out for you in the middle of a fight, I end up getting dead! You know how that is, Doyle? I thought you used to be good at this. Lately, you suck. And d'you know why?"

She paused, as though expecting an answer. When she didn't get one she continued, more aggressively than before. "Well, I'll give you a clue - You might fight better if you weren't so goddamned busy watching what we're doing! It's not like I can't take care of myself. Hell, better than you or anyone can; I don't need anybody watching out for me! And as for Wesley. . ." she hesitated, then shoved her hands in her pockets and shrugged her shoulders with an elaborate show of indifference. "Plenty more pansy-assed watcher types where he came from," she drawled sarcastically.

Wesley looked shocked, at that last part. I tried to convince myself she didn't really mean it.

Maybe she didn't. There wasn't that much malice in the girl. I hoped.

About the rest of it, though. . . she's right. I do look out for them. Slayer or not, and whatever she says, however she acts, Faith's still pretty much a kid. Not an innocent, perhaps, but still only seventeen. And Wesley. . . he's much more of an innocent than she is, for all he's a decade her senior.

I thought back to the fight. Yeah, she was right.

But when you're working with others, you watch out for them. At least in theory. I learned that in the LAPD. It's only a disadvantage if others aren't doing the same for you. I learned that there, too.

10 Evidence of Things Not Seen

I couldn't see a lecture on that particular theory working with Faith. Girl ain't much of a team player.

Her gaze shifted between Wesley and myself, defiant with challenge and a hint of nervous trepidation. She had taken her hands out of her pockets and fallen automatically into a combat-ready stance, rocking back on her heels jauntily as she waited for a response.

Getting mad now, I thought, would only make her take off again. And it worries the hell outta me when she does that, no matter she's always come back so far. Struck me as an option to avoid.

I had barely started to frame a placating reply when the pain hit.

Being interrupted mid-thought by blinding agony was so familiar to me by now that it took a moment for me to realise it wasn't a vision.

10.4 Chapter 4

It wasn't a vision, but it smarted like anything, just the same.

This was kind of a burning sensation, like nothing I'd ever felt before, which flooded my senses without warning, setting all my nerve endings alight with agony.

"Oh, my," Wesley breathed. Faith's mouth had dropped open, astonishment leaving her speechless, though unfortunately I was in no position just then to appreciate this rare event.

I lowered the hand I'd automatically raised to my forehead in anticipation of a vision, and stared in disbelief at the exposed skin of my hands. A strange light seemed to be burrowing outwards from under my skin, new patches of it forming and growing even as I watched. Where it touched, it burned, and it was spreading. Patches met other patches and merged.

What it felt like now reduced the sensation a few seconds earlier to an *itch*. It felt like I was being burned up from the inside out.

"What the...?" I looked to Wesley. Was this some kind of spell? If so, he knew a whole lot more about that sort of thing than I did.

If it was a spell, it was nothing well-intentioned. My whole body felt like it was burning up, like there'd be nothing left of me any second but ashes, just like any of the vampires we'd dusted.

A nicely ironic way to go, considerin'.

Wesley, the only one of us in any way qualified to defend against something like this, was preoccupied trying to keep a white-knuckled hold on Faith. A losing battle, I knew. Faith was straining forward to get to me; Wesley was holding up against her better than I'd ever have imagined he would, but it couldn't last.

"Faith, no," I heard his desperate voice faintly, through a haze of static. The room seemed to be getting an impossibly long way away. "It's some sort of malign magic. God knows, he must have made enough enemies over the years. There's nothing you can do except get caught up in it too. It could kill you."

"Like it could be killing him! I've got to do something!" Faith broke his grip - and probably very nearly his arm - and lunged forward.

"No, Faith!" Wesley cried, with futile horror. "It won't do any good for you *both* to..."

Oh, man. If I had to go the last thing I wanted was to take her with me. But there was nothing I could do to stop her. I couldn't move, pinned there by the sorcerous light. All I could do was watch as she reached out to me, her face a mask of determination...

...And missed.

No. She hadn't missed. That slayer hand-eye co-ordination didn't miss. Her hand had gone straight through me.

I realised I could see the floor through my magic-lined arms.

Damn it, I was being disintegrated. Burned up, slowly. In a moment there'd be nothing left-

Wesley was right. I had made a whole lot of enemies in this city. Some of them had tried to send people out after me more than once, in the past, and received a pile of dead or battered minions for their pains. And some of them - dark thoughts of lawyers flitted across my mind - might even have the financial whack to pay for me to be dispensed with by magic, from afar.

10 Evidence of Things Not Seen

I should have thought to have my own protections set up against this kind of attack. Heck, I'd even had Wesley and his books available on hand there for a couple of months.

Too late now.

In the instant before I was too busy concentrating on dyin' to see anything much of the room around me at all, I heard Faith's scream.

It was a cry of rage and distress, a sound which tore itself out of her lips with a passion and fury I'd never dared let myself believe I could ever evoke in her.

'She must've been beginning to care, after all, to dredge up a cry like that,' I thought as the world receded. *'Damn it all, now I'll never know if we really could've had some-thin' together.'*

It was the last thought I took with me into the darkness.

10.5 Chapter 5

I spent a long time in a fuzzy semi-aware state, wondering vaguely whether the demon in me meant I was bound for hell despite everything I'd done.

After about half an eternity it dawned on my overtaxed brain that I could still feel my body, and that there was far too much very real hurtin' going on in there for me to have crossed over to the other side quite yet.

Huh?

I was lying on a hard, cold surface which chilled to the bone even through my layers of clothing. To be honest, a little hellfire might have been an improvement.

Fire... I recalled being burned alive. Didn't feel burned now. Just aching, the bruises from the earlier fight intensified now by the chill. And dead tired, like I'd had about fifty visions each after the other.

Which was all still pretty good considerin' I'd never expected to feel anything again.

My senses continued to return gradually, and I became aware that, wherever I was, there were others close by. At first the voices floated through my brain as distant noises without any trace of meaning. As time passed the sounds became words, and the words started to arrange themselves into sentences with some degree of coherence.

Two distinct men's voices, each snappish and irritable, each speaker obviously less than friendly with the other.

I peered out through slitted-open eyes, but I was lying face down and I couldn't see anything except their nifty, expensive and absolutely-bloody-freezing polished stone tile floor.

I stayed exactly as I was, resisting the temptation to try inch my head around for a better view. Whatever they'd brought me here for, I was pretty damned certain it wasn't anything good. I didn't want them to know I was awake and aware. Let them talk on, oblivious. Meantime, I'd absorb all the information I could about what in hell's name was goin' on.

"It didn't look like it went too well to me," one of the guys was saying. His voice was sneeringly aggressive, oddly muffled, slightly nasal, and he used the tone of someone addressing an employee. "The senior partners will be displeased."

Senior partners... Goddamned bloody lawyers. I might have known.

"Oh, come off it, now. What do you take me for? I'm quite aware you wanted the second spell yourself," replied a smooth, dry, amused voice in a decidedly English accent. The speaker obviously wasn't remotely impressed by his companion's attempt to pull rank on him. "The senior partners didn't mention anything about it. Besides, the spell worked perfectly, I felt it, so either the answer to your problems doesn't exist, or he's leverage against both people you're after. I'd go with the first personally - psychotic murderers tend not to collect too many friends you can use against them."

So this was the guy who'd magicked me here. Bastard.

"Looked to me like you had a hard time even getting him here. And as for the second spell, I think the sum we paid ought to deliver more than a fifty percent success rate. Aside from which... do you really want to go back where we found you?"

"He's here. I've done everything that was officially asked to cover my obligation to you people. As for the rest, I'd stay the threats. Do *you* really want me to mention to the senior partners your attempts to use their resources for your personal vendettas?"

"Look, Rayne..." The guy - the lawyer - floundered, sputtering to a halt, and changed the subject to a different gripe. "Are you sure you even brought him back? He still looks pretty dead to me."

'Dead...?' My thoughts parroted with alarm.

Then, '*Still*?'

The lawyer continued, oblivious, thankfully missing any visible reaction I let slip in my shock. "It's no use to the senior partners if you've magicked them a corpse. They may think you're the man for these things, but I've done my research. I know your magic's screwy as hell. Practical jokes seem to be the best your tricks amount to. Costumes and candy bars. You couldn't raise a dead hamster."

A kick connected with my side without warning. I managed to change a yell of pain into what I hoped was a close approximation of a semi-conscious moan. "He's alive," Rayne's voice said dryly, clipped.

All this raising the dead talk... I'd not thought I could feel any more chilled, but I could feel it now, like splinters of ice running through my veins.

I'd thought I was dying. Rayne's spell had been to raise the dead. And he seemed pretty darn sure he'd succeeded.

Had I died after all, back in the office?

"He could be the wrong guy." Lawyer-boy was a persistent little weasel, give him that, his drawl measured and sarcastic. "He doesn't look much like the picture we have."

"Mercer, the picture you've got is so out of focus it barely looks *human*. He's Doyle. The spell was tied to his name, his identity. It's impossible that it could have brought anyone else."

Lawyer-boy descended into sullen silence. Rayne paced about the room inaudibly muttering to himself. After a few seconds Mercer said, insistently, "What about Faith, then?"

Her name jolted through me like an electric shock. Again, I had to have betrayed some kind of visible reaction, but their attention must've been elsewhere.

"What about her? You shouldn't be so surprised a murdering maniac doesn't have anyone close enough to use against them. Too bad, you'll just have to find some other way to get at her."

Another jolt. Murdering maniac, my Faith? Well, I guess the impression she makes upon the guys on the other side can't be too pleasant... But the description disturbed me, all the same, coming from a lackey of Wolfram and Hart of all people.

Mercer said, "I have one already. How about if I were to give you a little extra, to go after her separately? The senior partners don't have to worry, and we can forget mentioning anything to them about... anything else."

It occurred to me that if Faith was the other party they'd mentioned, I didn't have the slightest idea who it could possibly be they thought they could use me against. Surely not Wesley. And not Kate either, nobody would ever fool themselves into thinking she'd give in to that kind of coercion. It was baffling.

I couldn't think of a single other person who'd care enough what happened to me to be a possibility. They had to have made some kind of mistake.

One thing for sure, walking dead man or not, if they were going after Faith, I had to get away from there and warn her. Whatever the hell else was going on, and however mad the world had suddenly become.

Rayne was making indecisive noises which I interpreted to mean he'd accept but only after letting Mercer wonder about the answer for a while. He changed the subject - back to me. "Is he dangerous? You did say he was supposed to be some sort of demon hybrid, so perhaps you'd better restrain him before he wakes up. Because if he wakes up peeved, my magic goes towards saving my own skin. It's not in my contract to protect lawyers."

"He's not dangerous." Mercer's voice dripped contempt, though whether it was directed at me or Rayne was impossible to tell. "Far as I'm aware, he was just the Undead Avenger's messenger-boy, halfbreed demon or no."

Rayne grunted. "Better find something to restrain him with anyway. I noticed Wolfram and Hart has quite the collection of manacles, not to mention a uniquely expansive store of weaponry for a law firm." He chuckled, seeming greatly amused by the operation.

Sounded like my cue to leave. I'd learned as much as I would from these guys for the moment and I had no intention of ending up in chains. Plus, I didn't know who this fellow they were after might be, but their dismissal of me as no threat was just irritating. After all the trouble I'd given the lawyer-types in the past, I'd have hoped to rate a little more than that.

They *couldn't* have gotten me mixed up with someone else, could they?

Some other half-demon called Doyle? Oh, yeah.

I'd been listening carefully to the direction their voices and footfalls came from, trying to follow their progress in relation to me. I decided it would be best to take out the magical threat first, since I already had an idea what Rayne's magic could do to me.

Rayne was a pacer and I knew, following the betraying sounds of his feet and his dry, sarcastic voice that he should be quite close to me.

In fact, just about *there*...

I snapped my eyes open, rolled over, shot out a hand to grab an ankle, and wrenched the guy's legs from under him.

'Cept it wasn't quite that easy. My whole body was stiff from the cold and the enforced stillness, and put up considerable protest to the idea of moving. And my right arm, injured in the fight earlier, still wasn't up to much.

I managed to execute the manoeuvre in a series of clumsy, lurching motions. It only worked because neither of the guys had any clue I was even awake.

Rayne fell heavily and gracelessly, his long lanky form stretching itself across the floor with a brief curse that was cut off as his head hit the hard tiles. Satisfied he wasn't gonna be giving me any trouble for the time being, I turned my attention to Mercer.

Lawyer-boy, obviously no fool - and no hero either - was already practically out the door and opening his mouth to yell for assistance. I was somewhat surprised to see he had his neck in a stiff cast, and a bandage on one arm. Recalling the vendetta he had goin' against Faith, I wondered now if that was the result of a recent first-hand encounter.

I lunged for him, desperate to stop his yell for help. This required getting to my feet, which I sort of managed. My momentum carried me to him and gave out neatly in time for me to fall on him, dragging him down and cutting off his shout.

My hand over his mouth prevented him from attempting any further cries. He tried to sink his teeth into my palm and I leaned my weight hard against his neck cast. He got out a muffled curse, and something that sounded a lot like, "You fight as dirty as she does."

Guy *must've* met Faith.

Neither of us was currently in particularly good shape, but I knew what I was doing while all the fighting he was used to took place in a courtroom.

He managed to get in a couple of decent shots that didn't improve my day any, but following a few minutes of close, vicious scuffle, experience won out and when I'd bashed his head against the floor a few times he joined his cohort in a reluctant nap.

I rolled aside and lay on my back, breathing heavily, staring up at the ceiling. Trying to gather the energy to stand.

Someone might have heard. Someone might come in to check on these two. I had to move, and soon, because I was pretty sure I'd used up all the fight left in me for the time being.

If I didn't get out of there quick I'd be in chains, as they'd intended, with the only result of all my efforts that I'd be watched a hell of a lot more closely.

And then there was Faith.

I had to get back to her, back to the office. That cry, that look on her face when she thought I was dying... or, I guess I was dying...

Still didn't know quite what to think about that one. Couldn't wrap my brain around the idea I'd been raised from the dead.

Anyway, I had to let her know I was still around.

I forced my uncooperative muscles into action and made a painful progress to my feet. The circulation and feeling was returning to my limbs, but doing it in such a manner it made me kinda wish it wasn't.

I contemplated the unconscious Mercer and Rayne for a moment. I could kill them, end any further threat they posed to Faith and myself... but whatever else they were or they'd done, they were still human, and I wasn't entirely happy at the thought of slaughtering them while they lay helpless.

I pinched Mercer's suit, but otherwise left them as they were.

The suit was a little large, but it would have to do. I'd be far too conspicuous walking out of the basement and through the corridors of Wolfram and Hart's office building in my own battered and slightly charred clothes.

I ascended the stairs to the basement exit and stood for a long moment in front of the closed door.

Then, gathering up all the tatters of my composure, ignoring my various hurts, I pushed open the door and walked out of there. Through the corridors, past various employees, exchanging the occasional nod with a passing suit. I got to the foyer without discovery or even suspicion. Nobody spared me a second glance as I left via the main doors.

Emerging into the sunshine and petrol fumes of the LA streets.

10.6 Chapter 6

The world outside that door was different from the LA I knew.

The moment my feet hit the sun-baked sidewalk, it felt like I was walking through the streets of an alien city.

I couldn't quite pin down why, exactly. But it seemed as though the very air was more relaxed, and the shadows were lighter, and the people moved easier - and everyone appeared less aware of the vampire threat than ever.

What could have happened in the time that I'd been... gone? And how much time were we talking about here anyway?

With that thought in mind, I stopped at a news stand on the next street corner to glance at a paper.

Damn... I stared at the date on the paper, uncomprehending, as the information slowly sank in. May 6, 2000. I tried to remember what day it had been and got a fuzzy last-coupla-days-of November back from my sluggish memory. Wherever I'd been, I'd been there almost six months. So long... It must be true, after all. Rayne really had brought me back from the dead.

And a lot could happen in that length of time.

I flicked through the paper, studying it more closely. Couldn't find a single obviously vampire-related story within. Killings and attacks in abundance, yeah, as always, but next to nothing that screamed 'supernatural'.

I stared blankly at the open pages, no longer really seeing the tiny black print. What the hell had happened to the world? Had somebody - maybe even Faith - finally put an end to the Master in Sunnydale?

Somehow, that thought didn't cheer me in the least. In fact, it turned me cold all over, the very idea of a world without the vampire threat. What was I, after all, without this fight? Only another one of the demons, when it came down to it, with no real place in the human world.

Once upon a time there'd been a happily married third grade teacher called Allen Francis Doyle... until the day demons ate his wife, and he discovered the reason they didn't eat him too was because he was half one of them himself. After that, he turned himself into a vampire-killing machine, stripping from himself and his life everything else that had ever mattered, everything else that had made up the man he'd been...

I'd never imagined myself living in a world without the vampires. I'd only imagined myself dying to help create it.

This was gonna to take some adjustment.

I thought back to Wolfram and Hart and brightened slightly at the reminder that there were always the lawyers left to fight.

My brain still shied away from the concept of having died. I couldn't really take it in. Only an hour or so ago... or so it still felt to me... it had been business as normal. And now, the world had suddenly changed.

Faith and Wesley... as far as they were concerned I'd been six months dead. I wondered if they'd missed me. I wondered if they'd grieved for me.

I tried to picture Faith grieving over anything, but my brain had even more trouble making that leap than accepting my death. My imagination rebelled at the effort of stretching so far.

It was still better than the picture would have been three months ago... oh, hell, nine months ago... before I'd met her and Wes. Back then, pretty much everyone I knew remotely well would've received the news of my demise with a shrug and a "Well, you can't say he didn't have it coming to him." Kate might have gotten drunk in my memory, maybe a few of the PD guys would've joined her for appearance's sake. Nobody else would've cared.

I realised I was receiving sour looks from the guy who ran the news stand. "You gonna pay for that?"

"Yeah." I reached into my pocket then remembered it wasn't mine. What was more, it was empty. My own wallet was in my jacket, which I'd taken off at the office that n... a lot longer ago, apparently, than it felt like to me. "Uh, no. Sorry." I reluctantly put down the paper and moved on.

The exertions of the fight still lined my limbs with an insistent ache, making any movement a chore. I wondered how that could be, if I'd been brought back from the dead. Maybe it was the process itself which had done it, and I was only relating it to the fight because that was what I remembered. But that didn't explain why my arm still hurt. Perhaps Rayne's spell had brought me back in the condition I'd been in when I'd 'died'.

The bruises Mercer had added to the collection ached too, and though I was beginning to feel better than I had since Rayne's spell had dropped me in Wolfram and Hart's basement, I sure didn't feel like tackling the distance to the office on foot.

I could have done with a good long rest. A few hours sleep... a long drink... not necessarily in that order. But I had to get back to warn Faith. And Wesley too, assuming he was still around.

Realising that wasn't a given concerned me more than I'd have expected. Rayne and Mercer had made no mention of Wesley. And in six months, in our sort of dangerous business, he could easily be dead by now.

Pushed onwards by the urgent need to know they were both all right, I started to walk, fast as I could manage.

10.7 Chapter 7

The office was different too. I smelled it as soon as I walked inside.

For one thing, it stank of vampire. Not a good sign.

I'd had to pick the lock to get in the front door. Now I closed it quietly behind me and took the elevator up to the office.

I found it silent and empty. It looked like everyone was out.

The scent of Fiend of the Night was still unnervingly strong in there, and somebody had rearranged the furniture a bit sometime in the last several months, but you could tell Wesley at least was still around from the painfully neat little stacks of papers and books dotted about the place, much to my relief. I was half afraid that Faith would have killed him herself one of these days, with her temper, never mind the forces of evil.

I supposed it was good to know they'd carried on after my demise, fighting the good fight and all that. But it felt peculiar, lookin' around that place and thinking of them in my office without me.

I wondered whose was that third personality that marked the place like a dark cloud - and why Faith seemed to have taken to wearing cheap perfume and actually keeping a desk, albeit a somewhat messy excuse for one.

I got back into the elevator and took it down to the basement flat. Maybe there'd be somebody down there.

10.8 Chapter 8

What I found was a basement flat that wasn't my home any more.

When I walked into its dim, unlit rooms I was surrounded by somebody else's things, under a barrage of impressions of another personality inhabiting the space that my subconscious still perceived as my own. Some of this was real nice stuff; antique books, weapons... not the junk it'd been filled with when it was mine; the debris of bottles and papers and unwashed clothes. It sent a fierce shiver down my spine to see it all so changed.

It wasn't Faith or Wesley who was living there, either. Of that, I was certain. It was way off either of their styles. This was someone distinct. Someone new.

They'd got another person in. Someone in my place... I told myself sternly that the automatic stab of resentment that idea provoked was completely illogical - I'd been dead, gone. But it still sucked.

I wandered through the apartment that still felt like it ought to be mine, and at the same time felt so alien, trying to locate any sign that I'd ever lived there.

There was nothing.

The smell of vampire hung around there as well, stronger than ever. And I realised abruptly that it wasn't only much stronger, but also *fresh*.

Shit.

When I'd found the lights switched off I'd automatically assumed the place was empty. Of course, I hadn't considered the possibility that there might be another intruder in the place. I'd let my guard down, surrounded by too much to take in. Too busy wrestling with feelings of alienation and loss, I'd managed to disregard completely the instincts I'd developed over the years since Harry's death.

I switched to demon, to utilise the stronger senses of that form to sniff out the vamp, and that was when a voice behind me remarked in low, sarcastic tones, "I didn't think you could be human. You smell of magic."

I spun around to face him. In the dim light I couldn't see much more than a shadow. A pretty bulky shadow, at that. Broad shouldered, tall - taller than me, needless to say. He was dressed in black, an ensemble finished off with a big coat that draped around his form like a cloak. Every bit the modern vamp of style.

I shook off the demon form, feeling my face twist into a human snarl as the frustrations of the day took over and joined forces with carefully honed instincts and adrenaline to override my general exhaustion.

I didn't waste time with the small talk but opened with a sweeping kick at his ankles intended to drag his legs out from under him. Hoping to finish it quick.

He jumped neatly over the kick and threw back a punch which smashed straight through my attempt to block and caught the side of my face a glancing blow as I was moving to avoid it. I slammed backwards several feet until the wall stopped me, none too gently.

Damn it. This was a serious vampire, no fledgling like the usual fare.

With one arm still pretty lousy and feeling generally a lot less than my best, I began to suspect this wasn't a fight I should've been so eager to rush into.

Well, there was nothing I could do now to avoid it. It was a case of win or die... Uh, die again, at any rate.

I recovered to duck under another punch and managed to land one of my own which knocked him flat. He sprung up again in a second, with a sort of back-flip. No shortage of fancy moves, there.

I pressed the advantage, pushing my attack while he was still recovering his balance. And though he staggered under the barrage of hits, I knew he'd recover in seconds as soon as I let up. I looked around the room frantically for anything vaguely resembling a stake.

In my distraction, though, I wasn't watching him close enough, and after a flurry of motion and pain, the next I knew I was caught in a truly vicious arm-lock, my already damaged arm twisted around behind my back and threatening to snap under the pressure of his undead grip.

"Now, who are you and what are you doing here?" his voice growled, low and soft, next to my ear. The pressure on my arm increased as he spoke. Any moment, the bones would snap like twigs.

I was trying to gather together the energy to switch back to demon form, but answered to give him something else to think about in the hope he'd hold off breaking my arm. "I work here," I snapped, hearing my voice harsh and curt through the pain. "What's your excuse?"

My words died away, though, because he'd stopped, the pressure on my arm vanishing, the instant I'd spoken. He let go of me as though I'd burned him.

I spun around to face him, and got a good look at him up close for the first time.

He was staring, blankly, in disbelief. "Doyle?" he asked, stunned.

I'd never seen him before in my life.

And I wasn't about to hang around to chat with vampires, whether they claimed to know me or not. I swung round to put my foot through a nearby wooden chair, splintering it into bits, and snatched up a broken section of the frame that would serve as a stake.

I lunged forward to stake him, but the expression on his face made me hesitate. He looked like he recognised me... he looked horrified. There was a depth of pain and sadness in those dark eyes that I'd never thought any vampire could possess.

But... vampires were soulless, evil. No exceptions. I shook it off. And by then, it was already too late.

"Put that down, buddy," a female voice commanded, as I raised the stake again. "Unless you want to accessorise with some serious body piercing."

A tall, dark-haired girl was pointing a crossbow at me from the doorway, and there was a definite mean edge to her voice that told me she'd probably carry out that threat happily enough, given a reason. I let the stake fall from my hand. It hit the floor with a hollow clatter.

"Cordelia," the vampire said urgently, inclining his head desperately in my direction.

"What? Did you hurt your neck?" her tone was caustic and dismissive, and I had a feeling it was also normal. "Hey, don't you ever turn the lights on in here, Mr Sit in the Dark and Brood?"

She clicked across the floor in her impractically heeled shoes and flicked the switch, unwisely taking her hand off the crossbow for an instant - but she gave a little shriek and dropped the weapon altogether when she turned back and her eyes settled on me.

"Oh my God!" she shrieked, in a truly ear-splitting fashion. "Doyle? Doyle!" She moved forward as though she was about to jump on me and hug me to death or something, but stopped short after a few steps.

Maybe it was the confusion she read from my expression; maybe it was something else. But her face fell and for a moment she looked real broken up. Then she just looked spitting mad. "Wait a minute!" she snapped. "What's with the pointy sticks and the breaking and entering? And the suit! You're some kind of shape changing demon, aren't you? Ooh, you are so going to get it buster, wearing that form around here."

The vamp guy was just starin' on in mute disbelief. I glanced between them, wondering what drugs they were both on, and why a young human girl like this Cordelia was choosing to defend one of the fang brigade.

The girl was quite the looker, too, now I had chance to notice - although the shiner she sported did mar the effect somewhat.

Hell, who am I kidding? Black eye or no, she was still a stiffener.

Cordelia's perfume was the same I'd detected in the office upstairs, and it occurred to me that perhaps I'd made an error. Wesley and Faith could easily have relocated once I was gone; after all, it was me who'd held the lease on the office.

"Okay. My mistake," I said quickly, eager to be out of there. "I'll be goin' now."

I threw the remnant of the chair at the vampire and dived for the door before either of them could move to stop me...

...At the same instant as somebody else walked in through it. We collided, and he ended up on the floor while I managed to catch my balance on the door frame.

I was aware of a scuffle in the background as the girl moved to intervene and the vampire held her back, eliciting shrill protests.

The newcomer looked in a bit of a state. Wasn't surprising I'd knocked him over; it looked like you could knock him down by breathing out too hard in his direction. He was all bruised and battered and bandaged, like somebody had recently worked him over real good.

It was Wesley.

I found myself grinning with relief at the sight of a familiar face, even if it was a somewhat battered one; I never would have thought I'd be so happy to see Wesley Wyndham-Pryce, of all people.

I must have been right the first time about the office after all. Maybe he could use a bit of help to deal with this vampire squatter and his girlfriend. I bent down to pull him to his feet.

"Hey, Wes," I said as he accepted my help. He looked mildly confused, as well he might considerin' the last he saw of me I'd been in the process of being burned to death by a malign spell. "What the hell's going on? Who are these people? ... And where's Faith?"

The muscles in his arm stiffened underneath my fingers, and he pulled away.

The expression on his face was one of horror.

10.9 Chapter 9

Wesley flinched from me, skidding across the floor in his haste to get away. The vampire stepped in front of Wes, almost... protectively. And even more surprising, Wesley anticipated the vamp's movement, like they'd fought on the same side before.

"Wes?" I couldn't believe it. Wesley, working with a vampire? He may have acted like he sat on one too many stakes at Watcher school, but he was still a good guy. Wesley would have eaten hot coals before helping a vamp.

Of course that was six months ago. Now, he was standing in front of me, ready to help a vampire take me on. And where the hell was Faith? My blood chilled. Was Faith the reason Wesley was working with a vamp?

We all stood there for a few seconds, like someone had hit the freeze-frame on a video. It was starting to get old.

The stake had landed on the floor just next to my foot and I slid my toe under it, keeping my hands raised to distract my stunned audience. I didn't know why the vamp and his girlfriend were staring at me like I was a long-lost family member, but if I could just keep their attention...

I jerked my foot upwards. The stake leapt into the air and I made a wild grab for it... and missed by a mile. That kind of thing only ever works in John Woo movies, apparently.

But strangely, the vampire didn't leap at me and tear my throat out, despite my bungled attack. Instead he whispered, like he couldn't believe what he was saying, "Doyle?"

I licked my lips and tried to think of something to say.

Unfortunately, my list of pithy comments was driven clean out of my head by a stunning blow to the back of my skull. As I tumbled to the ground, I caught a glimpse of a hideous wart-encrusted face leering down at me.

The vampire was fast, I'll give him that. He hit the demon square in the chest with an impressive leaping double-kick which would have probably snapped my spine had I tried to do it. But he just bounced off the demon. Then it just swatted him away. Literally gave him one open-handed swat which blew him across the room and into a wall.

"Angel!" Cordelia shrieked at the vampire's crumpled form.

Wart-face bent down and grabbed me by the shirt. "I've been looking for you," it rumbled, in a voice like a rusty can-opener.

"Oh, really? Do I owe you money for a poker game or something?" I asked weakly. "You don't look like one of the crowd I usually play with, but after a few rounds of scotch I usually can barely see the cards, much less the other players--"

It hit me. Its full strength wasn't behind the blow - I could tell, because my head was still attached to my shoulders. But it sure as hell felt like it wasn't. Wart-face flung me over its shoulder and started for the stairs. My eyeline was directly level with its butt. Not a pleasant view, I can tell you. Pretty fortunately, I passed out.

10.10 Chapter 10

I'm pretty much an expert on headaches. There's the throbbing agony of a vision, the deep ache of a hangover, the stabbing pain of a skull fracture. . . I could go on for hours.

My head wasn't quite as bad as any of those when I awoke, but it was pretty bad.

"Ow," I groaned, lifting eyelids that felt like lead blinds. The first thing I saw was Wart-face's grinning mug, little bits of old meat glistening between his yellowed needle teeth.

"Wakey, wakey, little half-man," it whispered, its revolting breath washing over me.

"Do you even own a toothbrush?" I moaned, trying not to breathe.

The demon rose to its feet, taking its bulging head away from me. I sucked untainted sweet-smelling air gratefully. Now Wart-face had backed off a bit, I could actually see my little slumber nest. It looked like the inside of a van, old with scraped paint flaking on the walls. I guess Wart-face wasn't really that good at auto repair. My hands were tied above my head with thick rope and I was slumped against the van wall, my legs curled painfully by my side. The extra fun part of this set-up was that the demon had tied me at just the right angle to put my weight on my injured arm. I gave the demon a pained smile.

"Don't be funny," Wart-face warned me, growling. I think the toothbrush crack got to him.

"I try not to, but it just keeps on happening," I shot back. Admittedly, taunting a demon that could mash me into a flat pulp wasn't the brightest thing I could have done, but I'd be damned if I just lay there and did nothing.

The demon's eyes narrowed. I could see pulp-mashing thoughts flickering behind its eyes, but then it just turned and walked over to the front of the van. I heard the tearing of leather as it forced itself into the driver's seat. "Sit tight," it threw over its shoulder, as the van started and country music began to tumble from the radio.

Great. A murderous demon with crap taste in music. I tugged at the ropes, but just cut off the remaining blood flow to my fingertips.

"So, where we going?" I called. "Will there be aspirin?" The demon's response was to turn the bloody country music up louder. Nice work, Doyle.

I stared at the ceiling and wondered if trying to get him to change the channel would get me killed.

But then, after a long absence, the ol' Doyle luck kicked in. It's won me card games when I was so trashed I couldn't see the table, saved me from painful gruesome deaths at the hands of more demons than I care to remember and preserved me from Faith in a bad mood, which truly is a supernatural feat.

In this case, Doyle luck manifested itself when I looked up and saw what I was tied to. At first I couldn't believe it. The rock-head demon had gone and tied me to a bleeding weapons rack! Above me were the comforting shiny blades of half-a-dozen throwing knives. I began to twist my wrists up towards the blades, sawing at the rope.

Of course, I nearly slit my wrists. Eventually I calmed down enough to get my wrists moving at an angle which wouldn't take my fingers off and just like that, the ropes slid off. Good thing the demon took better care of his knives than he did his van.

I staggered to my feet, tripped over something, and fell flat once more. I tensed, but the demon didn't turn around. For the first time in my life, I was glad for the existence of country music. As I pulled myself up again, I found that my legs had been entangled by the thing that had tripped me. A black suitcase. I kicked it away and scrambled to my feet. Wolfram & Hart, the gold letters on the case read as it slid across the van floor. What a surprise. My new bestest lawyer pals.

According to my watch, I'd been out for a while. It was now after sunset - vampire time. And here I was, riding along in a van with good ol' Warty.

I selected a particularly wicked-looking axe from the weapons rack and gave the back of the demon's head a speculative look. Sure, if I got in a shot before he spotted me, there'd be one less demon in the world, but if he heard me coming, there'd be one less Doyle in the world. I was in no state to go a round or two with my smelly captor, axe or no axe.

I turned to the van doors, putting the axe level with the lock. Prickles raced across my skin as my demon side surfaced, spines protruding. It was time to leave.

10.11 Chapter 11

I can only guess what the various LA street crazies and night people thought when they saw me walking along the sidewalks. Spines or no, tumbling out of the back of a moving van can do nasty things to your skin. My face and hands ached like fire, and I could see hundreds of little scratches covering my palms like cobweb. Add to that the fact that I was trying to conceal a double-headed battle axe under a lawyer's suit jacket really a bit too small for such purposes, and I must have looked a sight. Luckily, I didn't run into any cops. Having to explain to some doughnut-scoffing cop why I was toting a medieval piece of hardware would not have been great fun.

It looked like it was sometime around midnight - I couldn't be sure because my watch was in small fragments on 43rd street, being driven over by late-night truckers. I wandered for about an hour, trying to decide where I could go to get medical attention. Unfortunately, my mental efforts kept on bringing up one place, and one place only.

Home.

Hospitals were out, since they require nasty little explanations for mysterious wounds. And I didn't know if any of the usual demon doctors were still in business. It had been six months, after all, and patching up demons isn't the safest profession. 'Sides, they all charge hefty fees and my wallet was God knows where.

But Wesley always kept a first aid kit under one of the desks in the office. I could only hope he'd kept up the habit.

I was thinking a bit more clearly when I arrived at my former office for the second time and this time I noticed that some idiot had changed the name on the door. 'Angel Investigations', it now read. The damn vampire was mocking my old firm. I really wanted to play wooden acupuncture with him, but I was just too tired.

10 *Evidence of Things Not Seen*

The office was dark and deserted, and I crept across to Wes's desk and grabbed the first aid kit from under his desk. All senses on edge, I tried to tend to my nastier scratches. Of course, with my senses in hyperdrive, the antiseptic stung even more than usual.

Finally, I dumped the band-aids and antiseptic back into the box and headed for the door.

"This is ridiculous!" Wesley's affronted voice complained loudly downstairs. I paused while curiosity and survival fought for control. I made up my mind to leave. It was too risky, the vampire was too tough for my current state, and I was so tired I could barely think.

But then I turned around and crept to the stairs leading down into my - the - apartment. My mother always said I was too curious for my own good.

Lying flat on the stairs, deep in the shadows, I could just see part of the apartment.

"There are a million and one shape-shifting demons," Wes continued, waving his hands around over a desk covered in books. "I can't just pluck a species name out of thin air!"

The vampire stepped into my field of view and planted a hand on Wes's shoulder. "I know, Wesley, but we need answers and we need them now."

Amazingly enough, picky Wesley seemed ashamed of his tantrum. "I suppose I could try the Black Chronicles again," he said with little hope in his voice. Planting himself down on my sofa, he picked up and book a flipped through it. "So, any distinguishing characteristics?"

"He looked like Doyle," I heard that girl - Cordelia - say dryly, out of my field of view.

Wesley rolled his eyes. "Very droll, Cordelia."

"Guys..." Angel said patiently. "Let's stay on track here."

Wesley looked uncomfortably at the vampire. "As much as I hesitate to bring this up, is there any possibility it **wasn't** a shape-shifter?"

"Huh?" Cordelia said blankly. "That would mean-"

"That it was really Doyle," Angel said quietly.

"Uh, yes," Wesley said awkwardly. "I admit that I'm not as qualified to discuss Doyle as you, but--"

"Yeah," Cordelia cut it harshly. "You're not."

"I only meant--"

"Besides, the real Doyle would never be caught dead in a suit," she finished firmly.

For a girl I'd never met before, she understood me pretty well.

Wesley looked like he was melting in the hot silence emanating from Angel and the girl. "But isn't it possib--"

"No," Angel said abruptly. "There was nothing left, Wes. Not even ash. Get back to the Black Chronicles," he said in a tone that brooked no argument. How the hell did a damn *vampire* know what that spell did to me? Ash... no wonder it hurt so much.

Wesley nodded slowly, transfixed by the vampire's intense gaze. He peered down at his dusty old book. "Smell?"

Angel frowned. I got the impression he did that a lot. "Smelled... normal for Doyle, I guess. He could have done his laundry a bit more."

I was indignant. The clothes weren't that bad! After all, beggars can't be choosers. In my book, if it's not evolving sentient life, it's clean enough to wear. But apparently not clean enough for sissy-boy-vampire.

"Did he smell of sulphur?" Wesley asked hopefully. "With a faint lingering cheesy smell?"

Honestly, did these people think I never bathed?

"No," Angel answered.

"Well, he's definitely not a Wareshi spirit," Wes said firmly.

"Way to go, Wes," Cordelia said sarcastically. "At this rate, Angel will be hitting his tri-centennial before we find out what's going on." I kinda liked Cordelia. She seemed a decent sort, whatever her dodgy associations. Nasty tongue on her, though.

"Well, considering you're so ready to contribute to my research," Wesley said with barely concealed exasperation, "have you found anything useful on your side of things?"

"Yes," she replied smugly.

"You have?" Wesley asked flabbergasted.

"You have?" Angel asked, eyebrow raised. Inwardly, I cheered her on.

"Well, we wanted to find that demon that snatched Doyle-faker-guy, right? So I found him," she said, handing a book to Wesley. Now I could finally see her. Her back was to me, but considering the lovely behind that presented me with, I wasn't complaining.

Faith will castrate you, my thoughts warned me quietly.

Wesley paged through Cordelia's book. "Well, it... appears she's found something."

"Really?" Angel asked.

"Really? I mean, of course I have!" Cordelia said firmly. "See, not just a pretty face," she told Angel sharply. "I do contribute."

"But you don't answer the phone, take messages, organise meetings or make coffee," Angel responded pointedly. "Which is your job."

"Men!" she rolled her eyes heavenward. "Never satisfied."

Angel's response was interrupted by Wes in full professor-mode. "The demon that snatched Doyle, or whoever he is, was a Cursak Beast. They're incredible natural trackers and predators, generally hired as bounty hunters. They've been known to track their targets across continents, and they're practically invulnerable."

Great, just great. Not only was a demon chasing me, but it was a huge, strong and unkillable demon. Lovely.

"Practically?" Angel asked.

"Apparently, Cursaks are extremely allergic to silver," Wesley clarified. "It's believed they may be a purer offshoot of the demons that bonded with humans and evolved into werewolves. They're extremely sought after for their skills and combat ability. Not too bright, though."

Yeah, I could confirm that one.

"I think I've dated football players like these guys," Cordelia contributed.

I waited with interest to hear how Wesley responded to that one.

He ignored it. "So, in conclusion, I believe we can firmly say - we've got problems."

Angel shrugged. "We'll deal. We haven't got a shortage of silver-lined weapons," he said, crossing the room and opening a weapons cupboard identical to mine. Hell, it *was* mine! He drew out a nasty-looking silver dagger I didn't recognise, more of a short sword. "Will this do?"

Wesley said something, but the words were lost in the sudden haze of pain that flooded my temples. I was dimly aware of my hands shaking violently, as images and sensations seared my mind.

A young businessman being confronted by a huge slimy demon. A rancid stench filled my nostrils as the demon slithered closer, grinning savagely. A sign was superimposed over the doomed man. 'Delilah's Delights', the flowery pink letters read. A sweet store on the corner of 22nd and Main, with an alley with sewer access right next door...

I have no idea how I managed to stay in place during the vision. Using strength I didn't know I had, I clutched the stairs railing tightly. It took serious effort to unclench my fingers when the vision passed.

Down below, Angel was helping Cordelia to her feet. Her face was flushed and her brow tight with pain. I knew if I looked in the mirror, I'd see the same expression on my face.

I knew, somehow, she'd just seen the same thing I had.

What the *hell* was going on here?

But I didn't have time to consider it. The kid in the alley needed me. Besides which, Angel was striding for the exit, his coat flowing behind him in a dramatic kinda way like he was Batman or something. I didn't want to be around when he hit the stairs.

Head aching, I grabbed my axe and staggered for the door.

10.12 Chapter 12

I ran the eight blocks to Delilah's. The run nearly killed me before any demons could. I rounded the alley corner and saw Mr Slime. It seemed bigger than in the vision. Smellier, too. The man I was supposed to be rescuing lay unconscious in a pile of trash. And between him and the demon, his assistants flanking him, was Angel.

I have to admit, part of me wasn't really surprised. Angel was holding his own against the demon, sending blows flashing at it so fast I could barely follow them. The bastard sure could fight. Wesley and Cordelia stood back a few meters, Wesley holding an axe, looking fierce but useless, while Cordelia tried to rouse the fallen victim.

The slime demon hit Angel a good one on the jaw and the vampire spun a full circle with the force of the blow. It lunged, meaning to bury the vampire beneath its bulk. I don't know how, but Angel got his feet back under himself and tripped it. The demon fell hard, dragging Angel with it. Pinning the vampire, the slimy monster rained punches down, battering and bruising him.

Wesley tensed and I could see that, any second now, he was going to leap across and try to save his vampire pal. I couldn't allow that. I couldn't care less if Angel was ground to dust, but I wasn't about to watch the demon rip Wesley to pieces.

With a roar of fury, I charged the demon, my own demon side coming free so fast it almost hurt. I brought the steel curve of the axe's blade down into the centre of the slime demon's back. It howled with gurgling fury as I tore the axe free and swung again and again. As it reached out to hit me, I chopped one of its arms off. As I dodged a gush of demon slime, I finally got into position for a killing stroke and swept the axe around.

The demon's head splattered when it hit the ground. A second later, its body followed.

I wiped green sludge from my face as Angel rose to his feet, watching me closely.

"My God," Cordelia muttered. "It's Super-Doyle."

Angel took a step towards me. "Close enough," I warned, raising the axe as I felt my spines flare defensively. "I want some answers, pal, and you're going to give them to me or I'll fill a dust buster with you. We clear?"

Angel's dark eyes blinked once as he stepped back. "Crystal."

"Good, now first off-" A roof slate crashed to the ground just in front of me. "What the hell was that?"

Angel and I looked up. Perched on the edge of the roof, Wart-face leered down at me.

"Found you..." he grated gleefully as he dropped. I raised the axe futilely as he crashed down onto me. Hit the ground hard, born down by his crushing weight. My head bounced off the pavement, my spines retracting as I lost control of my demon side. I looked up at the demon through darkening eyes. He smiled and reached for me.

But then with a flicker of motion, Angel's large silver knife buried itself in his chest. The Cursak gurgled, the veins on his neck bubbling and bulging. His warty features twisted in shock and pain and he fell forward. On to me.

I passed out, buried beneath seven feet of bubbling demon.

10.13 Chapter 13

The first thing I noticed when consciousness leaked back into my brain was the gentle touch of a woman's fingers on my face, followed by the smell of perfume.

Okay, so the next thing I noticed was the cold metal of a handcuff around my left wrist, but in what passed for my existence since Rayne and Mercer dragged me back from wherever I'd been to wherever I was now, that almost qualified as pleasant.

Fingertips, soft and tentative, were stroking their way down the side of my cheek, tracing the scratches left behind from my tumble out of the van. As light as the touch was, there was an odd sort of tingle that went along with it, as though some kind of faint current of energy were moving across my face along with the fingers. I could sense it even through the latest variation on the headache which seemed to have become the theme music of my life.

From a distance, I heard an uncomfortable-sounding throat-clearing noise that might have been the vampire. Then again, vampires don't need to clear their throats. Or do they?

"Cordelia." It was Wesley's voice. "You shouldn't get so close, it could be dangerous."

I'd been contemplating attempting to open my eyes, but now I lay still and listened, interested to know what they had to say about me. Their reactions before had been odd, to say the least.

"He's still out like a light. Can you blame him? The poor guy got pancaked." She withdrew her light caress as she clapped her hands together to illustrate my latest Wile E. Coyote impression. Judging by the closeness of that breeze, she hadn't moved too far away.

"Don't get too attached. You said yourself that this is most likely a shape-shifter of some kind, and not Doyle at all."

"No, it's really Doyle. If he could change his shape, then by now he would have done some slimy thing and slipped right out of the handcuff, right? I mean, who wouldn't? Besides, there's... something. I can't explain it, but I can feel it now. Especially... well, when I touch him," the girl answered, in a voice full of wonder. "I just... know him. Maybe it's some kind of a vision thing, some kind of a connection, but I'm sure now."

"Or else you just want to believe." Wesley spoke gently, but he just couldn't keep that trace of mockery out of his voice.

"Very funny. No, I don't think anybody has been abducted by aliens, even if he does look like somebody stamped a map of the butt end of the next galaxy on his face. It's really Doyle. He's just got some weird kind of amnesia or something. Somebody has mixed up all his memories."

"He did have a strong smell of magic on him when he first came in," the vampire, Angel, agreed. "Of course, after the Cursak fell on him, there's nothing much left of any other smell on him but Cursak."

Gee, thanks.

I made a decision and managed to open one eye partway. Saw the girl's face very close to mine. Despite the fading black eye, she was still amazingly beautiful.

Even more amazing was the expression on her face. She was looking at me like I was the most astonishing thing that she'd ever seen, and I had the distinct feeling that this girl had seen a lot... and not just in visions.

Funny thing, up until I ended up getting my molecules painfully disassembled, right in front of two of the very few people who actually cared about keeping them stuck together, it had never even occurred to me that anybody else in the world might ever have the same curse thrown on them as I did. I always figured that it had to be my very own private hell. What could this gorgeous girl have done to get the Powers mad enough to put her in the box they'd built especially for me?

"He's awake!" she exclaimed, with a brilliant smile, as I managed to get both eyes open.

"If you can call it that," I muttered.

"Maybe getting another knock on the head brought his memory back. You do remember me now, don't you, Doyle?" Cordelia coaxed.

It occurred to me that it might be wisest to go try getting along with these people, just for the moment. Among other things, even without one arm cuffed to the bed I was in no condition to do any fighting. Also, it seemed like the vampire and the girl, not to mention Wesley, might be my best chance of finding out what in the world was actually going on here.

Of course, until I knew a little more about the Doyle they thought I was, I couldn't exactly fake them out, but acting confused right now... well, I couldn't actually call it acting, either.

I settled for what you might call an equivocal answer.

"Well, more or less."

"He remembers me!" she crowed triumphantly.

"We just met. You work for the vampire," I said slowly, putting together what I could remember from the day just past. "You get the visions, same as I do."

"Well, duh, of course I do. You gave them to me. And you work for Angel, too, or at least you did."

"No," I protested feebly. "First of all, I never met you before today, or maybe it was yesterday, I'm not sure any more. And if I could get rid of the damned visions, true enough, I'd do it in a minute and be glad - but they're not something you can give away."

"Well, you found a way," she said, her voice very soft. "I'll never forgive you for it, either."

I had a feeling that I didn't want to know what she was going to say next.

"You kissed me... just before you... died... like this."

Before I had a chance to wonder which one she was going to demonstrate, the kissing or the dying, her lips closed over mine.

Ever heard people talk about getting a tingle when they kiss somebody? They don't mean it, not really. It's just a pretty expression.

This one wasn't. I actually felt a jolt when Cordelia kissed me.

She pulled back sharply. "What was that?"

"I have no idea," I answered honestly. "Want to try it again?"

Cordelia grinned triumphantly. "You see, it is Doyle! I told you so!"

"Actually," Wes began, "You originally said-" Then he broke off with a sigh.

She bent down again to kiss me, and I didn't mind that having one arm cuffed to the bed gave me a perfect excuse not to resist. Once again, there was a shock, a little crackle of energy. She pulled back reluctantly, and stared at me with a puzzled expression.

"What is this? Are you really android-Doyle or something? You never had an electric charge before."

"Perhaps it has something to do with the visions?" Wesley suggested. "I don't know if there are any recorded cases of two seers coming into close physical contact with one another."

Close physical contact? With an effort, I stopped the images that idea brought to mind... better not to go there, not if Faith was still alive somewhere. I wrestled my uncooperative mind away from that thought.

"And another thing," I said irritably. "I have never worked for a vampire."

Cordelia stared at me, with a wounded expression.

"Doyle, come on, you have to remember. You worked for Angel, and then you passed the visions along to me, which was just so unfair, because you know how much they hurt."

"Yeah, right, sure. Sorry." Even though I didn't believe a word of it, for some reason, I actually found myself feeling guilty as she gazed at me with that soulful look, with her lower lip trembling slightly. "But you'll never get me to buy that one, not after what happened to my wife."

Now the girl just looked confused. "What do you mean? Did something happen to Harry?"

"You knew Harry?"

"Well, duh, you introduced me to her yourself, just a little while before you... you know."

Wesley supplied helpfully, "Died."

"Thanks, Wes," I snapped. "You at least should know me well enough to know that I never worked for a vampire. I still can't believe that you ever would."

"I'm afraid that I don't know you at all," Wesley responded. "I know of you by reputation only. We never actually met."

"Now who's the one with amnesia?" I complained, even more frustrated, and getting angry.

"You are," Cordelia announced brightly, apparently delighted to get a question that she could answer. "You've forgotten all about working for Angel, and meeting me. But it'll be all right. It will all come back to you."

"Not likely. How many times do I have to tell you this? I never worked for your Angel."

"You didn't just work for him, Doyle," Cordelia said softly, her fingers brushing against my hand lightly, almost reverently, with that little buzz of energy trailing a tickle of sensation everywhere we made contact. "You died for him."

That one left me speechless. I looked at Wesley, noticing once again, now that my sight was clearing somewhat, that he looked almost as much the worse for wear as I was. He seemed to have nothing to say on that subject, either, and he was very busily looking everywhere in the room except at me.

Cordelia turned toward Angel. "Do you think we should get in touch with Harry? If this is really Doyle, she'd want to know."

"Does everyone in this godforsaken place like to play at seances?" I asked bitterly. "Maybe you should have your own talk show."

"What are you talking about?" She looked at me with blank incomprehension.

Angel said quietly, "He thinks Harry is dead."

I looked at the vampire, who seemed to be the only one in the group doing more listening than talking. The expression on his face stunned me. I'd never seen a look that carried so much pain on the face of a human before, let alone a vampire.

"What the hell do you mean?" I asked him. "'He thinks Harry is dead?' Thinks? I saw it happen. I saw them kill her... Your kind."

He looked straight back at me, with infinite sadness.

"You're not from here at all, are you?" he asked, and his voice was heavy with meaning. "You're not the Doyle we knew. You come from a different place altogether - if 'place' is even the right word."

Cordelia glared at him with an astonished anger that it was wrenching to witness. She looked as though she might start to cry - or, alternatively, start to trash furniture. "What do you mean?"

"Do you remember the other Willow?"

She hesitated for a moment, then grimaced with distaste. "The vampire Willow, the one that Anya brought by mistake?"

"That's the one. Remember how she came from a different version of Sunnydale? Where things were, well, just different. I think this Doyle may be from another one of those ... alternative worlds, I guess you'd call them."

I couldn't help some reaction to the mention of the Hellmouth; the vampire caught it, although the others didn't, maybe because he was the only one still looking at me. He didn't let on to them that he had noticed. If anything, that made me even more uneasy.

"Of course!" Wesley exclaimed. "An alternate reality? What a fascinating idea! It would make sense, given the facts we have..."

Sense? I was trapped with a mad vampire and two humans who seemed to be just as crazy as he was. Of course, they would think this all made perfect sense. Hell, maybe it did on their side of the looking-glass.

"Not a chance," Cordelia protested, echoing my indignation. "I mean, vampire-Willow was like the opposite of real Willow, right? This isn't mirror-Doyle, this is our Doyle. He looks like our Doyle, and, okay, so the action-Doyle stuff was a bit weird but he saved you, right? Just like before. He's for real, Angel - he even smells like our Doyle, right? Because you should know."

Wesley cast a pained look at the possessive way Cordelia's hand had settled on my good arm, but otherwise he seemed to dismiss her. Angel followed his gaze, and then after another brief glance at me, looked away quickly, as if he had been splashed with holy water.

"Yes. Alternate realities," Wesley went on, with one of his knowing nods. "I've heard about this sort of thing before. You're right. I don't know why I didn't think of it myself."

I couldn't follow all they were talking about, but... a world in which my Harry was still alive? I couldn't even allow myself to think about that idea, or I would end up drooling right next to this lot.

Looking down at the floor and just about everywhere else but at me, Angel went on: "He really doesn't remember. To him, I'm just another vampire."

"But if he's not from our own reality," Wesley continued, and his voice grew hard, "Why would he ask about Faith?"

This time I didn't even try to hide it. One thing I learned awhile ago - if you know somebody's on to you, you change the game, and I decided right then that I was changing this one. I straightened up at the mention of Faith's name, and the cuff jerked against my arm, holding me back. "Where is Faith? Is she still alive?"

"She was very much alive last week, " Wesley answered drily. "I am carrying the marks to prove it, as is Cordelia."

I turned too quickly toward Cordelia, and was rewarded by a stab of pain. "Faith did that to you? Why? Where is she?"

Cordelia asked angrily, "Why should you care? You never even met Faith."

"Not here," Angel reminded her. "Apparently things are different wherever he comes from."

"Or just in whatever screwed-up hallucinations he's been having since his memory got fried. Maybe he decided he was entitled to a Slayer of his very own," Cordelia snapped persistently, with an angry glare at Angel. Angel directed a look back at her, and it wasn't lacking in compassion, which surprised me considering the source, but its message was plain enough - *not now* - and she hmped and fell into a sullen silence, arms crossed huffily over her chest.

"Wherever he's from, it can't be that different," Wesley put in. "You might notice that the idea of Faith carving her initials into me didn't surprise the man too much."

Cordelia whirled, as though struck by a sudden thought. "Do you think Wolfram and Hart sent him here, like Faith? I mean, they've got some pretty tight connections in the demonic social circles in this city, and we know they're out to get us. Maybe zapping Doyle back from the dead - or wherever - could be part of some twisted plan of theirs..."

"Wolfram and Hart?" I blurted out, and all three of them turned toward me.

"That does mean something to you, doesn't it?" Angel confirmed.

"Sure does. But first, tell me what the hell you are talking about. What do Wolfram and Hart have to do with Faith?"

Cordelia looked doubtfully at Angel. "Should we tell him? I mean, does he even know which side he's supposed to be on?"

"I think we should. This may not be our own Doyle, but he's still Doyle. If he's here, then it's for a reason."

"Fine then, find a reason. Wesley can look it up in his books. I'll settle for finding Doyle. Our Doyle. Any Doyle." Her tone was dangerous.

Wesley cautioned, tritely, "Even so, one person's reason may be another's excuse for murder and mayhem. Remember, the other Willow was evil."

Seemed like some things about Wesley hadn't changed.

"The other Willow was a vampire, standard package, soul and other valuable options not included," Cordelia retorted. She and Wesley exchanged a quick glance, and he tossed something in her direction. She grabbed it out of the air - the gal had decent reflexes for a normal human - and laughed out loud when she saw what it was.

"If it makes you feel better," she said dismissively, and with a condescending look back at him, she pressed a small wooden cross lightly against my abused cheek. "See? No smoke, no burn, no problem. Ta-da! We now return you to your regularly scheduled universe."

Angel frowned. "Cordelia. Wesley. He's not a vampire."

"I'm glad to know that I'm in such perceptive company," I snapped impatiently. "So, are you going to tell me about Faith, or are you all plannin' to keep me shackled here all night for your personal entertainment?"

Cordelia favored me with an aggrieved glare. "You wish. Back from the dead and Faith is the only thing you want to know about? Death must do a weird number on your priorities, not to mention scrambling your mind." Then she relented and snapped, "Wolfram and Hart sent Faith to kill Angel."

"Is she still *alive*?" Remembering how well Angel fought, I had a sinking feeling that the answer would be 'no,' but he surprised me.

"She's alive," Angel said. "She's in prison right now, but she's there by her own choice. There isn't a jail built that could hold her, if she didn't want to stay."

"You got that right," I threw back at him, feeling an idiotic grin of relief spread across my face, but unable to stop it, even in the glare of Cordelia's concentrated scowl. I hadn't fully realized quite *how* worried I'd been about Faith until that moment. A few minutes seriously contemplating a world without her slammed it home to me. . . Man, was I ever in too deep. "But why would Wolfram and Hart send a Slayer after a vampire? Sure, it's the usual way of things and all that, but knowin' those creeps I'd expect it to be the other way around."

10 Evidence of Things Not Seen

It was Wesley who answered. "This Slayer is a rogue, and this vampire has a soul."

I stared at him. "What is it you're trying to sell me, Wes? That somehow everything is switched around, evil Slayer and good vampire? Black is white and white is black? Is that supposed to be the deal?"

"In this particular case, and to my own discredit, yes." Wesley sighed. "I must take my share of the responsibility for Faith, and she has been more than eager to remind me of that fact. If you claim that you know me, or at least some counterpart of me, then you should be aware that I would not work for any ordinary vampire." He straightened himself slightly, wincing as he did, and a look of something like pride, and more, came over his face.

"Angel does, indeed, possess a soul. He now works on the side of good. There would be no other reason for me to ally myself with him."

I was feeling the strangest prickle at the back of my neck as I looked at Wesley. He was gazing at Angel as he spoke to me, with a sad little smile, and it was giving me a weird sensation, because Wesley's expression as he looked at Angel was warm with admiration and affection. Friendship, certainly, but more. It was something I'd never seen on Wesley's face before, a look that was close to hero-worship.

But that wasn't the strangest part of all. There was a similar expression on Angel's face, but it wasn't directed toward Wesley. The vampire didn't even seem to notice Wesley.

It was directed at me.

10.14 Chapter 14

It didn't take long after that for them to talk each other around to setting me free. They were hardly comfortable with keeping their old buddy Doyle chained up, even if he thought they were all lunatic strangers.

The vampire unlocked the handcuff, and good as it felt to get rid of that thing, I could've done without Angel getting quite so close to me. Alleged soul or none, the guy creeped me out.

Wesley managed to hustle Cordelia out of the room to allow me to throw on some clean clothes he'd brought in. Which were all black and too large - and, gee, no prizes for guessing whose wardrobe they'd raided for *those*.

My arm twinged with pain as I struggled to shove it through the shirt sleeve and Angel, looming, said, "You ought to get that looked at properly. You might have a hairline fracture."

I scowled. Aside from the fact that his low voice next to my ear had made me jolt in less-than-manly fashion, I didn't need health advice from any vampire. "It's fine. Besides, half-demon, remember. Hospitals? - probably not a great idea. One sneeze in front of the doctors and I'm suddenly the medical curiosity of the century."

Angel seemed surprised, and his expression turned thoughtful. I wasn't sure why until he mused, "You can joke about it... you use it to fight..."

"Huh?"

"Your demon."

I shrugged, finally managing to pull on the black shirt, which smelled of vampire and cheap washing powder. "It's a weapon. Why shouldn't I use it? I wouldn't be able to do what I do nearly so effectively without it, if at all. Not a Slayer. Don't have a head full of demonic book-learnin'. I'm all for survival and, y'know, killin' vamps - no offence - ain't exactly low risk work."

"No." I looked down, following the direction of his gaze to the pattern of bruises on my chest. I buttoned the shirt over them. He cleared his throat. "What... exactly is it that you do?"

"Oh, yeah, you think I worked for *you*. Right. Well, for your information, I'm a licensed PI, and this is... was... whatever... my office."

Angel gave a little cough of laughter.

I was more than a little unsettled by vamp-man trying to make like we were the best of friends. Wesley seemed aware of that too.

"Angel, would you mind...?" he indicated the door. At his undead pal's puzzled expression, he explained, "I'd like to talk to, um, Doyle here, a moment. You're too close to all this to see it objectively. Besides which, I... think you bother him."

Angel looked... faintly hurt? In any case he seemed to understand well enough, as he reluctantly left to join Cordelia in the office, and I couldn't deny my relief as the door closed behind his black-clad form.

"Nice one, Wes," I said, once he was gone, keeping my voice low. "You can stop the act, now. Tell me what the hell's really happened here?"

He blinked at me, confused. "I assure you, there has been no pretence. Evidently you still suspect I am your friend. Likewise Cordelia and Angel still believe, at least a little, that you may be the man they knew."

"And what do you think?" I asked, my voice sounding harsh to my ears.

"I think I've never met their friend. Which does not necessarily mean I consider you to be evil. But it does mean you're going to hurt them. You do hurt them, even by just being here."

"Wesley." I gripped his arm. "You're the only good thing I recognise about the world since I woke up in Wolfram and Hart's basement, and you're telling me you really don't know me?"

"That is indeed the case, I'm afraid," he said quietly. "And if, as you say, I was your friend, imagine how it must be for Angel and Cordelia, who saw your counterpart die for them. And you are not him. You have no affection for them - in fact, Angel scares the hell out of you, and don't think I didn't notice what you were playing there with Cordelia."

"Wesley?" This wasn't the man I remembered. He looked like Wesley, and talked like Wesley, mostly, but there was something very different there.

Still, a lot could change in six months and it didn't mean you had to be in another universe. I still didn't buy the explanation.

I said, somewhat desperately, "You're Wesley Wyndham-Pryce. A Watcher - Faith's Watcher. You know about 50 different languages. You crashed at my apartment for a month with a broken leg watching some of the crappiest television I've ever seen. You've saved my life a few times and almost got me killed a few more. You drink more tea than oughta be humanly possible for one man, and your dad was a complete shit."

He gaped at me for a long moment before managing a flustered recovery. "I don't doubt you know some things about me from your friendship with my counterpart, but I assure you we don't know each other. I have never stayed in your apartment. And Faith went bad before I could ever truly be a Watcher to her."

Faith.

I jumped up, unnerving him. "We gotta go find Faith. They're after her, that Rayne guy and Wolfram and Hart's lawyer types. They were after your Angel as well. That's what they wanted me for - a lever. I didn't understand them at the time."

"They thought you were someone else, too," he reasoned slowly.

"Yeah. Whatever. And, anyway, I gotta see Faith. I can't get a handle on all this 'til I've seen her--"

"What is this obsession with-?" he faltered, incredulous. "You and *Faith*? Oh, Cordelia's going to love that one." A pause, then he slowly let go of a long sigh. "You do realise, don't you, that the Faith we're talking about isn't the girl you know either?"

"Well, that's a matter of opinion. I've only got your word I'm in some crazy mirror universe. An' normally, y'know, I'd believe you, Wes, man. But given that you could well be Evil Wesley--" I left it hanging there with savage irony.

He blinked. Frowned. Nodded reluctantly and allowed, "I suppose I walked into that one." His expression grew deeply thoughtful, and I studied the lines and bruises on his battered face, trying to work out where my Wesley left off and this new one began.

Finally, he said, "Angel may not like this but, well..." He took a few steps towards the door, hesitated and looked back. Held out a hand in a beckoning gesture. "If you're up to it, let's get out of here. There's something I think it might help for you to see."

10.15 Chapter 15

Angel and Cordelia were a lot less than keen on the idea of us taking off, but Wesley faced them down with a calm determination which astonished me and, eventually, they acquiesced.

I wasn't sure how much of their reluctance was lingering distrust of me, and how much residual protectiveness for the dead friend that I wasn't. Or maybe it was Wesley they were worried about. The man looked like a walking bruise. Whoever it was that'd worked him over, they'd been thorough. Too easy to believe that it might have been Faith.

I had to make a conscious effort not to shiver, every time that possibility brushed my thoughts.

In any case, that was how Wesley and I, both looking like half-dead survivors of some major catastrophe with our myriad cuts and bruises, ended up taking a cab across town to a run-down area of the city where big half-empty apartment blocks loomed up above narrow dark streets.

Wesley's expression was grim in the glare of the streetlights as he paid the cab driver, who took off with the haste of someone who knows which neighbourhoods it's not a good idea to hang about in.

"This way," Wesley said, and started walking, like a sleepwalker, blank and automated. I still had to fight the protests of my battered muscles to keep up.

I watched the frown lines creasing his forehead deepen into crevasses, then chasms, the further we walked.

Something had occurred here. Something bad. Something he didn't want to go back to face - but he was going.

Whatever it was that had happened to this Wesley to make him different from the man I knew, it had brought out a steel in his character I'd only ever caught the faintest glimpses of in the mildly ineffective Watcher who'd regularly drained the tea supplies in my office. No matter whether he was removed from the man I knew by a matter of universes, or by time and ensorcelled memory loss.

"We're here," he said presently, his voice reverberating around the tall, darkened street. His face had gone paper white, and the bruises screamed out all the louder against the paled background.

"Nice place," I said, uneasily, the levity an effort to break the sombre atmosphere. "Real classy..." I gave in. "Okay, what's the significance of 'here', then? So far as I can see, it's just a shabby street in downtown LA. And not the most spectacular example of such I've ever seen, at that."

Wesley didn't answer. He was staring up at a shattered window several floors above. His mouth was set in a thin line. His gaze broke and he glanced down at the pavement beneath his feet.

"There is nothing here..." he said. "Nothing. It was pointless to come. I shouldn't have brought you. There's nothing to see."

His intensity gave the lie to that. He was seeing plenty. I just couldn't fathom what it might be.

"Wes," I started, concerned.

He slumped down atop a box among a pile of junk at the side of the street. Water had pooled in the recesses between the trash, sheltered by shadows and not yet dried up from a recent rain shower. "No point going up there." Although he made no effort to indicate it, I figured he was referring to the room which had the broken window. "The police will, of course, have cleared everything away, and probably they will have sealed it off. I'll abstain from breaking the law, I think." He sounded wretched: bitter, self-mocking. "*Stupid*. Of course there's nothing here. What they didn't take, the rain washed away with the blood. I'm a fool."

"You're not-" I stopped. "What blood? Damn it, Wes, what *happened* here?"

He shook his head. "I thought I needed to come back. I came with you because I couldn't bring *them*. And I thought it might help both of us. But it was pointless."

"I'm sure it wasn't," I said. I reached down and gripped his shoulder, intending to pull him up and lead him away. We'd passed a shoddy little bar on the corner, it'd be good enough for my purposes. "Come on, Wes, there is no point in sittin' here, mopin', I'm right with you there. Not when there's plenty of perfectly good bars in LA that'd make much better mopin' ground. And you and I both sure as hell need a drink. Come on, let's get out of here."

But Wesley wrenched away from my touch. He overbalanced and fell to his knees on the damp pavement amid the strewn garbage, his hands resting on the tarmac, fingers outspread. He stared down at them. He was shuddering, shoulders quivering.

"She came to Cordelia's flat," he said. "She wanted Angel to come after her, so she took me. Cordelia would've been a better hostage, for Angel - I wouldn't have thought he'd search for me so diligently. But it wasn't about that. It was an old score. I'd failed her, and she wanted to take it out of my flesh."

"Wesley?" I crouched down in front of him. His left shirtsleeve was askew, bandaging showing underneath. What other hidden wounds was he carrying around with him? I wondered if his friends Angel and Cordelia even knew about them all.

"It still took him hours to find me. She didn't idle them away." I'd thought he'd finished, but then he added, a dark mutter under his breath, "At least he stopped her before she started bloody burning me."

Burning? Damn it, I'd thought she'd beaten him up - she, yeah, he had to be talking about Faith, I accepted reluctantly - but it hadn't been like that. It had been prolonged, systematic. I shivered.

I wanted to be home. I didn't want to be here, in this place where everything was turned upside down and Faith had got her kicks torturing Wesley.

"She enjoyed it," he said.

"Gal's got strange enjoyments," I said, at a loss.

A small huff that might've been laughter. "I suppose you would know. God, Cordelia..." he swept a hand across his eyes. Hell, he was laughing. Sort of. He choked on it after a few seconds. "Your world," he said bitterly. "In your world, she's the Slayer and I am her Watcher in truth, isn't that so?" The look in his eyes was a lot like amazement, like longing.

"Yeah. Well..." I shifted uncomfortably. "She still ran away from you. Turned up at my patch in LA. You came on her heels. Things sorta went on from there, and before I knew it I was making a career out of actin' as mediator and translator between the two of you."

The edges of his mouth quirked up in a smile at that image.

"The Faith I know wouldn't have done this, though," I said.

"Are you so sure?"

I hesitated. Faith had tied me in a few knots when she couldn't get her own way, but that was only playful, like. Well, mostly. And she knew I could take it. "Yeah," I said.

He nodded. "She... wasn't always bad. It didn't have to happen. She had some bad luck. Some unfortunate experiences. Maybe it didn't help, that there were two of them. It took away some of the responsibility. Made it cheaper. Easier to fail."

I bit my tongue on my lack of understanding and just settled for nodding encouragingly. But he seemed to have wound down. He just crouched there in silence, in the muck and the damp, staring into space.

"Come on," I said, after several long minutes. It was cold, and I hurt, and there was only so much cathartic wallowing a beat-up guy could stand, and a beer was always a better solution, anyway. "Let's go get that drink, Wes."

11 Ghosts

by Roseveare, Mike Dewar, Mike and Ellen

11.1 Chapter 1

I awoke, slumped across the familiar awkward contours of a couple of pushed-together chairs in my office, to the sounds of arguing and the glare of the sun blazing in through the blinds to penetrate my eyelids. I shifted, raising an arm to cover my face, turning over. A number of aches I'd forgotten about announced their presence.

In many ways, waking up to the music of an argument was something of a relief. Home comforts, if you will. Because I'd been having the strangest dream, and part of me had been expecting to wake up somewhere... not much resembling Kansas at all.

"...to go, Wesley. I mean, what were you thinking of? The one lead we have from this screwed-up business and you have to take him out and vanish for the rest of the evening? Did you even stop to consider that some of us might be waiting back here for you to show up?!"

On the other hand, my very considerable hangover was not finding the volume of the debate any relief at all. "Faith-" I groaned.

She predictably ignored me. "And if that wasn't bad enough, you finally turn up drunk out of your doofus wits and crawl up the steps so that Bat-Doyle here can pass out in the doorway."

I creased my forehead in puzzlement at Faith's uncommonly mild vocabulary, as Wesley protested weakly, "You said all of this last night, Co-"

"And like you were in any fit state to listen? Or remember? I'm gonna keep saying it until it goes in-"

"Faith!" I snapped, sitting up. My jacket, which had been draped over me, slid into an untidy heap on the floor, and the move did a lot less for my head than the shouting, on the whole. The sunlight shone directly into my eyes, dazzling me, and I blinked in the glare for a moment-

-before focusing, with a jolt of alarm, on a woman I'd only seen before in a dream, who emphatically wasn't Faith.

11.2 Chapter 2

"And you! Doyle... uh... whatever your name is... Doyle," Cordelia snapped, swinging around on me as I leaned on the wall and swayed to my feet, groaning.

My head spun. Finding a sink definitely felt like being the first order of the day.

"I do know exactly whose fault all this was!" she continued mercilessly. "'Cause I know Wesley, and if you know Wesley, even if you don't know Wesley, then you should know he doesn't do this. Right? He doesn't do the broody drinking 'getting-my-sorrows-utterly-wasted' thing. Unlike you, who I also know... kind of... You just called me Faith... Well suffice to say I know you encouraged him!" She finally paused for a breath and choked on it as full realisation dawned. "You just called me *Faith*?!"

All this wasn't improving the state of my hangover. I cast a pleading glance at Wesley, who looked as grey as I felt and was trying to sneak out of the office while Cordelia's back was turned.

That woman must've had eyes in the back of her head. Her arm shot out behind her, an accusatory pointing finger on its end. "Don't you dare sneak off! We need you. You're research guy."

Wesley sagged into one of the client chairs lined up neatly beside the door and Cordelia continued ranting at me as though the interruption had never occurred.

"What the hell did you think you were doing? He's on medication - you know that, right? Part of the whole 'being tortured for hours by Psycho-Slayer-Girl' thing. You want to land him in the hospital?"

"Cordelia, I assure you I'm fine-" Wesley attempted to interject, looking slightly freaked out.

She rolled right on over him. "Not to mention the worry. You have no idea how much Angel and I have been trying to make like all sensitive-"

"-not that I don't appreciate your concern-" Wesley said, beginning to look mildly pissy, hangover or no hangover.

"-And you go take him out to get *drunk!*" Cordelia finished on a screech. "And I'll ask again, did you just *call me FAITH!*"

Her voice reverberated unpleasantly inside my head, starting up a wrestling match with the residue of last night's binge that was sloshing around in there. That girl was scaring me. I was starting to have very strong suspicions that I'd gotten the calmer, saner, softer deal with 'Psycho Slayer Girl'.

"Uh... sorry?" I tried distractedly. I was going to need that sink very, very soon.

"Cordelia," Wesley said firmly. "Will you please *listen?*"

He and I both cringed at his volume, but to my surprise, Cordelia turned around, her lips pursed, and in profile the leap of her throat was visible as she swallowed whatever she'd been about to say next.

"Thank you," he sighed. "Doyle is all right. I am all right. Last night, I believe... cleared the air somewhat, in more ways than one. I am very aware that we should at the very least have phoned in to let you and Angel know everything was all right, and I apologise for any concern we caused you. Now, I think..." He frowned at me. "You are all right, aren't you?"

Shaking my head frantically, I bolted out of the door.

11.3 Chapter 3

Angel was still moaning while pulling on his clean shirt as we got out of the elevator. "I mean, this is sixty-percent silk. Do you know how long it takes to get stains out?"

"Are you like this because of the soul thing?" I snapped back. Hungover and all, I didn't much feel like playing nice with the cuddly vampire. "Because I never met a prissy vamp before and, y'know, if this is part of what makes you 'special', I think I prefer the bloodsucking variety."

He looked taken aback, then offended, then defensive. "Well, actually, Angelus--"

I tuned out the rest. We were approaching reception, and I could hear Cordelia and Wesley in the middle of another full-fledged round of name-calling that was descending into truly schoolyard-esque territory. My head started thudding anew, and I longed for Wesley and Faith's friendly debates, even with the possibility of violence that tended to skirt around them. I couldn't actually envision Cordelia picking Wesley up and hurling him through a window if he pushed her that little bit too far.

"... and it's such a pity that it's demons we investigate and not the exhaustive variety of badly-applied highlights available cheap in LA," Wesley griped, "Because then maybe you'd actually contribute more to this agency than bad coffee and indecipherable filing."

Then again, you never knew. I didn't particularly like the way Cordelia's eyes had narrowed.

"Kids," Angel said, still sounding pissy about the shirt as he tucked the new one into his waistband. "We have a case." He pointed at me without looking my way.

"What side of the coffin did you get out of this morning?" Cordelia shot back.

"Well, excuse me, but it's difficult to stay cheerful after being projectile vomited on by a half-demon trying to break the land-speed record on the stairs." He glared around at the three of us, then a very particular irritation settled across his face and he returned to Cordelia, "And can we lose the coffin jokes?"

She was too busy smirking to pay much attention. "Ah. More sufferage of the Dark Avenger wardrobe," she said sagely, and stage-whispered to me. "Would you credit it? And this is a guy who can't actually see his own reflection."

"It's the Soul Thing, right?" I asked.

She scrunched up her face. "I think it's the Angel Thing. Hey, have you seen his car?"

Angel slammed a file down on the desk, making Cordelia and Wesley jump and my hangover do acrobatics. "Case. Doyle. Faith. Wolfram and Hart. *Some* aspects of which might be urgent. Guys?"

With that, all possibility for the joking around vanished. Cordelia's expression took on a seriousness I wouldn't have thought possible, and Wesley sagged into a chair and frowned intently at the pages of an open book. Of course, at the mention of Faith, my reaction wasn't much different. She could be in danger, and here I was joking around with vamp-man, his cheerleader secretary and an amnesiac, beat-up Wes.

"Right. First we need to know everything you remember from the spell that transported you to when we met you yesterday," Angel said. He picked up a notebook and pen from the desk, but handed them to Cordelia, who looked annoyed.

11 Ghosts

"Wrong. First we need to get to Faith and warn her," I said. Damn it, she could have been in danger last night, and I'd gone out and gotten drunk with Wesley. This screwed-up universe was doing a weird job on my priorities. "In fact, they could have got to her by now and we wouldn't know." In alarm, I started towards the door.

Angel's hand gripped my arm. Painfully. "We have these nifty things here in this universe. They're called 'telephones'. Maybe you have them in yours?"

Cordelia muttered something about that being a pearl beyond price from a man who couldn't answer his cellphone.

I nodded. "You call."

The first number he tried, nobody was picking up, and he frowned and rang the prison direct. After about half an hour of red tape he got onto someone who was prepared to answer his questions and take seriously his warning that one of their inmates might be in danger from a contract taken out on her life.

By that time, Cordelia was pacing the office, having dumped the notebook and pen in front of Wesley, who in turn was dozing across the table with his head rested on his arms.

Angel was still talking when Cordelia suddenly stopped. "Oh my God," she said, squinting through the glass to the hallway outside the office.

"What?"

"I think there's somebody standing out there." Her voice was hushed with awed amazement. "I think that's... oh, my God. I think we've got a client."

"Client, huh?" I said, impressed. "I vaguely remember we had those, once or twice."

"And you know what that means? Head-splitting-vision free client... we get to *charge*."

She was already bouncing her way to the door to snag whoever the poor soul outside was before they wised up and left.

11.4 Chapter 4

Cordelia's exuberance didn't last long - in fact, when she shepherded the client back inside her face was so sombre her previous cheer might never have existed. It didn't take much figuring out why.

The woman would normally have been pretty, but someone or something had given her a real working over. Bruises and an intricate network of small cuts marred her visible skin. A couple of spots of blood on her clothing hinted at who-knew how much more damage underneath.

"Guys." Cordelia had a sensitive-voice. The revelation could've floored me, except the next instant I saw her fashionably-clad foot connect, hard and surreptitiously, with Wesley's ankle. Wes snorted awake with an exclamation and Angel set down the phone as Cordelia continued, meaningfully, "This is Miriam. She's come to us for help."

"Miriam Welsh," the woman supplied, looking nervous and jittery. "I've heard you handle unusual cases - things that maybe most people wouldn't believe?"

Angel's expression went through a variety of contortions in its attempts to avoid looking cross, and eventually settled into something vaguely neutral. His eyes flickered around myself, Wesley and Cordelia.

"That's right," he said finally, his decision evidently falling on the side of not telling a severely beat-up woman clearly in dire need of aid to come back later when it was more convenient. He quickly stood and surrendered his chair, guided her into it with astonishing gentleness, sliding the loose jacket she was wearing from her shoulders.

"Wesley..."

"Of course." Wesley was already rising to his feet. He exited, in shambling, difficult steps. A moment later, coffee-making sounds were emanating from the next room.

Cordelia sat down in his place and leaned across the desk to place her hand sympathetically on Miriam's. "Don't worry," she said. "We're here now to help. Whoever it is that's after you, we'll sort them out."

Since Cordelia had put the machine on not long ago, it was only a minute or two before Wesley returned carrying a tray somewhat shakily.

11 Ghosts

A faint guilty look flickered across Angel's face and he quickly took the tray. I remembered Wesley complaining about Faith making various incisions in his right arm with a piece of broken glass and winced. Cordelia caught on a second later and leaped up out of the chair to allow Wesley to sit down again. He made a few faint protests but gave in when her expression turned from compassionate to irritated.

Miriam looked at Wesley with wide, shock-glazed eyes. The two of them exchanged sympathetic wincing. They did kind of have a look of bookends about them, battered figures framing Angel's desk.

"You work here?" she asked him hesitantly, sipping the coffee Angel placed in her hand. "I mean, when I walked in - I thought you were here as a client." She suppressed a laugh.

"No, no... our last case got a little rough," Wesley reassured evasively.

"See. Angel Investigations, you can rely on us for dedication," Cordelia said chirpily. "Right down to the actual-physical-wounding and the migraines-from-hell." Everyone gave her odd looks and she rolled her eyes. "Okay, well. This is Wesley. That's Angel, the boss. I'm Cordelia. Oh, and that's Doyle - and he is a client. Sort of. But he used to work here - sort of - so it's totally okay to talk in front of him."

Angel cleared his throat and cut in. "Miss Welsh. I realise this might not be easy for you to talk about, but you must tell us what happened so that we can help you. Who did this to you?"

She blushed and averted her gaze. "It's - it's Mrs Welsh. Well, not really. I still use Mrs, but my husband, Jeremy - he's dead. He's been dead four years. And - he did this to me." She spread out her arms with all their cuts and bruises, gazing at them as though it was the first time she'd seen them. And she burst into tears.

Cordelia was on her knees next to her chair, offering physical support with the air of someone who'd done this before, her abrasive personality set aside, and Wesley was predictably extending a pressed, clean handkerchief. Angel was sitting on the edge of the desk, looking a little lost but nonetheless determined to help.

I kept back out of the way. It wouldn't help to crowd the poor gal, and I was intrigued, watching them work together, figuring out the dynamics between them.

"It wasn't long after his death," she said in between sobs, "that I began to have this feeling - this sense that someone was watching over me. It was wonderful and comforting, to think that he wasn't gone completely. I thought maybe I could-" She broke off a moment. "If things had stayed that way, it would have been fine. But I can't make a life for myself with a ghost. It's taken me years to try to move on, to commit to another relationship and a man that means anything to me again - a couple of flings in the meantime that went nowhere, there was some unrest about those. I could tell he wasn't happy, didn't want me to move on from him. But it was nothing like this time..."

"We were having dinner at his apartment. He's called Ben. Benjamin. He runs a cafeteria. He's such a sweet man."

She broke down again, and it took her longer, this time, to recover and go on. "The windows in his apartment, they just shattered inwards. There was flying glass everywhere, and other things were hurled around the room - hurled at us both. He's in intensive care. They said there's a good chance he'll be all right."

"Oh, my God," said Cordelia breathlessly. "I'm so sorry."

Miriam showed her a cellphone, and I realised she'd been gripping it since she walked through the door. "I'm waiting for a call. I should be at his side, but - what's the use in him getting better, if it's going to happen again? He's in danger so long as I'm near him. I have to stop it now. I hoped - I realise it's a strange request, but I hoped you'd be able to do something."

"We can do something," Cordelia said firmly. "We can completely do something. We've handled ghosts before."

"Right." Angel was nodding, but there was still a trace of indecision in his eyes. He looked at me and Wesley. "If you could stay with Cordelia a moment, there's something I need to discuss with my associates. Please excuse us."

"All right," she said, nodding hollowly. Looking a little afraid. Well... that was definitely understandable.

Angel drew us outside into the hallway, where Wesley leaned on the window, looking pasty and ill in the little sunlight that was filtering through and Angel lurked at the side of the window in the darkest corner. I sat on the top step.

11 Ghosts

"Guys," the vampire said. "I know... we have other stuff at the moment. I don't want to... can't turn her away. But I can't make this decision. You both have a say in this too. Faith's all right for now, and we've warned the prison authorities. I'm not sure there's much else we can do there. There are visiting hours this evening. Maybe we'll be finished in time to go, or at least some of us could go."

"I'm not sure why you're asking me," Wesley said. "I should think I have very little bearing on Faith's welfare."

"You were her Watcher. You should have a say."

Wesley's eyes narrowed and he looked like he'd swallowed a mouthful of bees, but I could tell that Angel really was trying to be considerate. He fluttered a hand dismissively. "I agree with you. Ms Welsh's case should take precedence." He slumped back against the window, practically asleep on his feet.

Angel looked at me. I gulped. This wasn't easy.

"We shouldn't be standin' here jawin'," I said sharply, turning my face so he couldn't read it. "Not when we've got a jealous ghost to exorcise."

"You don't have to do anything. This isn't your world, you don't belong here. You haven't had a vision. You've no obligation to help Miriam Welsh. And Faith--"

I stood up, angrily rounding on him. I'd made my decision, and the last thing I needed was Mr-Soulful-Vamp talking me out of it when I was trying to be selfless. Faith could die. But so could Miriam, and...

"This doll's dead boyfriend's on the verge of killin' her," I snapped. "Faith at least can defend herself. This gal has no chance except us - you. You aren't the only one who helps people. I have my own investment in this 'Helping the Helpless' gig."

I glared at Angel. I was expecting - if not argument, some rebuke for my temper. Instead, he reached out and set a hand on my shoulder.

The kind of gesture you'd only get between two friends who'd lived and lost and fought side by side.

"Doyle," he said, and nothing else. It was an affirmation.

And he smiled. A brilliant, real smile that lit up his sombre face, a smile that went right down to the soul.

Me, I resisted the impulse to squirm out from under his hand, and tried to quash any giveaway signs of how his touch made my skin crawl.

11.5 Chapter 5

We emerged from the hallway in an awkward procession, heralded by Cordelia's brilliant smile and the words, "We've decided to take your case. Cash or account?"

Ms Welsh looked relieved to concentrate on something as mundane as payment. "Cash, if that's all right."

Cordelia's grin threatened to remove her head, but Angel stepped hastily in before the words "hourly rate" could cross her lips. "Cordelia, Doyle, if you'd get the equipment from downstairs? Wes, can you dig up a ritual format?"

Cordelia looked decidedly sullen. I couldn't blame her. If Angel's firm ran anything like mine, a client willing to pay cash was of far more excitement and interest than any run-of-the-mill magic spell.

But somewhat to my surprise, she swallowed the blistering response that was obviously brewing in her eyes, and grabbed my arm, ignoring the buzz of static that seemed to flare up every time we touched. Admittedly, her nails were drawing blood as she pulled me after her down the stairs, and I could swear my supernaturally sensitive ears were picking up the sound of her teeth grinding, but the thought was there.

Thankfully she let go of my arm midway down, apparently deciding that there was no chance of my getting lost in a simple stairwell (the fact that I walked up and down its alternate-reality sibling ten times a day notwithstanding).

Back down in my - in Angel's apartment she stalked across the living room and into the bedroom. I followed cautiously, taking the time to observe fully the changes the vampire had made.

No, 'changes' was the wrong word, wasn't it? I had never lived in this place, never slumped with Faith on the couch to watch wrestling on a TV that wasn't there, never shared a pot of tea with Wesley while sitting at a table that was now across the room, or fought Spike on the floor now covered with an expensive rug.

11 Ghosts

Sure, some other version of me had probably lounged on Angel's chairs, chatted to him, raided his fridge for any fluids that weren't blood, but not me.

I shook off the chill that seemed to have crept up my spine without my noticing, and followed Cordelia into Angel's bedroom. She was over by his closet, pulling out clothing and boxes with the abandon of someone who has absolutely no intention of cleaning after herself. I glanced inside. Angel's wardrobe choices were not unexpected. Black featured heavily, though the surprise appearance of a pair of leather pants left me longing frantically for a less vivid imagination.

"Gotcha!" The pants were flung to one side, as Cordelia hunkered down and dragged out a largish cardboard box, filled with foul-smelling herbs and bottles that didn't look anywhere near as pleasant as the ones with which I normally associated.

I stared dubiously at the over-filled box and wrinkled my nose in disgust. "Do this often, do you?"

Cordelia shrugged. "We still have some leftovers from the last cleansing spell we did. You - uh, the other you got it from one of your dodgy demon buddies or something."

That would be Rick Stanz, I figured. Unless Rick was his bizarre double or something, and had become a small-town preacher in Nowhere, Iowa. Knowing Rick, I felt that unlikely.

But then again, I thought I knew Faith.

Hastily squashing that particular train of thought, I picked up the box, bringing all those nasty smells even closer to my suffering nose. "So what'd you cleanse that time?"

"My apartment."

I couldn't resist it. "Couldn't you just invest in a hoover or somethin'?"

Predictably, Cordelia was unamused. "Ha-ha. I was hoping that, being Bizarro Doyle and all, you'd actually have grown a sense of humour. So sad I was wrong."

She headed back up the stairs at speed, without much respect for my own overburdened gait. Crabwise, I half-climbed, half-staggered after her, trying not to spill foul-smelling ritual liquids all over my shirt. "So how'd that work out for you, anyways? Get rid of your ghost?"

"Actually, no," she called over her shoulder. "He's my roommate."

I nearly dropped the box on my feet.

11.6 Chapter 6

By the time I crawled up the stairs, Angel and Wes were deep in some discussion on rituals, and Cordy was over by Miriam Welsh. She flashed me a "what took you so long?" look.

I tried to respond with a "well, I was climbing up a flight of stairs in the dark carrying a huge box and being guided by a crazy woman who lives with a *dead person!*" look. Unfortunately, I don't really think all the subtleties came across correctly.

"Doyle," Angel said, with too much warmth for my comfort. "We were waiting on you. Wes and I have worked out a ritual, and we're good to go." He turned to our - their client. "Ms Welsh. We're ready to go when you are."

Something began to niggle at the back of my mind.

Mrs Welsh nodded in a vague way. "You won't hurt him, will you? He was always very gentle and kind to me. . . you know, before, when we were. . . he was - "

"Don't worry," Wesley assured her. "An exorcism may seem extreme, but it isn't really. It's just a way of. . . easing the spirit on to wherever it's going. A bit like a birth, really. A lot of noise and stress, but everyone's the better for it. It was the blasted film that gave everything such a terrible reputation."

"Actually, I thought it was quite realis - " Everybody looked at Angel, who turned the rest of the sentence into a cough. From a man who didn't breathe. Yeah, real convincing. "So let's go, shall we?"

The three of them began to herd Mrs Welsh towards the door. I started to clear my throat.

"Doyle!" Cordy snapped. "Move your heinie!"

"Where to?" I retorted.

She frowned. "To Miriam's apartment, nitwit. Haven't you been listening to anything we've been saying?"

11 Ghosts

"Oh, really. To Miriam's apartment, huh? Why exactly are we goin' there, when she was attacked at the *boyfriend's* place?"

There was a quiet moment. "No," Cordy said. "She was attacked at her - "

"No, she wasn't," Angel cut her off, glancing sheepishly at the pad of notes.

Everyone looked at Miriam, who nodded. "We were having dinner at Ben's."

"An' didn't you say you'd felt his presence around you a lot?" I asked. "Before you even met Ben. So why exactly would the ghost be hauntin' *his* apartment?"

"I-I don't know," Miriam said, looking somewhat confused.

I glanced at the flushed figures standing beside her (except, of course, for Angel, who was still pretty damn pale.) "Jeez. An' you call yourselves detectives," I said, not without a trace of smugness.

"All right," Wesley said. "So it's a haunting located around a person, not a location. Around Miriam. That doesn't change the ritual to any great degree - "

" - except that we have to make it manifest somehow," Angel said, those already-oversized brows of his furrowing. "We need the spirit fully present here for the spell to work."

"So how are we gonna get it here?" Cordy asked. "Send a Spirit-O-Gram?"

"Piece of cake."

They all looked dubiously at me. "It is?" Angel asked.

I smirked. "Uh-huh. This ghost's basically just your average over-protective husband, right? Well, I know what'd piss me off royally if I had a wife who looked as pretty as Miriam..."

11.7 Chapter 7

"Oh, come on," Cordelia pleaded. "Don't be so immature about this."

"No."

"She's really cute. . ."

"No."

Cordy changed tack. "Angel, she's a poor, innocent woman being tormented by her dead husband! She needs this."

"No."

"Angeeeel. She's willing to pay *cash*."

"Cordelia, I said no," Angel ground out. "I am *not* going to make out with our client so the ghost of her husband will appear and try to kill me. It's not happening." His eyes flicked over to Miriam, who was sitting in embarrassed silence in her seat at the far corner of the office, while the four of us clustered at the other end. We'd been trying to keep it quiet, but that last remark had obviously come out louder than he had intended.

That route was obviously closed, so Cordelia locked onto another target. Unfortunately, it was me.

"Doyle. . ."

I had difficulty breathing, trapped in the merciless spotlight of her eyes. "Are you crazy? Faith would kill me!"

She rolled her eyes. "Doyle, she's in another dimension or something. She'd never know."

"You think I want to take the risk?" I said, trying to keep it light. "Especially now I've heard what she's capable of?"

And *that* was the wrong thing to say. Everybody looked at Wesley, who looked out of the window.

For my part, I wasn't really sure why I'd said it. It certainly wasn't a serious comment, but there was nevertheless no chance on earth I was betraying Faith. It didn't matter that she might never know, that she routinely flirted with men in front of me at clubs and parties, or practically tore their clothes off them on the dance floor if I was too tired to dance with her. That's just her way. Faith will be. . . Faith, I guess.

And I'm me. And Allan Francis Doyle never cheats on his lady. No matter what.

I gradually became aware that Cordelia's sympathetic gaze at Wesley had become distinctly more... speculative.

11.8 Chapter 8

Miriam appeared surprisingly unconcerned about the whole thing. She sat demurely at the desk we had converted into a dinner table, poking at the weeks-old microwave dinner Angel had dug up from the last time he'd had guests - a long time ago, by the smell.

By contrast, Wesley looked about ready to die. Seated opposite her, he was sweating with a fervour that suggested the candles Cordelia had scrounged were considerably warmer than might appear. His voice, when he spoke, was thin and strained like a man who couldn't breathe properly.

If that was how he was on real dates, I wasn't surprised the man never got any.

We kept a safe distance from our little staged romance, in an attempt to try to make it less awkward than it absolutely had to be. Evidently, we had failed.

Wesley and Angel had decided on a Shamanic variant of exorcism, so as to get around Angel's crucifix issues. As a result, Angel was hunched over a messy-looking array of pastes and herbs, smearing sacred symbols onto his forehead with the logical hesitancy of a man who can't see his own reflection.

Cordy and I sat near him, ostensibly helping. Instead, we kibitzed about nothing in particular and Cordelia gave Angel occasional tips about how she usually applied makeup. They didn't go down well.

"So, about this spectral roomie of yours," I said. "How's that workin' out for you?"

Cordelia smiled warmly. "Oh, Dennis and I get along great. He takes care of all the house-cleaning and stuff, and I just hang around and... you know, live there."

It sounded to me like she'd found herself live-in help for free. That's pretty impressive in Los Angeles, even if the live-in help isn't technically alive.

"Must save on food bills," I commented.

"Well, yeah, though Dennis doesn't exactly pay rent. I was wondering if I could find a way to write him off to the IRS as a dependent, since that would really - "

The sound of breaking glass interrupted her, and we both tensed, turning to face the table again.

"S-sorry," Wesley apologised guiltily, indicating the broken wine glass on the floor with an ineffectual wave of his hand.

Cordy rolled her eyes. "God, that man is so wet."

"I don't know..." I said thoughtfully. "Is it just me, or is Mrs Welsh enjoyin' herself a little bit more than you'd expect?"

She stared intently at the couple. Sure enough, Miriam was smiling at Wesley as she helped him to pick up the broken shards, warmly dismissing his apologies. "Wow. You know, I think you could be onto something there..."

I shrugged. "I don't get it. I mean, what is attractive about *that*?"

That was Wesley forgetting this was just a staged meal and taking a bite of his pre-historic microwave dinner, then gagging and fumbling desperately for Miriam's wine glass, which he knocked over too.

"I guess every girl wants a guy with class," Cordelia said. "And Wesley does ooze that. Even if he also oozes poor, desperate and boring. Heck, I had a crush on him once."

That little tidbit gave me some pause. "You? What happened?"

She laughed. "He's a terrible kisser. I mean, really, really apocalyptically bad."

"Ah," I said, filing that away for potential use when I got back home. Then something else gave me pause. "So you've kissed Wesley. And you kissed the other me. Any other co-workers you've been smooching?"

Both our gazes shifted inexorably to Angel, who looked up, his face smeared with garish green-and-purple paste. "What?" he asked.

"...God, no." Cordelia shuddered. The sound of breaking glass dragged us both back from that Dark Mental Cave. "Wesley, do we have to buy Styrofoam cu - "

"Cordelia," I cut her off. Both Wesley and Miriam stared at us, their faces frightened and pale. On Cordelia's desk, a good ten metres away, a vase had shattered on the floor.

11 Ghosts

Angel's eyes searched the room behind their mask of grease. "Anybody see anything?"

"How can we see anything?" Cordelia retorted. "It's a *ghost*."

"It could just have been a breeze," Wesley offered.

"Only one way to find out," I suggested. "Let's turn up the heat. Uh, metaphorically speakin'."

"Angel?" Wes said plaintively.

"Do it."

Wesley leaned towards Miriam, who shifted uncomfortably in her seat, and pecked her on the cheek. He hastily retreated as if her skin had burned him, and we all scanned the room again. Everything was still. Angel rose to his feet, holding the sheet of paper with the incantation on it. "Try again."

Wes swallowed and smiled weakly at Miriam. "Once more unto the breach, yes?"

She smiled nervously back, and Wesley leaned in for another peck. I wasn't sure if Wesley veered off-course, or if she turned her head at the last minute, but the ensuing kiss was no peck. It was long and enthusiastic.

Angel and I both averted our eyes. Cordelia stared critically ahead. "He's been practicing," she observed.

Wesley and Miriam finally broke it off. "Did you feel that, too?" he said breathlessly.

"I guess the Earth moved," I said wryly.

He flushed, and started to respond, when the entire table shifted in front of him, spilling what was left of the cutlery as it began to tremble violently. "Angel..."

Angel took his cue, starting to speak. It sounded like meaningless gibberish to me, and evidently the ghost felt much the same way, since the table just began to shake more furiously. With a crash, one of the filing cabinets leapt forward and fell to the floor. Miriam flinched at the loud noise, her eyes misting with tears. "Jeremy..." she whispered. "Please don't be angry... *Jeremy!*"

The name became a scream as the door to the office swung open so violently that the glass in its window cracked. The entire office was shaking now, papers spinning off desks into the air as cold wind tore through the rooms.

Angel continued to chant, the papers forming a funnel around him as the wind raged on and the lights swung from the ceiling. The wind's voice seemed to rise to challenge the vampire's own as he screamed the final words of the spell.

And nothing happened. The wind tore the incantation from his hand and shredded it. Angel stood there, dumbfounded.

"Angel..." Wesley repeated nervously, barely audible above the raging wind. "What's - " The rest of the sentence was choked from him as the wind seemed to lose interest in Angel and swept towards him, carrying with it most of Angel Investigations' case files. "Angel!" he shouted, squinting in the wind as papers spun about him, slapping against his head and shoulders. He appeared to be struggling to get out of the chair, but something held him firmly. Miriam's fork leapt from the table stabbed down at the seat of his chair, thudding into the wood between his legs.

"Angel!" The cry was considerably higher and more panicked now. Angel began to struggle towards Wesley, the wind slamming into him, impeding his progress.

"Stay here!" I snarled at Cordelia, my jacket flailing about me as I staggered towards Wesley as well. The wind stung my skin and smashed my torso like a flurry of punches.

"Doyle!" she yelled, her voice cracking with fear. "Wait!"

I glanced back at her, and saw her staring in horror at the desk we had been sitting on. A loud rattling was coming from it as if something was trying to tear itself loose. "What?"

"We - we keep some spare weapons in there. Stakes... knives."

I frowned. The roaring wind was a distraction, making it hard to think. "Huh?"

"Doyle - it's not locked."

Oh shit.

I spun around and screamed at Angel. "We need to get the hell outta here!"

11 Ghosts

He nodded, almost at Wesley's private tornado of paper, and then bobbed his head to the side. I caught his meaning. Miriam was on her hands and knees, trying desperately to crawl towards the door, sobbing and screaming as the wind ripped through her long hair, effectively blinding her with the long locks.

I turned and grabbed Cordelia by the arm. "Come on!" Pulling her after me, and gritting my teeth against the weird static buzz which was the least of our problems at the moment, I staggered through the hurricane that the office had become.

One step. Two steps. I was literally bent into the wind, straining with every muscle to advance. Three steps.

A fourth. I was at Miriam now, and I pulled her to her feet. "Jeremy... Jeremy, please forgive..." she whispered, her voice hoarse from screaming. Dragging both Cordelia and Miriam after me, I lurched forward, reached the open door. Shoved them out into the calm and quiet of the passageway beyond.

I turned back, clinging to the doorframe, as Angel and Wesley struggled towards me. The vampire was practically carrying Wes, shielding him from the rage of the storm with his own body. Despite that, something struck Wes's head hard and he lolled against Angel's shoulder. I stretched out a hand towards them. Angel looked up - and stopped, his eyes wide.

"Come on," I snarled, standing in the doorway as wind whipped around me. "Come on, damn you!"

Then I felt the warmth of the sun on my back, and understood.

Angel took another step towards me, his skin starting to smoke. "Take Wesley!" he yelled. "I'll be all right!"

I stared at the vampire's face, screwed up in pain, as he took another step towards the deadly, sun-lit exit. My enemy, by his nature. My friend, by the actions of another me.

As my old adversary Spike might say, bugger this for a lark.

I stepped away from the doorway. Uncomprehending, Angel offered Wesley to me, but I pushed past both of them into the centre of the room.

The first thought I had, as I hit the full force of the storm, of the worst Jeremy Welsh had to give, was grudgingly admiring: *How the hell did that bastard carry Wesley through this?*

And then there was no more room for thought. A pot plant flung itself at me, smashing itself into my face, and I crashed to the ground in demon form. The uncompromising way the wind pushed down on me let me know I wasn't getting up again. So I crawled. I crawled, inch by inch, as the wind screamed and spun around me, along the floor of office. Towards the coat hooks at the far end.

In my world, it might hold one of my worn jackets, one of Wesley's neatly-pressed blazers or one of Faith's shiny leather numbers. Here, now, it held the only thing that could keep Angel alive.

A long, dark coat.

I managed to grab onto the tail of the coat, which, like everything else in the room, was flailing around crazily. Using it as a support, I pulled myself to my feet and leaned against the wall.

I remained there for a moment, looking across the room at Angel, Wesley still cradled in his arms. I looked into his eyes and saw trust there. Absolute trust in his dead friend Doyle, that Doyle would make it through everything with a smile and ready joke.

At that point, the entire matter of what I thought of Angel became pretty much irrelevant. There was no way I was going to let the memory of this poor, dead version of me down. It didn't matter if he really was as heroic as they had painted him to be (and knowing myself, I was pretty damn sure he wasn't), I was the next best thing.

And I wasn't going to die at the invisible hands of some jilted, dead lover of some woman I hardly knew. Because I was needed at home, in my real home, and because these people would break like glass if they saw their friend die a second time.

I still don't remember crossing the room to get to the door. I think I blacked out (either that, or Angel's coat just wrapped itself around my head), but the next thing I knew, I was at the door, flinging myself into Angel and throwing the coat over both him and Wesley as we crashed down into the sunlight.

11.9 Chapter 9

We huddled into the shelter of the stairwell, four warm bodies and one cold one pressed awkwardly into the small space, and struggled to regain control of our breathing while objects thudded against the door that a coat-wrapped Angel and myself strove to hold closed. An irritated breeze raced around the hallway and slapped at us but, lacking any loose objects to hurl, it wasn't so much of a problem.

11 Ghosts

Gradually, it died down.

"That went well," I ventured sarcastically when things had subsided enough for speech. Apparently nobody deemed the comment deserving of an answer.

"Everyone okay? How's Wesley?" asked Angel's muffled voice from beneath the coat.

Cordelia, tucked in a corner beside the unconscious watcher, raised her head. "I think he'll be all right. I can't see any marks, so I guess he just fainted." She looked like she bit off a joke; instead she cast a thoroughly wasted glare at Angel, who in his current circumstances stood not the slightest chance of actually seeing it. "Great job with putting the walking hospital case in the line of fire, Mr. 'I couldn't possibly smooch up with a woman who's not blonde'."

Miriam stirred, moving to grasp Wesley's face in her hands. She gently tried to slap him awake, attempting - impossibly - to avoid bruises. "Hey, guy?" she encouraged. "Wes?" She looked at the rest of us for confirmation on her shortening of his name, and I saw the guilt in her face.

Wesley groaned. "I don't want to go to school..." He blinked fully awake. "Ah. Um..."

"Jeeze, Wesley," Cordelia said. "You're having just the most suck week, huh?"

"I shouldn't have let you take the risk." The coat shifted frustratedly, then slumped back, restrained by the sun. "It's my fault. I should have done it. I let you get hurt - again."

"Oh, do shut up," Wesley said, weakly but with a discernable snap. "I'm perfectly capable of making my own decisions, Angel. Please do me the courtesy of acknowledging that."

I couldn't decipher the answering mumble that came from the depths of the black leather.

Cordelia tottered up on her heels, prodded at the door, and doubtfully enquired of the world in general, "You think it's safe to go back in?"

11.10 Chapter 10

I seemed the obvious choice to make the cautious foray. A few pieces of furniture rattled irately, but the actual danger seemed to have passed. Leaving the weapons as they were, blades jammed deep into the office side of the door, we helped each other back inside and settled in the office to contemplate our bruises. Cordelia made coffee, compounding the misery of the little scene.

"Okay, so it didn't work," Angel said presently. "So, how come? Why didn't it work?"

Sagged in his seat looking grey, Wesley nonetheless managed to muster his customary spiel of academia. "Clearly Miriam herself is not the centre of the haunting as previously deduced. We need to find the real centre, wherever it might be, and perform the ritual over it for it to take effect."

"But, where? As we've seen, wherever the centre is, the spirit's not bound to it in the manner we might normally anticipate. How can we tell?" Angel looked to be sinking into a fairly practised state of gloom.

Cordelia agreed with him, albeit with a roll of her eyes. "Yeah. How many goes is it gonna take to get this right? Are we going to have to get old Jeremy riled enough to be putting serious effort into killing us dead in order to perform the ritual every time we try?"

"I very much fear so." Wesley sagged even further into the chair. "Luckily - if that's the right word - I did make another copy of the ritual." He flapped his hand towards a piece of paper Angel picked up and frowned sourly at.

"Uh, maybe I could-" I started, figuring that, Wesley having been nearly killed once already, Faith would understand. Probably.

"No," Angel said quickly. "If anyone's taking on the role of a target for this spirit's rage again, it's going to be me."

Cordelia made a disgusted "pffft" sound.

"Vampire. Immortal. Supernatural healing," Angel insisted.

"Yeah. Apart from the fact all Jerry has to do is shove you out into the sunlight and you're flames and dust."

11 Ghosts

Angel's expression, however, brooked no argument. He stuffed the paper into a pocket of his jacket.

Miriam had been watching the proceedings with quiet guilt, and now she spoke up, almost in tears. "I don't understand it. Jeremy - he was a good man, a good person. He was never violent, wouldn't ever hurt anyone. Why would he be doing this?"

Rearranging his limbs with leaden effort, Wesley leaned forward, returning to some semblance of life. He extended a hand he stopped just shy of resting on her knee in a gesture of comfort, at least until Miriam moved her knee to complete the contact. Wesley swallowed but managed not to withdraw his hand. "The spirit may not understand too much of what's happening. It may only be the smallest remnant of your husband, trapped on this plane, reacting by instinct and habit. Habit is a powerful force, Ms. Welsh."

He patted her knee, smiled tightly, and moved to beat a polite retreat.

The cup of congealing coffee he'd rested on the floor next to his feet exploded, peppering shards of glass and splashing lukewarm liquid to the furthest corners of the room.

"Oh, hell," said Cordelia.

"We have to get out of here." Angel was on his feet, reaching again for the black coat. "We need to perform that ritual properly and get rid of this spirit before someone dies. Wes, the spirit's centre - place of death?"

He nodded. "It's a strong possibility."

"Then we're going. Cordelia-" Angel threw something across to her, and when she snatched it from the air with an "eep!" of excitement I saw it was a set of car keys. "Go get the engine started." An unbroken window rattled ominously. "Run."

She left, at warp speed or thereabouts. The grin on her face and the enthusiasm with which her fist clutched around those keys suggested it wasn't entirely the impending danger that powered her haste.

The rest of us followed, progress impeded by Wesley and Miriam's weakened states and Angel's bundled state. Which left me as the one fending off hurled objects and bolstering the others up against the occasional especially vicious blast of supernatural ire.

Outside, the engine was running and the hood was up. We piled into the car, me slipping in the front next to a Cordelia grinning maniacally behind the wheel, Wesley and Miriam on either side of Angel in the back, shielding him as best they could.

The car looked decidedly familiar. Given the various rather more critical distractions, it didn't seem the time to devote too much thought to that. But I couldn't resist musing aloud about the wisdom of a vampire driving a convertible.

"Go figure," Cordelia said.

The convertible shot forward under her guiding hands, and she nearly sent us straight up onto the pavement and through the side of a nearby building as the windscreen wipers went haywire like they were trying to beat through the glass to get to us.

I was abruptly very, very afraid - and the ghost had little to do with it.

11.11 Chapter 11

I couldn't help but notice how the mood of our little party deteriorated as the journey progressed, the distraction of Cordelia's dismal driving aside. She and Angel were the major culprits, grimness settling around both their shoulders in a manner even I, having known her just over a day, could tell was unusual for the former. There was something about their depression that was subtly different to Wesley's battered worry and Miriam's guilt, and it intensified as we drove further into the docklands district, with its derelict buildings and dingy, near-empty streets where warehouses shadowed out the sun.

Cordelia, tight-lipped and pale behind the wheel, must've noticed my confusion, and gave me a rather freaked glance-over before saying, "It was close to here that you... that..."

"Where Doyle died," Angel supplied from the back.

Oh. Right.

It was the most peculiar of feelings that struck me as those words registered, like I was walking over my own grave and echoing hollow, loud footsteps through the topsoil.

I suppose it should've been a comfort to know that at least an alternate version of me had had people who cared this much over his passing. But mostly it freaked me out, just as much as it did Cordelia to have me here, now, with them.

11 Ghosts

I thought about Wesley and Faith again. About arguing with them the last time. . . I looked in the rear-view mirror at the bruised guy sitting in back next to the space that was Angel, crumpled suit and sagged depression. Getting fired seemed to have knocked all the starch out of him. My eyes on mirror-Wes, I found myself missing the starch, wishing for the straightened back, puffed out chest and stuffy comment.

I was becoming positively *unhinged*.

"Doyle. . . died?" Miriam, I saw in the mirror, looked understandably confused.

"It's complicated," Angel's voice said from the space.

"It's another parallel-universe Star Trek deal," Cordelia said caustically. I craned my neck around in time to catch the vampire's glare of disapproval on the back of her head she remained oblivious to.

Miriam blinked, her attention wide-eyed on me. "Another?" she picked up weakly.

"We deal with a wide variety of paranormal and otherworldly phenomena," Wesley said. "It's probably best not to worry too much beyond 'more things on Heaven and Earth'. We should concern ourselves with your own case at this time."

The scattering of paraphernalia on the dashboard clattered and jumped without aid of either a bump or corner to make them do so, as though in agreement.

I eyed the activity. There hadn't been a peep out of the spirit for about quarter of an hour, and right now, Miriam wasn't even looking at Wesley. She was staring instead out of the window at the broad shady street as she mumbled an agreeing, "Y-yes. Thank you."

"Here," she said then, voice abruptly much stronger. "Stop here."

"What?" Cordelia demanded as she pulled us to a screeching halt that had my nerves trying to crawl down into the dark little space under the seat for safety.

"This is the place," Miriam said.

I snatched at a pen on the dashboard as it leaped up, aiming for either Wesley or Angel, cursed as it fought my grasp, and wondered why the activity was suddenly-

Something clicked in my head at the same time as Wesley voiced a faint, "Oh, dear."

"It was a hit and run," Angel said slowly. He glanced up and down the street which, while not exactly busy, wasn't empty either. A group of kids played, further down. A couple of winos lounged with brown paper bags I was in just the right mood to envy at the mouth of an alley across the way. Scattered people walked about their business. Sporadic traffic crawled by.

Angel looked un-thrilled. "We've got to perform an exorcism in the middle of the street?"

11.12 Chapter 12

It was just about cloudy and dim enough now that Angel could walk around outside the car unprotected, though we left all the doors open on the convertible, parked up half on the sidewalk, wildly askew despite Cordelia's insistences it was perfectly fine.

Angel stood in the middle of the road with paint all over his face looking nervously at the open car and the long, shifting shadows that flickered with the motion of sun and cloud.

Angel looked nervously at Miriam.

Passers-by looked curiously at Angel.

Cordelia and Wesley, leaning on a low wall together, a conspiratorial duo more at ease together than I'd seen them so far (they weren't arguing for about the first time that day, for a start) looked expectantly at Angel.

Miriam looked expectantly at Angel.

I looked deliberately away and tried not to smirk. Didn't work on either account. Half-covering my face with my hands in the pretence of rubbing my forehead, I turned back, unable not to watch.

Angel cleared his throat, swallowed, and very politely leaned down to touch his lips to Miriam's.

That was it - they didn't get any further. The air around exploded, and dust and splinters of rock and wrappers and debris caught up from the street whirl-winded itself around them.

11 Ghosts

Angel, prepared this time, wrapped Miriam tight in his grasp and in his leather coat, and read quickly from the paper gripped in his hand.

Standing in the midst of all that he somehow made it through the ritual, keeping Miriam safe, shooting the occasional glance over to Cordy and Wes where they hovered worriedly looking on, as though in spite of their own mortality they'd like to rush in to help their undead boss.

Hell, there were a couple of bad moments *I* was tempted to rush in to help. Must be nice to have that brand of Dark-Avenging-Hero charisma.

He finished off with determination, shouting out the last few lines to the wind and the street and the gaping onlookers. With a special pissy glare reserved just for the gaping onlookers.

Nothing happened - except that a few of the passers-by tossed coins. Cordelia dived forward, but fell back when she realised it was the smallest of small change. People in these parts didn't have too much money.

"It didn't work," Wesley said tightly.

"No kidding, Sherlock," Cordelia retorted. My hangover, which I'd briefly managed to forget, stabbed a fierce revenge. Angel shouted something from his mini-tornado but we couldn't hear a word. "This is not good. It was supposed to work here!"

Wesley swallowed. "I suppose it couldn't, after all, be the victim's home? The place the spirit felt most drawn back to?"

"It's got to be the next choice," I said. "And maybe if we get away from this spot the activity will die down again, like it did before."

"Right." Cordy eyed the sky. "And hurry. 'Cause unless I'm mistaken, I'm raising that by a 'move now or Angel's about to become Melba Toast'."

All three of us contemplated the whirlwind of pissed-off spectral power Angel had told us at length and with emphasis to keep our distance from. I didn't even bother wasting time assessing Cordelia and Wesley and their comparative chances. I pulled on the demon - wincing at the number of interested bystanders who 'oohh-ed', but then again if they thought the rest was a show, a guy in a spiny mask wasn't going to burst their bubble of happy normality - and waded in.

It was pretty much like I'd always imagined it must feel like to be in one of those acceleration generators astronauts get trained in. Plastered against Angel by the G-force, I tried to unpeel his rigid grasp on Miriam and yell into his ear.

"We have to go inside! Angel, you gotta let go of her, she's the only one who can let us into her house so we can try perform the ritual again!"

He let go of Miriam and she crushed herself into my arms instead, which made it even more difficult to breathe. I couldn't move from the spot for a moment, then I felt Angel's large hand plant itself in the centre of my back and shove. Then I was staggering out into clear air.

I let the demon dissolve away before Miriam saw it.

Behind me Angel, freed from the necessity of protecting Miriam, fought his way out of the funnel. His exposed skin was raw, patched with grazes torn by rock pieces and dust, and I was taken aback to see him vamped-out. Hard to believe, but I'd almost forgotten.

That mask melted away as well when he saw my instinctive fear-reaction. I bit my tongue on an urge to apologise at the dejection in his face.

I shifted my hold on Miriam, who was sagging in my grasp and visibly on the verge of tears, and herded her towards the row of converted flat units some way down the street that her mumbling had indicated.

"Wait," Angel said, fending off a coke can that came close to scoring on his caveman brow.

"Jeeze, Angel," Cordy began.

"No. We shouldn't go inside. There'd only be more... ammunition there, and besides, we don't even know if this would work. It's already failed twice. That should tell us something. I'm beginning to think we're going about this the wrong way."

Wesley looked thoughtful, then shook his head. "I really don't see any other option, Angel. We have to try this. It's the next logical step. If there's no success here, then clearly we must reassess, but..."

Angel ignored him, turning to snag Miriam out of my arms again. He held her shoulders while I stood close at her back to shield her from the remnant of the spirit's anger.

"Miriam," he said, compassionate but stern. I had to remind myself again, hey, vampire. "Can you tell us any more about the circumstances of your husband's death?" A bottle flew at her with frightening speed and he plucked it out of the air by its neck almost casually and held onto it. "Anything you can think of, however irrelevant it seems, however much it might hurt, however much you don't want to. We need to know. Something isn't right here. You know we can't solve this without all the details."

"Oh my God." Miriam gulped and the tears she'd been holding back burst the banks. "We were so happy, and I... I didn't deserve him, I didn't deserve to be happy. You'd think if I loved him that much I could have been faithful, right? You'd think that would follow naturally, and I didn't mean it... I don't even know why I cheated, it just happened, but I never even understood why I went with those other men, because I loved him... only him. Jeremy."

"Miriam." Angel leaned forward as though to tighten the embrace and then apparently thought better of it.

"It was my fault," she said. "My fault. I didn't love him enough and he was taken away. The hit and run driver killed him but he died because of me. I'm sure he would have hated me. He wouldn't have wanted me to be happy. I didn't mean to fall in love again. That's why this is happening. I killed him and I don't deserve-"

"No, no, no!" Cordy burst out, at Miriam's side in a second despite the remaining activity, unceremoniously shoving Angel out of the way in the process. "You had affairs, sure. Pfft. Who doesn't?" I blinked. "But that doesn't mean you're guilty of anything but, uh, a really over-active libido. You're not a killer and you don't deserve this. And your fiance certainly didn't."

Wesley appeared at her other side, cautiously taking hold of the distraught woman's arm. "Miriam," he said softly. "You said yourself your husband was a good man. While I'm sure your dalliances would have hurt him, I'm equally sure that he wouldn't begrudge your chances of moving on from him now, four years on. And I'm certain he wouldn't want to harm you, or your paramour. All of this is really rather obsessive, wouldn't you say?"

"Obvious much, Wes?" Cordelia said.

He didn't even bother to hush her, his attention solely upon Miriam, his gaze intent, and I knew that expression on Wesley. It came fairly often right before a cry of 'eureka!'. "Miriam... do you think that perhaps *you* are the one who thinks you need to be punished?"

She gulped a massive sob, and the last of the activity disappeared.

Cordelia and I blinked around and exchanged bemused looks, then she was joining Wesley with Miriam. Feeling out of my depth comforting an hysterical woman with, apparently, a massively destructive psychic power, I looked around for Angel.

The vampire had retreated to a corner of shade, as patchy sun had begun to break through onto the street. He was looking intently at a car parked down the road. Following his gaze to the vehicle, I realised that not only did it look familiar, but a figure leaned against its far side, watching us over the top.

I squinted. "Wasn't that car outside the office when we left?"

Angel nodded slowly.

11.13 Chapter 13

I shifted position slightly, turning my head as if to glance back at Wes and our erstwhile client. "Impressive. I've been doin' this a while, an' I never got my own stalker."

"It's nice to have fans," Angel murmured.

With exaggerated casualness, I fumbled for a packet of cigarettes in my coat, and extracted one. "Okay, let's just play this nice and cool, and maybe we can surprise him. Just don't let on that we..." I realised I was addressing an empty space.

"Saw him," I said belatedly, as Angel dashed towards the figure, vampire speed closing the distance between them effortlessly.

Although, predictably, at the vampire's first twitch, the figure spun around and sprinted down the nearest alley.

I gave my cigarette a longing glance, then cast it aside as I moved after the vampire.

Angel's coat was already disappearing around the alley corner as I reached the parked car. As I slid over the bonnet, I tossed a quick glance inside: a couple of coffee cups, a fast food wrapper... our "fan" had been watching us for a while.

He wasn't at all slow on his feet, either - as I rounded the corner I could see him well ahead of Angel. A duffel bag slung around one shoulder obscured most of his form, bobbing furiously with every step.

11 Ghosts

Angel was faster, but the vampire was hindered by having to stick to the shadows. I winced involuntarily as he flung himself across a short patch of sunlight with a sizzle like burning bacon.

Hell, the vamp was tough. He could take it.

But there was no way he was going to catch the guy, not while having to avoid bursting into flames.

There was no way I was going to get him, either, as far behind as I was.

Unless I got creative.

I spun around and dashed back to our shadow's abandoned car, ignoring Wes and Cordy's confused stares. A quick elbow to a window got me inside, and I scrabbled at the sun visor. A bunch of keys tumbled into my lap.

Bingo.

I gunned the engine and the car screamed down the road with a reckless disregard for safety or speed limits, scattering our last few spectators as they shouted and swore.

Figures. Conduct ancient magical rituals in front of folks, and they throw money. Slap the accelerator a little hard and they act like it's the end of the freaking world.

I spun the wheel, dragging the car through a turn that was slightly too close for comfort. This wasn't one of my usual haunts, but years of patrolling still made street maps unnecessary.

That alley leads on about a block or so... assume they didn't turn off into one of the buildings, then they come out...

Here.

I spun the wheel again, veering onto the correct street. There weren't many cars on the roads, but those that were there expressed their displeasure with horns and raised middle fingers.

I was too busy to care.

One... two...

I stomped on the brakes, and the car jerked to a halt, effectively sealing the mouth of the alley. Glancing to the side, I saw our buddy pull up sharply about ten meters or so away. The sun was behind him, but I caught an impression of a slight frame, taut with surprise and adrenalin.

I flashed an ironic wave as I shoved open the door and started towards him. The figure flung a look over its shoulder at Angel also bearing down on him, coat raised high around his shoulders to ward off the sun.

I could picture the expression on our mutual target's face, and suppressed a grin.

I half-expected him to give up right then and there, but instead he ran at the nearest door in the alley, what looked like the side entrance to an apartment block. His leg came up and kicked the door open in a single, practiced motion.

Hmm. Limber.

The figure dove inside, slamming the door shut in Angel's face. With considerably less grace, the vampire smashed straight through it. He didn't even break his stride.

I rushed through the splintered entrance after them. In the passage ahead of me, apartment doors slammed shut with the terrified haste of residents who had encountered Angel going full-tilt. The vamp in question bounded up a flight of stairs at the end of the corridor, shaking wood chips from his clothes.

I ran like hell in a futile attempt to catch up.

11.14 Chapter 14

We went up three flights without so much as a pause, and I could feel my smoker's lungs protesting indignantly as we reached the fourth and final floor.

I was just trying to keep my legs moving at that point, and I nearly ran into Angel before I realised he'd stopped. I peered over his shoulder, my breath rasping like someone was scraping a cheesegrater up and down my throat. Unsurprisingly, Angel wasn't even breathing hard, or indeed at all, and he glanced at me irritably as if I was going to scare all the bad guys away.

"What the... hell... was that... back there? I thought vampires... supposed to be... sneaky!" I gasped.

11 Ghosts

Angel shrugged, scanning the corridor before us. "I thought private investigators were supposed to be fit. We all have these little misconceptions."

I wanted to kill him quite a lot just then, and it had absolutely nothing to do with him being a vampire.

I bit down on my retort. "Where'd he go?"

Angel shrugged again. "I lost him turning around that last flight - by the time I got up here, he was gone."

"Roof?" I asked, pointing down the length of the passage towards a big black door right at the far end.

Angel shook his head, pointing at the shiny padlock on the big black door.

"You think he lives here?" I asked as we edged our way cautiously down the passage, glancing into crisscrossing passages.

"No. The way he dove in here after you blocked him off - looked like a random choice. Nice move with the car, by the way," he offered, smiling slightly.

"Thanks." I caught myself about to smile back, and rooted for a cigarette instead. Finding one at last, I gripped it between my lips and fumbled for my lighter. It was only then that I remembered that my lighter was in another reality, and that I'd picked the cigarettes up at a convenience store last night. A convenience store at which I had forgotten to buy matches.

"Damn," I muttered to no one in particular.

Angel half-turned. "Huh?"

And then the door nearest to us, door 408, burst open. I know it was door 408, because it swung straight into my face and I got a very close and painful view of the plaque.

As I tumbled into Angel, our target shot from the room. I caught a confused glimpse of strangely familiar features, as he leapt over us and sprinted down a side passage.

Angel rose from the floor in a single predatory bound, moving in pursuit.

Unfortunately, my own personal type of predator was one which currently had difficulty distinguishing between the floor and the ceiling, and I slumped back, my nose throbbing enthusiastically.

I heard a flurry of footsteps and then a loud crash. Pulling myself to my feet, I glanced in the direction the two had fled, expecting to see Angel clutching my attacker by the collar.

Instead I saw him standing helplessly, fists clenched in frustration, in front of an open fire escape door. A door through which bright sunshine streamed.

"Doyle..."

"I'm on it," I responded, pushing past him as I gathered the demon to me. The sun shone warm on my skin as I flung myself through the doorway, grabbed onto the rail directly ahead of me, and vaulted it effortlessly.

I've done a lot of stupid things in my life.

"Jumping from the Fourth Storey of an Apartment Building to Reach the Bottom Before the Person Climbing Down the Fire Escape Did" made the top five easily, just below "Challenging Faith to a Drinking Contest."

If it wasn't for the relatively soft landing below, it could all have ended pretty painfully. It may seem humorous, even ironic, to be saved by a huge pile of refuse, but I really wasn't in any mood to appreciate it as I plunged feet-first into an open dumpster.

I spent an unpleasant second or two there, the urge to vomit vying with the sensation that my stomach was in fact no longer within my body, but instead four storeys above it.

Then I burst from the dumpster in a snarling ball of spines and fury... to land in an empty alley.

I glanced around for a second, before I realised that my plan had in fact succeeded a little too well. I looked up and saw a duffel bag descending towards me at speed.

The duffel bag, and a second later, its owner slammed me to the concrete. There was a brief, confused flurry of arms and legs, and then the figure was off, leaving me spread-eagled on the floor.

11 Ghosts

With a growl, I gave chase. I was tired of playing Wiley E. Coyote to this jerk's Road-runner - he was going down if I had to pursue him into the next state.

We dashed across a street, dodging cars and shrieking pedestrians. It took my adrenalin-fuddled brain a moment to realise why they were shrieking, and I hastily retracted my spines and hoped desperately no one had a camera.

Narrowly avoiding being flattened by a taxi, I half-ran, half-limped into the next alley.

Nothing.

Abandoned newspapers danced around my trembling legs, as I glared up and down the full length of the alley. Big warehouses on either side formed intimidating walls, like an urban version of a hedge maze.

Gulping air, I took a few steps further in, scanning my surroundings. I caught a flash of colour through the grimy windows of the warehouse to my left. The warehouse that had a sliding door, slightly ajar.

Ah.

It took all my willpower to keep my head turning as if I hadn't noticed anything, as I took another step into the alley. I shifted my feet slightly, getting my balance, glanced around one more time, and *moved*.

A shoulder charge took me through the doorway and bowled over the person behind it. The duffel bag went skidding away and I rolled frantically, trying to land on top of my opponent. We spun through one last dizzying turn and then I pinned his hands to the hard wooden floor.

Grey eyes met my own, alight with recognition, and I made two important discoveries in quick succession.

"Kate!" I said in surprised delight, sitting back on my haunches. "What are you doing?"

Something cold pressed against my belly, and I heard a hammer cock.

11.15 Chapter 15

Great. Just great.

I stood up cautiously, hands in the air, Kate's gun following my every move. She rose, equally cautiously. The gun didn't so much as waver.

I tried a smile. "Hi?"

Kate's expression didn't twitch, but her pistol shifted aim to my forehead. I ran the facts through my mind, somewhat distracted by the thought of Kate running a bullet through it instead.

Good vampires. Faith in jail. And Kate pointing a gun at me. I always thought those Star Trek parallel world episodes were lame. Well, lamer than the rest of Star Trek anyway.

"Sorry about the tackle," I said awkwardly. "Heat of the moment, and all that. But, hey what's one tiny error between friends? You remember the part where we're friends - right?"

Kate's eyes narrowed. That would be a 'no', then, from the lady with the gun and the itchy trigger finger. I prayed that my alternate self had never done anything to piss her off. "Doyle's dead. I don't know who the hell you are, demon, but you aren't him."

"Well, that's somethin' of perspective, really. I'm Doyle...just not *the* Doyle." This argument didn't seem to be winning her over. "You a big Star Trek fan?"

"Yeah, well as I remember, Doyle wasn't a demon," she said curtly. "You, on the other hand..."

Seeing her finger tighten on the trigger, I decided to take a different tack. "Hey, I'm workin' with Angel, aren't I? Angel's a good guy, right?"

And *that* went down like a lead balloon. "Last time I checked, Angel was several hundred dead people short of 'good guy'."

Several *hundred*? Angel and I were going to have words about this, I decided. And if he didn't have a damn good explanation, I was going to stake him. Assuming Kate didn't shoot me first, of course.

The lady in question wasn't finished, though. "And what exactly were you and he working on, anyway? Some kind of black magic? Raise a couple of your demon pals in the middle of the street and have yourselves a hellbeast frat party?"

"What, *that*? Hey, that wasn't what it lo- well, I guess it..." I laughed uneasily, and tried to start afresh. "We were just doin' a spot of exorcism. Like the film, you know, with the priest and the projectile-"

"Oh really? Demonically possessed street corners?"

I had to admit, to the impartial observer, my story seemed to be full of holes. I didn't give a damn about the impartial observer, but the extremely partial Kate Lockley with a handgun wasn't impressed either. And that I *did* give a damn about.

I started to back away cautiously, hands in the air. "I can see you're not comfortable with that scenario. Okay, new scenario. You shoot me with that gun. I die human, now you've got a body to dispose of. We already roused a few people gettin' here - at least some of them know how to dial 911. The cops are already on their way. They find you standing here, with a gun in your hand, an' a still-warm body on the floor. Even LAPD could solve that one."

"I'm a cop," she said bluntly.

"True, but then you get to explain one dead suspect to the rest of the guys, and hey, that's a whole lot of paperwork hell you're looking at just to fix me. Might even end up with you getting a hearing and losing your badge, if they smell a rat and that 'I was defending myself from a dangerous suspect' plan you're probably cooking up right now doesn't completely convince. Maybe worse."

Kate hesitated, gun still following me as I continued to back up. I could see the indecision in her eyes - assuming this Kate was a cop like the one in my world, she was reviewing the same possibilities I was...and maybe wondering why a demon would know about them...

I glanced to the side. There was a whole mass of packing crates behind me, irregularly piled up by a forklift that now sat derelict near the doorway I'd smashed down.

It wouldn't be great cover, but it sure as hell beat air molecules.

"...an' let's say you run. Then forensics pull the bullet out of me at the morgue, an' they check it against their records. That your service weapon you're wavin' at me?" Kate's eyes flickered slightly. "'Cause if it is, then the boys at Internal Affairs will pick you apart an' leave you for the vultures in the Justice Department to finish off. Ugly way to end a career."

I spread my hands and smiled as disarmingly as I could, watching the nose of the pistol droop slightly as Kate moved to cover me. "Of course, none of this is a problem if you can't hit me."

I dove sideways as she fired.

There's a reason why people talk about "dodging the bullet" on something. It's a feeling quite unlike anything else. I've had a lot of things thrown, fired or - during one memorable battle with a Slaragsh demon - excreted at me, but there's nothing quite like being shot at.

You're moving before the gun fires, but you hear the shot when you're still in motion and there's a microsecond of hesitation. Was I fast enough? Was the shooter anticipating me? After all, real life isn't like the Matrix. You don't see bullets coming. It's just bang, you're dead.

And you're so wired up, so totally focused on that one tiny piece of lead, that when the impact comes it jolts your entire body. And it takes you a moment to release that it's not a bullet, that it's just your body hitting the floor, and there's a sense of sublime relief. You did it. You're still alive.

Of course, the shooter still has the rest of the clip to kill you with.

Which was why I rolled and kept scrambling until I was behind three crates piled in a rough triangle. It wasn't exactly Fort Knox, but as long as I was hunched over I was pretty safe.

Despite that, Kate popped two more rounds over the top of the crates. I wished for a shorter haircut.

Still hunkered down, I skittered backwards and rolled behind a different pile of crates, then slung myself to one side and rolled again. As I ducked down beside the forklift, I was pretty sure I'd managed to confuse Kate enough to buy me some time. Sure enough, peeking through the driver's windshield, I could see her scanning the crates uncertainly.

"I've considered your argument, demon, and come to a decision." she announced. Then turned and pumped three rounds into the windshield. I dropped back, glass pelting my shoulders. "I want you dead. Screw the paperwork."

11 Ghosts

Shaking glass from my hair, I staggered around to the back of the forklift, hearing her footsteps approach me. "I wouldn't be so hasty. Those Internal Affairs guys are pretty damn nasty. And have you met the lawyers in this town? Now *that's* malevolent."

Kate kept walking, calmly, methodically. Like an executioner. That's what she was basically gonna do, anyway. An execution. I had no weapon and she had a loaded semi-automatic, and she was going to walk right up to me and put a bullet in my head. My friend, my *partner*, was about to blow me away and she wouldn't even mourn. I was just another demon to her.

Another dead demon.

She stopped walking. Bad sign. Either she was about to give up, which seemed unlikely, or she'd got close enough that she was confident about her chances to blast me no matter which way I moved.

But fortunately for me, the forklift's driver had left the keys in the ignition. For a moment or two, I toyed with the idea of actually starting the engine and driving towards her, but I abandoned it. The forklift probably had the acceleration rate of a golf cart, and I'd be an easy target. And even if I did hit her, the impact would probably kill her.

And that wasn't an option I wanted to consider.

I snatched the keys from the ignition and flung them left. I heard them jingle as they hit the floor, waited a heartbeat, and dove.

It's a stupid trick, and I knew Kate would be wise to it. Which is why I dove left, following the keys' trajectory, and she spun right, expecting me to use the distraction to go right.

I heard her curse and adjust her aim in time to snap off a quick shot. A shot that came far too close for comfort, whizzing past my right ear, close enough for my eardrums to hurt.

I hit the ground and rolled and kept on rolling, hearing another bullet skip off the floor. I came up behind a single large crate, standing upright. It was pretty high and pretty thick, so I didn't expect any bullets to get through. On the other hand, it was about the size and approximate shape of a coffin. That was hardly comforting.

Scraping sounds...Kate was picking her way towards me. She paused for a second, and I heard the clicking as she extracted the nearly-spent clip from her pistol and slapped in a fresh one. So much for running rings around her 'till she ran out of bullets. I silently cursed whichever LAPD firearms instructor had taught her good ammunition discipline.

That same discipline had kept me alive so many times...I'd never expected to be cursing that aspect of Kate's personality. Her abrasiveness, yes, her regular flares of temper, yes, her rabid anti-smoking policy...

Kate fired another shot, and my heart skipped a beat as it thudded into the crate. But whatever was inside was obviously pretty dense - the only thing staining my shirt was sweat.

I stood with my back to the coffin-shaped box and listened to her approach. There was no way my earlier trick would work twice on a cop of Kate's calibre. Besides, I had nothing else to throw.

So I waited, feeling dampness collecting in the small of my back.

She was barely meters away now, and I heard her stop and take a deep breath.

I did the same, and let the change come with the air, tightly controlled. The demon's strength flowed through me and I pressed my back against the coffin. My enhanced senses picked up the scent of Kate's perspiration as she took another step.

Now.

I pushed backwards and felt the heavy crate toppling. Kate yelped in surprise as it tumbled down at her. She reacted fast, for a human, rolling away from the tumbling wood and trying to regain her balance. Not a bad move, all things considered, and very fast.

For a human.

I bounded over the crate and straight into her, knocking her as flat as the crate would have. Of course, had the crate hit her, I wouldn't have had to worry about her kneeing my stomach. I gasped for air, and heard her gun go skittering away as she lost her grip on it. I tried to grab her wrists, as one might do with a person having hysterics, and she headbutted me for my trouble. My own grunt of pain mingled with hers - the spikes on my face weren't kind to such manoeuvres. But the headbutt stunned me enough for her

to get away. Blinking away tears of pain, I snatched at her leg, bringing her down again for a second, but then she slipped free, planting a foot in my face for good measure.

I could see her standing a few metres away, grimfaced and angry, as I staggered to my feet, wheezing. I hadn't exactly figured Kate for a pushover, but even with demon reflexes, I was down several bruises and unpleasantly winded. On the plus side, her hair was pretty mussed.

Some demon I was.

Speaking of, I decided that was an opportune time to winch in the spikes. The gun was gone and maybe if she saw me revert to human she might decide to talk instead of attacking. Unfortunately, she didn't so much as waste a breath on me, instead stooping to draw her backup gun from her ankle holster.

A puzzled expression crossed her face, which darkened to a frown as I held up the little leather holster. Pointedly, I emptied the gun and threw it aside. Okay, so maybe I'd done more than just muss her hair.

I grinned. "I don't suppose we could just give this up? Have coffee or somethin'?"

Kate wasn't buying - she turned and dashed for the door.

"Maybe later, then?" In pain, and still trying to fill my aching lungs, I was happy to let her go. Happy, that is, until she stopped halfway to the door and bent over the duffel bag she'd been carrying. There was the sound of a zipper and then metal flashed.

Kate hefted a fireman's axe and starting walking towards me. "Nah. I had three cups already today."

I started to back up again, retreating behind the fallen coffin-box. "Uh-huh." My voice squeaked embarrassingly into upper registers. "So you're gonna work off all that excess energy by choppin' me into itty-bitty pieces?"

The axe swept round and I dodged hastily to one side. The blade chomped into the coffin-box, and Kate extracted it with a businesslike tug. "Pretty much."

"Ever tried racquetball? Or ping-po--"

I ducked another swipe and managed to snag a broken plank from the floor. Kate was coming dangerously close with that axe of hers - she'd obviously been practicing this Jack Nicholson number for a while now. I shifted the plank to my other hand and tried to get a decent grip on it. At least it had the advantage of reach, although as easy-to-wield weapons go, it ranked somewhere up there with a cement mixer.

I swung it anyway, and Kate stepped to one side and slashed with the axe. With the sound of tearing wood, I lost the advantage of reach.

I shifted my grip on the shortened plank, putting one hand firmly near each end, trying not to wince as the splinters protruding from the severed end dug into my palm.

Kate eyed the half-plank balanced between my hands, judging the wood's thickness. One good swing...

She brought the axe back for an overhead swipe that would destroy my shield and probably most of my face as well...and I smashed the plank down onto my knee.

Picture the scenario. One wooden plank going down...one knee going up...The plank broke in the middle and its two sharp splintered ends both spun upwards, following the upwards angle of my knee...to point directly at Kate's throat.

And abruptly Kate had gone from about to bring a heavy axe down on an unlucky enemy, to having said axe raised uselessly high, while said enemy had two sharp pieces of wood brushing her throat.

I might not have Kate's axe-wielding flair, but after years of killing vamps there's nothing I don't know about pointy pieces of wood.

And now, watching her muscles tremble with the strain of holding the axe upright, watching her eyes stare intently into me as they searched for a way out...it was only a matter of time.

With a disgusted sigh, Kate let the axe fall and stood there, trying not to flinch away from the impromptu stakes at her throat.

11.16 Chapter 16

"Doyle! No, wait-"

11 Ghosts

And suddenly Angel was diving between us, knocking myself and Kate both sprawling, sending the sharp ends of wood skittering out of my hands.

I blinked up at him as he rounded on me, and my protest was turned into a choke when he hauled me up by a not-so-friendly grip on the collar of my jacket.

"What the hell did you think you were doing?" he snapped.

I angrily twisted out of his grip, which seemed to surprise him. He wavered, my motion having apparently unsettled his balance, and didn't come after me again as I backed off. Instead, he turned to Kate, who didn't look especially happy to see him. Although, in fact-

My thoughts froze. I frowned at Angel, narrowing my eyes to focus on Broody-Avenger-Vamp. "Wait. You really thought I was going to-?" I looked at Kate again, and thought back over her reactions.

Oh, hell. Angel wasn't the only one. She'd actually thought...

"No," I said. A stupid gulp that was half a giggle escaped my throat, and my voice squeaked as I protested, "You can't honestly have thought that I'd... I *know* her. Kate."

I moved towards her and she redoubled the efforts she was making to stand. Succeeded and sprang away from me, her feet scuffing on the floor with the clumsiness of fright.

I stared. I could barely believe it.

Angel looked between us and seemed to calm down quite abruptly. He held out both hands, palm down, in a pacifying gesture, and kept his body placed carefully between the two of us. "Okay. Let's all ease things up here. Doyle. Kate. We can sort this out rationally."

Rationally? I was in a crazy alternate universe where my best friend had just been convinced I was about to kill her and I was being told to act rationally by a goddamn vampire cursed with a conscience! But... okay, I guess I could see his point.

Kate didn't look so rational either, to my mind. And, studying her again now, trying to trace something of the woman I knew inside her face - finding so much there the same that it really was hard to credit-

Then her gaze fell upon Angel, and her whole face changed, conflict blazing into being behind her eyes.

I didn't think I could ever remember seeing Kate look quite like that. There was such a cold, all-encompassing fury residing there now, drowning out much else of what I had recognised. And, mixed all up within that, something else entirely...

Shit. Whatever the rest was about - and there sure as hell was something nasty lying between them - she really had it bad for the vamp, too.

"Angel," she said. She spoke his name like a curse. "I'm here to stop you making a mistake. You think he's your friend. I get that. But you're wrong. Your friend's dead. He's just a demon. I saw him change--"

"He was always a demon, Kate," Angel said, curtailing her.

She was left standing with her mouth half-open. I could see her weight shifting on legs planted firmly and a measured distance apart, fight-or-flight posture.

"But he died. You told me."

"It's complicated, Kate."

So was the way those two were fixed on each other, enough almost to make me feel like I should just slink out of the room and leave them to it.

"Doyle... was a demon," she repeated slowly. She shot a glance over at me again, but I got the distinct impression that my presence had become incidental. "A dead demon." Her eyes narrowed to slits. "I guess, that's a back-from-the-dead demon."

"More or less. He isn't a danger. But let me guess who dropped the idea on you that he was. That whole deal with the stalking game today? Some old friend from a certain law firm been paying you visits again?"

"I only listen to *them* because they're telling me the *truth* and you're breaking the *law*. Harboured murderers, last time. I've yet to hear you explain that one away."

"I was trying to give her a chance."

"Did you tell that to your colleague Wyndham-Pryce?" Kate nodded with satisfaction as Angel's jaw closed and bunched. "Yeah. We got his fingerprints on record - he was picked up some months back in Texas on some minor charge, sleeping rough or suchlike. I know who was in that apartment with her. The one who did the bleeding. Pretty big damn mess we had to pick through, after. I think I'd want to see anyone who did that to me or to one of my friends pay for their crimes."

"She's paying. And... he's chosen not to press charges," Angel began, seeming a little off-balance still at Kate's approach, although it did seem the current Wesley Situation was something that had him a fair bit off-balance in general.

Kate shook her head and apparently dismissed the tack in an instant. "What about Cordelia?" I didn't like hearing that trace of a sneer in her voice. I'd never known Kate to be so petty, and could only conclude it an illustration of how significantly this weird relationship with Angel screwed with her head. "Does she sprout horns and a tail at will, as well? Or would that mess up her hair?"

"Cordelia's human." Angel said sharply. "Kate, you need to let this go. I didn't kill your father. I'd have saved him if I could. You can't let what's between us allow Wolfram and Hart to get their claws into you. They've manipulated you before, and yeah, so you've got your doubts about me, and maybe some of them are justified - but you **know** they're evil."

"Go to hell." Kate spun on her heel, bent down in a swift move to retrieve her gun from the floor (I realised then that she'd been slowly working her way around closer to it throughout the exchange) and then she'd bolted through the nearest exit, just pausing to pick up the second gun on her way out.

Vampire reflexes considered, Angel could probably have caught her in an instant, but he didn't move at all, just watched after her.

He looked at me, his body language distinctly uncomfortable and almost at a loss.

I looked back at him.

Neither of us said anything at all.

11.17 Chapter 17

We made an apathetic, bruised, scratched and in Angel's case faintly scorched duo as we worked our way back to where we'd left Cordelia, Wesley and Miriam.

Along the way, Angel related in brief, subdued bursts how he'd come to meet, fall in, and fall out with Kate, and I listened with churning insides to the twisted history of my best friend in a universe a step removed from my own.

There were parts of it that hit a little too close to home, sending painful hitches through my circulatory system.

At one point, Angel slowed his steps and all but stopped on a largely empty street passed innocuously mid-chase, staring across the expanse of a wasteland of docks to an empty berth and a dilapidated series of warehouse blocks. A distant expression on his face, as he lingered, before he caught my arm and with a sudden determination that brooked no argument moved us on.

I really didn't want to ask. So I didn't.

Instead, having been intrigued by the story of the sexually transmitted demon and the whack-job lawyers helping Angel and Kate get in touch with their warm and fuzzy sides, I cajoled out of Angel a few more tales of his fighting of the Good Fight in LA.

Funny thing, once you talked your way past the stick up his ass, the vampire turned out to have an enthusiasm that was almost funny when it came to spinning out a yarn. I got fights hand-puppeted blow-by-blow and everything.

It took about half an hour to make our way back - that had been some serious sprinting for an out of shape half-demon on too much injury time, too little sleep, and a regular diet of beer, cigarettes and pizza even when it wasn't reduced to the last few days' irregular fare.

My faint worries about having left Cordy and Wes to manage the Miriam situation without any fighting muscle ready on hand quickly evaporated when we arrived back in the street where we'd left them. Angel doubtfully picked out the house he remembered her giving the address of and somehow turned out right. We tapped on the door to be shouted inside - where we found the three of them sitting drinking hot chocolate on worn but expansively comfy chairs that made my whole body sigh and go limp just looking at them.

Both chairs, unfortunately, were taken, and Miriam was sprawled out so as to leave no room on the couch.

11 Ghosts

"I see you've been having a tough time of it," I observed sarcastically, leaning on the door jamb and trying not to fall over. Now that we were in more or less safe surroundings, my energy seemed to have left me and I felt the weight of my battered body, redoubled from the chase and the fight, once again.

Wesley smiled smugly with a mouth smudged at the edges with chocolate drink only barely discernable from the smudges of his bruises. "Indeed."

"Yup," Cordelia said. "Oh, hey - we'd make you some, but we used the last. Sorry." Angel huffed and she gave him a funny look. "Like you'd count anyway, Mr O-pos."

Wesley's smile disappeared into seriousness again as quickly, pushed down by the furrows in his brow. He cast a contemplative, worried glance at Miriam, curled up with her mug and a nervously shifting, guilty expression, her eyes trolling the room with no particular direction. I supposed I'd be pretty spaced too, in her situation. I wondered what she was thinking, now - about the guy it turned out she was responsible for all but killing. Wesley stood up.

He drew Angel and myself aside and, leaving the women with a surreptitious nod toward Cordelia (Cordelia quenched the put-out flicker that darted over her face with admirable speed and efficiency), herded us into a small but tidy kitchen.

I leaned on the table. Wesley sagged against the wall. Angel stood in the middle of the room still smelling faintly of ozone and fidgeted like he didn't know what to do with his hands.

Wesley said, "Ms Welsh clearly possesses what has, until recently, been a deeply buried suppressed psychic ability, and now that it is unleashed and attached to a distinct and dangerous trigger, she very clearly needs to learn to control it. I've given her some numbers - a few mystical contacts far more familiar with this sort of phenomenon than I, who should be able to help."

His eyes flickered back through the open door to the woman curled on the couch, and he shifted uncomfortably. He rubbed a hand across the bridge of his nose, almost ousting his glasses, wincing as he hit a bruise. "I... er, I've also recommended an excellent therapist, and strongly suggested she seek counselling." He reddened slightly.

Angel's eyebrows shot up, and the line of his lips seemed to dance a faint jig as he tried to keep a straight face.

"Oookaaay," I said, drawing out the vowels of the word, frowning.

Through the open door I could see a Miriam distraught but on the road to solving her problems, and no longer in immediate danger of her life. Several other pressing concerns that had been battering at the back of my mind for hours had abruptly returned to the fore.

"Guys?" I said somewhat pleadingly. "I believe our work here is done?"

In the following brief silence, I heard the sound of Miriam's cellphone ringing from the other room.

11.18 Chapter 18

Claustrophobia has never been one of my problems, but when I followed Angel past that prison gate, and it closed behind us, I was starting to understand it really well.

This place, massive and cold, couldn't have anything to do with Faith. She was like a dancing fire that no lamp could hold, and damn me for missing her enough to come up with something as giddy as that. I was getting as sentimental as Cordelia and Angel.

She could never survive being caged.

Not my Faith, anyway.

Angel went in first. He started to explain to me about the "one visitor at a time" rule, but I already knew. So I waited, like I'd been waiting ever since I first woke up in this world, and my hands kept getting colder.

Wesley was looking everywhere except at me.

When Angel came out, he was shaking his head a little. "I warned her, but she doesn't seem to be taking it very seriously. I told her that you were the one who heard Rayne and Mercer."

I stood motionless, until Angel gestured sharply. "Go on in."

And then I was through the door, into that room where there was only a transparent barrier between me and the girl who looked like Faith.

She looked up, and straight on past me, looking over my shoulder to see who else was coming in. When I made my way over to her, and sat down opposite, she looked startled for a moment, and then vaguely amused, as she picked up the phone.

11 Ghosts

"So, you're Angel's dead friend?"

"Not exactly."

She met my eyes for a moment, then shrugged indifferently. "You don't look like I expected. So, what did you hear?"

I fumbled out a few words of explanation. She nodded a momentary acknowledgement at Lee Mercer's name, but that was about it. I couldn't think of anything that I could tell her about why I'd been brought in as a hostage for her, as well as Angel, so I just left out that part, and by the time I edited out anything that might suggest that I was expected to mean something to her, there wasn't much left to say.

When my voice ran down into silence, she made no attempt to break it. Bored, she scratched the back of her neck idly and then stared at her fingers, as though checking for something.

Maybe nothing was there, but on this side of the partition, I could feel something creeping at the back of my own neck. But it wasn't anything living.

"Well, ah, I'll go then. Wesley wants to see you."

That one got her attention. Her head swung around, and she scowled. "Why the fuck does Wesley want to see me?"

Watching the way her face came alive then, with guilt chasing anger, I couldn't stand it any more. I got up abruptly, putting down the phone, and backed away, almost bumping into someone.

"I'll send Wesley in," I muttered. The last I saw of her before I took off, she was frowning fiercely in my general direction, but I knew perfectly well that she wasn't looking at me.

She wasn't really seeing me at all.

I didn't wait for Wes and Angel. I took the visitors' bus from the prison back into the city. That way, I didn't have to talk to anyone.

I picked up a bottle on my way back to the office. If this were my world, then with Faith and Wesley gone, I would have had all the silence I wanted, and time enough to see my way down to the bottom of it. But when I arrived, Cordelia was there.

"Hey."

"Hey," I echoed dully. "What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you."

The way that she was gazing at me made me look away. I knew where the glasses were kept in this version of the office by now, and I headed briskly off in that direction. But she followed me.

I put the bottle down on the counter, feeling her coming up behind me. She put her hand over mine, and as her fingers closed over my own, that weird sensation returned.

"I wish you wouldn't do that," I muttered.

"Well, I wish you wouldn't do that," she retorted, pointing at the bottle with her free hand. "Come on, sit down. Tell me about it."

"I don't think so, Cordelia." I looked longingly at the bottle, but I let her lead me over to the couch, anyway. She kept her fingers entwined in mine until it made the hair rise and the back of my neck ache with the buzzing, but right now, there just wasn't enough left in me to argue.

"You know, I've seen that look on your face before, right in this room," she said quietly. "It was when Harry was here."

It took me a moment to come up with the energy to answer. "Whatever it is that you're remembering, that wasn't me. You already know that."

"Yeah, well, part of me does. But part of me doesn't, you know? I think you get what I mean."

"Maybe I do."

She leaned toward me, a lot closer than I wanted anyone to be right now. I couldn't really find the words to explain it, but as Cordelia's hand slid up my arm, her eyes searching mine, it was like looking in a mirror. She was still trying to find her Doyle there, just like I'd been looking for my Faith.

Neither one of us was having any luck today.

11 Ghosts

I had looked at that familiar face, blank with unrecognition. I had seen a figure in a prison uniform, looking so much like the body that had warmed me in another place, and I knew that I was seeing a stranger, just as she was.

She might look like my Faith, but my Faith wasn't here. My Faith had never been here.

Maybe I've been dense, maybe I've just been stubborn, but I couldn't see a world without her in it.

In that moment when I'd seen the person who wore her face, I knew that I was in that world.

And I knew that I didn't want to be here.

Gently, I detached Cordelia's hand from my arm, and placed it firmly on the couch, away from me. That odd, prickly feeling faded as the contact ended. "You still feel that?" I asked, changing the subject.

"The buzz? Well, duh. Yeah."

"My best guess is, we're feelin' that because we're not supposed to be both here at the same time. Well, at least not with the visions."

"Makes sense, I guess. They're your visions, after all. I only got them from Other-You by kiss-of-death-o'-gram. You're the one who was supposed to help Angel, not me."

"Maybe you just happened to be in the right place at the right time, then."

"Or in the wrong one," she retorted. "Do you have any idea how hard it was to get to sleep after ... ?" She looked at me, and then relented. "No, I take that back. You don't have a clue what I'm talking about, do you? You weren't there. You weren't the one who did it."

"No. I wasn't."

She looked at me quizzically for a moment, then spoke slowly, and more thoughtfully than seemed usual for her. "There were about a million things that I wanted to tell him, starting off with just how rude and inconsiderate he was to up and die like that, and how dare he? But there was more, you know? There was more."

I shook my head bemusedly. "I'm not your Doyle, Cordelia. Never was, but I guess I can't blame you for trying."

"It's hard to give up on that, when you look just the same. You were ... I mean, he was ... " She shook her head a little. "It's hard to let go," she admitted softly.

"So, I think maybe you get why I had to see Faith for myself."

"That's different," Cordelia objected. "It's not like you just walked away one day and disappeared, or something. I know what happened to you - the other you. I saw you die."

My face must have shown something, because she stopped then.

"Oh. I'm sorry. I keep forgetting that where you come from, you saw her die."

She reached out to touch me again - like she just couldn't keep her hands off me - and for a moment, just for that one moment, I let myself consider the possibility of someone who loved a version of me, even if the so-called hero she remembered wasn't me at all.

I started to feel that tingle again as her fingers brushed gently against my skin, and then the office door banged open.

"Who died?" a familiar voice demanded.

Cordelia and I both turned, and she groaned. "Oh no, not again!"

I couldn't speak. I couldn't move. I could only stare.

It wasn't possible.

It couldn't be.

It was Harry.