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6.1 Flutter

by The Brat Queen

"Wesley?" Angel looked at his friend, wondering what had distracted him.

Wesley stood there, mouth agape. He turned, his hand dropping down from the front of his coat, and with it came a flash of silver that plummeted to the ground in between them. There was a loud clatter, then a blur which quickly settled into the shape of a knife.

Angel frowned. The blade glowed a dark blood-red. "Wes?"

"Angel - " Wesley colored, as though he were embarrassed to have been caught doing something so crass as having a weapon fall out from what looked to be his chest. He bent down to retrieve it, the streetlights glinting off of his glasses as he did. "Sorry, I - "

Angel bent down as well. His hand reached the handle of the 16th century dagger at the same time Wesley's did. They sat there, staring at each other, locked in a confusing tug-of-war.

"Wesley?" Angel tried again.

"I'm sorry," Wesley said, his voice barely audible over the rush of traffic in the background. "I should go."

PRESENT DAY

Angel woke up with a start. His body immediately protested the sudden movement by sending waves of agony up and down his left side. He longed to go back to sleep or, ideally, to tear his nerve endings out piece by piece if it meant finally enjoying the bliss of being numb. Unfortunately, both options were snatched out of his grasp by the sound of a familiar voice.

"Happy anniversary!" Nina sang out. She sat on the edge of the bed, her hotel bathrobe falling open to reveal that she was wearing absolutely nothing underneath. Normally Angel would have enjoyed the view, but currently he had other things grabbing his attention.

"What?" he asked. He sat up, rubbing his shoulder. Pain lanced through his side as burnt skin was pulled taut, then forced to relearn how to be flexible. He winced, hating that he couldn't hide the evidence of how badly he was damaged.

Nina pursed her lips in sympathy. "That's not feeling any better, huh?"

"Nope," Angel said. His hand moved down to the circular brand that remained stubbornly attached to his chest. He scratched at it absently, hoping it could distract him from the still-throbbing scars which covered half of his body from neck to foot. "Neither is this. You know, you'd think dragon-fire would be the one thing that could blast off a brand, but apparently not."

Nina swatted his hand away. "It's never going to heal if you don't stop touching it."

"It's been three months," Angel said. "At this point I feel like it's never going to heal, period."

"Give it time," Nina said. "That aloe vera I gave you worked wonders, right?"

"Actually, I don't think dragon burns are affected by - " Angel started to say, then stopped himself, remembering that being a boyfriend often meant abandoning truth for tact. "Uh, that is *usually* affected by aloe vera stuff. But that jar you gave me is something special."

Nina folded her arms. "You haven't even tried it yet, have you?"

"I tried it," Angel said. He cleared his throat. "Once. Sort of. Look, it smells funny."

"Smells funny," Nina repeated.

"I'm sorry," Angel said. "It was nice and a pretty jar and all. It just - I dunno, maybe it's a vampire thing."

"Vampires don't like aloe vera." Nina quirked her eyebrows in disbelief.

"Apparently." Angel frantically tried to remember what men said to dig themselves out of holes like this. "But I kept the jar, though."

Nina shook her head. Her chest-length hair fell forward, framing her face. Angel thought about telling her how pretty it was, now that she'd let it grow over the summer, but he didn't know if that might imply that he'd hated it before.

"You know," Nina said, "it's lucky for you that you know when to start groveling. Otherwise I might have to rethink this whole relationship."

"I *really* liked the jar." Angel sat forward to squeeze her hand reassuringly. He cried out as his body immediately protested. "Son of a - "

"Would you take it easy already?" Nina asked. She pushed him back onto the pillows. "You're still healing. Plus this is a *vacation*."

"I won't heal at all if I don't move," Angel said. "This only gets worse when I stay still."

Nina flashed him a coy smile and a bit of what was underneath the bathrobe. "Who says you won't be moving?"

Angel attempted to smile back through the pain. "There's going to be movement?"

"There might be *lots* of movement," Nina said. "But first: Happy anniversary!"

Angel sighed. "Nina, I don't want to talk about it."

Nina's face fell. "Angel, why can't you just celebrate?"

Angel got out of bed. His left side was more sluggish than the right, but he forced himself to move

as naturally as he could. He hid the spasms of pain by pretending to adjust the smooth satin of his pajama bottoms. "Because there's nothing to celebrate, that's why."

"You're free," Nina said. "You're out of that awful place, you're doing whatever it is you do, you're *alive* -"

"This isn't alive," Angel said. "This isn't freedom. This isn't even an *end*."

Nina deflated, wrapping her robe around her body. "You survived. Doesn't that count for something?"

"It does when the battle's over," Angel said. He walked around the room, stretching his arms to help them limber up. "It does when somebody's won."

"You lived!" Nina said. "You won! You destroyed the building, you went up against an army, you fought a *dragon* for God's sake!"

"The Senior Partners didn't just let us go," Angel slammed his right hand down on the bedside table, knocking over the radio, which had been playing softly in the background. It began to hiss and crackle with static. "We were outnumbered, outmatched, out-powered, outdone. Gunn was *minutes* from death - hell, we *all* were. Spike, me, even Illyria. They *had* us, Nina. They *had* us."

"Maybe that was all they wanted to do," Nina said. "Maybe they only wanted to shake you up a bit before they left town."

"So they do all that and then just vanish?" Angel demanded. "Drop everything in the middle of battle without even a word?"

"Why does there have to be a word?" Nina asked. "Why does there have to be an anything?"

"You don't understand," Angel said. "Wolfram & Hart is an organization which has existed for millennia, and the thing that they are most obsessed with is *me*. They didn't just leave. They didn't just let us go. They didn't just let *me* go."

"Somebody needs to let go of something, all right," Nina muttered.

Angel squatted down in front of her, grateful that the pain had eased enough to allow him to stay there and rest his hands on her knees. "Nina, this is what I do. I fight these battles. I protect people who need protecting. What do you think would happen if I stopped?"

"You could actually have a real vacation?" Nina suggested.

"Somebody would get hurt," Angel replied. "Some person, some *innocent* would get caught in the line of fire because I wasn't there to do it for them. I can't let that happen. The Senior Partners are planning something, and I have to make sure I'm at least three steps ahead of them so that whatever it is they want to happen never does."

"Can't you at least have some fun?" Nina put her hands over his own, touching the left one more tenderly than the right. "It's not just the anniversary for them, you know. It's three months of *us*. Three months since you came and found me down in Mexico. Isn't that worth celebrating, too?"

"It is," Angel said. "But not now."

Nina pulled back, balling her hands into fists. "Right, got it. You know, maybe I should - "

Angel caught her before she could get any further. "Not now, because it isn't three months. It's two months, two weeks, and three days."

A smile spread across Nina's face. "You remembered."

Angel reached under the bed and pulled out a small gift-wrapped box. "I remembered."

Nina lifted up a much larger box that she'd hidden behind her. "I got you something, too."

"I bet it's perfect," Angel said.

"Not *too* perfect," Nina warned. She leaned in, rubbing their noses together. "You really remembered?"

"Why else do you think I brought you here?" Angel asked.

"The joy of sex without my niece interrupting or you having to clean your god-awful apartment?" Nina replied.

"Also that," Angel admitted. He ran his right hand up along her side. "So do I unwrap my present, or am I unwrapping my present?"

Nina held the belt of her robe up in invitation. "I bet you could do both."

Angel sat up, catching Nina's lips with his own. "Bet that would be fun."

"Bet we could give you a lot of that healing movement," Nina added. She ran gentle fingertips along his left side. "You know, for the good of getting you ready for that big fight."

"Of course," Angel said, though in truth his side was hurting him. In fact, his entire body was starting to feel off. "Um - maybe you should be on top?"

"I like a man who's not afraid of a strong woman," Nina said.

"Someday I really have to tell you about all my old girlfriends," Angel said.

"Someday I really have to make sure we don't start that conversation without a gag in your mouth," Nina looked thoughtful. "Actually, now that I think about it - "

Angel kissed her into quiet, rolling onto his back so that she could straddle him. "Maybe later?"

"Maybe later," Nina agreed. She rocked her hips, slowly peeling the bathrobe away. "Like your present so far?"

Angel trailed his fingertips along her abdomen, smiling as she twitched at the tickling along her sensitive skin. "Liking it so far."

"There's even more," Nina promised. She leaned over, reaching out to try to adjust the radio. "Movement, presents, mood music, a few tricks of mine I haven't even told you about yet - "

"Movement *and* tricks?" Angel said, "I might raise that 'like' to a 'really enjoy'."

"Adverbs sound like a good sign," Nina said. She frowned, her fingertip twisting the radio dial. "Not that I can say the same for this thing. How hard did you hit it?"

"I didn't," Angel said. He tried to sit up but a sudden pressure held him down. His skin was twitching, and the back of his neck was starting to hurt. "Nina - "

"Maybe there's a storm overhead?" Nina guessed. She picked up the radio and shook it. She stopped as the lights began to flicker. "Or an earthquake?"

The feeling of wrong was even stronger now. "Nina, get *down*."

"I'll call the front desk," Nina said. "Maybe they know -"

"Get *down*!" Angel shouted. He pushed her to the floor, covering her with his body as the room plunged into darkness, and a large black cloud came crashing through the window.

Angel: No Limits

Episode 6.1: Flutter

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THREE YEARS AGO

"Angel." Wesley spared him a quick smile of greeting before turning back to the clipboard he was holding. He scribbled something down. "I'm glad you could join me."

"You said it was business," Angel leaned against the large SUV that was parked in front of Wesley's apartment building. He'd never seen the car before. He wondered if Wesley had bought it over the summer. "Always happy to help out my - your - um, **the** business."

Wesley looked up, adjusting his glasses. The new frames shaped his face differently. Or maybe that was just the new haircut. "Yes," Wesley said carefully. "About that - "

"I'm sorry," Angel said at once. "That was my bad. It's **your** business. I work for you. Angel Investigations, Wesley Wyndam-Pryce is in charge."

Wesley folded the clipboard to his chest. "I don't want to take anything from you, Angel. I don't want us entering into some kind of arrangement that you don't think you can deal with."

"I can deal," Angel promised.

"I know you offered to take the role of an employee as a way of atoning for the mistakes you made during your time with Darla," Wesley said, "but I would prefer that we be honest about what we can and cannot do. If you cannot accept my leadership..."

"I can accept," Angel said. "I'm accepting. Honest."

Wesley tapped his pen on the back of his clipboard. "If you're certain."

"Positive," Angel said. He jerked open the passenger-side door, getting in before Wesley could see the look of ambivalence on his face. "Never been more positive in my life."

PRESENT DAY

"Shit," Spike announced. "We need more coffee."

Gunn didn't stop in his quest to rid the dust-filled storage room of useless junk, or at least to shove the boxes into a manageable pile. "Last I heard you weren't crippled. Go and get some yourself."

"Can't, can I?" Spike asked, leaning against the doorway. "Don't have the petty cash. Not trusted with the budget. Besides, it's still daylight for another half-hour."

"Order in," Gunn told him. "Or get Kevin to get some. Or - wait, what the hell is wrong with the coffee? I got a ten pound can of that stuff from the warehouse store just last week."

Spike gave him a dry look. "And as we all know, warehouse stores have the finest in Columbian

brews. That's why they have all the fancy décor of..." Spike faltered for a comparison, then settled for waving his coffee cup to gesture at the area around him. "... this place."

"Don't start," Gunn warned him.

Spike didn't listen. "Of all the *pea-brained* ideas - and Angel has had a lot of pea-brained ideas, let me tell you - "

"Please do." Gunn tore open another box and peered inside. "Because one thing that has not gotten old for me is having to listen to you and Angel go on about the glory days."

"More my glory than his," Spike pointed out. "But say what you will about Angelus - "

"Also a subject I can't get enough of."

" - at least *he* knew the proper place to put a bloke," Spike continued. "None of this on the cheap, falling down, utter *crap* that he's making us work out of."

"Don't recall him putting a stake to your chest." Gunn hefted one of the boxes and walked past Spike to put it out in the hall. "If you want something better, go find it."

"I did," Spike protested. "I said we should shack up in that hotel you lot seemed so fond of. Still don't know why nobody else liked that idea."

"Because we don't own it anymore, and we can't afford to get it back," Gunn said, coming back into the room. "This is what happens when you quit your job without getting a better severance pay then not having your head severed from your body. Also when you don't take a single damn cent of your fancy-ass paycheck and try to invest it, or at least shove some of it under a mattress. Not, by the way, that I'm still bitter about that."

"Of course not," Spike said.

"We are going on *nothing*," Gunn reminded him. He picked up another box, deciding to deal with this one in the lobby. "And until we get more clients then we're going on the *dust* of nothing. Be glad we have an office in the first place."

Spike fell into step behind him. "I *am* glad. Unlike some people, I'm glad about the whole bloody thing. We're here, we're helping the helpless, we're what passes for most of us as being alive - "

"So what's your problem?" Gunn asked, as they reached the end of the hallway.

The two of them emerged into the remains of the old Walden movie theater. Rows of red, velvet-covered seats were scattered about, many of them ripped and soiled from years of misuse. Still other parts of the theater were empty, the chairs gone and rolls of ancient carpet and curtains put down in their place in the hope that the area might one day be good for training. The stage was behind them, a silver screen covering what had once been the home of Vaudeville performances. A chandelier hung overhead, looking as though it were moments away from showering crystals down on them or even collapsing on top of them entirely. On the far side of the room was a balcony, but nobody had yet had the courage to go up there, mostly because it looked as though it couldn't have supported even Illyria's weight.

Spike and Gunn stood in the doorway, taking in the ambiance.

"Well, for starters," Spike said, holding up his coffee cup, "everything in this place smells like popcorn."

"We'll air it out," Gunn adjusted the weight of his box, then headed up the incline to the lobby entrance.

"Not enough air in the world to disguise the truth of the matter," Spike said as he followed behind him. "This is a *joke*."

"It's the best we could do," Gunn said.

"It's a *joke*," Spike repeated. "This isn't a real office. Real offices have real office space. They have filing cabinets and bookshelves. What they *don't* have is soda machines and broken-down marquees out front that read 'Angel Investigations, We Hlp Th Hepss.'"

"Least that's better than what it said last week," Gunn replied.

"Angel's got to stop firing those temps so quickly," Spike agreed.

"Especially when they're up on the ladder and fixing the sign," Gunn said. "Though why that girl was holding two 'c's and a 'k' in the first place I'll never know."

"Clever use of the v for a u," Spike conceded. "But it doesn't fix the real problem."

"There's no real problem," Gunn said.

"There's a problem because the man that's got his name above the titles is not in the game," Spike said.

Gunn snorted. "You don't think the problem is that Angel's a little *too* in the game?"

"He is nowhere near the game," Spike said. "And you know it."

"Are we talking about the same guy?" Gunn asked, lifting the box out of the way of a stack of old props. "Because the Angel *I* know -"

"You *don't* know," Spike stepped in front of Gunn, halting their progress. "You don't. You fought with him, what? Four years? Five? That's not knowing him, mate. Not like I do."

"I know enough," Gunn said.

"You don't know the look he gets on his face when he's torturing a little girl," Spike said. "You don't know what his laugh sounds like when he walks away from a smear of a man who's been begging him for death for five hours straight. And you don't - *nobody* knows what that soul has been whispering into his ear for over a century."

"Give or take," Gunn said.

"Doesn't matter," Spike replied.

"And *you* do?" Gunn asked.

"If there's a better bloke around I'd love to meet him," Spike said. "Not that I'm proud of this, mind."

"Of course not," Gunn said.

"You got your expert, Charlie," Spike patted himself on the chest. "Might as well use me. He's *not* in it. He's not anywhere near it. And he hasn't been since -"

The back doors to the theater slammed open. Illyria appeared in the doorway, framed by the light of the lobby.

"Hey," Gunn said.

Illyria's impenetrable eyes regarded him, then slipped away. She passed in between them, either ignoring or oblivious to their attempts to catch her attention.

"Have a good day there, Blue?" Spike called after her.

She turned. Her look was cold and had a hint of threat beneath it. Apparently content with that for a rebuttal, she resumed her progress towards the exit door to the right of the movie screen.

Spike watched her go, then shook himself as soon as they were alone again. "I will say this about Angel -"

"Don't start," Gunn said.

"He's right about one thing," Spike continued.

"No, he isn't." Gunn hefted his box again and went out into the lobby, passing by the long row of old movie posters that had been taped to the windows to protect Angel and Spike from the sunlight.

"Percy was the *one* bloke who was even close to understanding her," Spike said.

"You trained with her." Gunn dumped the box on top of the ticket desk that was now their reception area. "Don't *you* have a rapport?"

"Sure, if you want somebody to go a few rounds of mutual punching bag," Spike said. "But Wesley was the only one who managed to keep her under his thumb. Or whatever organ he was fond of using."

"Maybe." Gunn tore open the box and began to put the contents onto the richly patterned gold and red Oriental rug that decorated the lobby floor. Piles of old paperwork and even a few fountain pens began to gather around him. "But you do *not* say that in Angel's hearing."

"All I'm saying is Wesley had a point," Spike said.

"And all I'm saying is you do not say that in Angel's hearing," Gunn said, pointing his finger at Spike. "I miss Wes, too, but we do *not* need somebody to do his job. We need a receptionist and that's *it*."

"Where the hell is Kevin, anyway?" Spike asked, swiveling his head around.

The answer - or what seemed like the answer - came when the door to the underground garage swung open, but it was Angel who stormed through.

"So there I am," Angel said, not even breaking stride as entered, "down in Newport, enjoying a great weekend with my sexy girlfriend, hitting the beach - "

"Get in any surfing?" Gunn asked.

"No," Angel said.

"Newport's supposed to be great for surfing," Gunn said.

"Vampires don't surf," Angel told him. He went behind the reception counter, checking his basket for messages.

"Scared of the water?" Gunn guessed.

"I am not, and it's a thing," Angel said.

Gunn frowned. "It's a - "

"We look a right prat in the swim shorts," Spike explained.

"Too pale?" Gunn asked.

"Hole in one." Spike tapped his nose.

Angel dumped the few phone memos left for him into the trash, then started the climb up the stairs to his private office. "So there I am - "

Spike and Gunn exchanged a look before moving to follow him.

"There you were," Gunn prompted.

"Having a great weekend," Angel continued, "figuring I'd enjoy the view, the company, maybe take in a little whale watching."

Gunn frowned. "I thought this wasn't the season for that?"

"I've learned that now." Angel opened his office door and flicked on the lights. The room still looked grey and in desperate need of some life or color. "And I'm thinking to myself that the worst thing that can happen over the course of two days is that I have so many of those fruity drinks with the umbrellas in them that I forget I'm not supposed to try to get a tan, and what do you think happened?"

Spike slumped down into one of the chairs meant for clients, propping his feet up on Angel's desk. "I hope at some point you got shagged, otherwise waste of a holiday for you."

"I was attacked." Angel unbuttoned his coat, then shucked it off. "Just guess by who."

"Judging by your outfit," Spike said, "I'd say some fashion queen who doesn't like you very much."

Angel paused, his hand halfway towards hanging his coat up on the rack by the door. "What? What's wrong with my outfit?"

"Nothing," Gunn said.

"Absolutely nothing," Spike agreed. "I assume you *like* the way you look in white turtlenecks."

Angel tossed his coat onto the rack, then twisted as he tried to look down at himself. "It doesn't look good?"

"It looks *fine*," Gunn said.

"Nina got it for me," Angel said.

"Ah." Spike tilted his chair back. "That explains it then."

Angel looked at him sideways. "Explains what?"

"Nothing." Spike waved it off. "I think it's smashing that you and your significant other can swap clothes from time to time."

Angel glared. "Spike - "

Spike tilted his head, pondering the ceiling thoughtfully. "'Course most of us would have made sure we were dating somebody of the same *gender* before grabbing the first thing we found out of their closets."

"This is *not* a girl's shirt," Angel said.

"Of course not," Spike said.

"This is *not* -" Angel started, then turned to Gunn. "You don't think that I look - "

"Word to the wise?" Gunn said. "You want to not look like a girl then the thing you *don't* do is ask the guy next to you if your outfit looks hot."

Angel stood up again, adjusting the shirt and pants. "But I thought - "

"No," Gunn said.

"But -"

"No," Gunn said, then held up his hand. "And I'm going to make it clear right now that if the next words out of your mouth are some form of 'do' 'pants' 'hips' 'make' 'look' 'my' 'these' and 'fat' I *will* kick your ass."

Angel's brows furrowed. "You think that these pants - "

"Kick your ass," Gunn repeated.

"You look *fine*, princess," Spike told Angel. "Now sit down and get on with your nattering."

"There is *nothing* wrong with this shirt," Angel said. He turned to face the new person who had just walked in the room. "You don't think there's anything wrong with this shirt, do you? Wait - who the hell are you?"

Kevin stood in the doorway, looking small and out of place in his brown slacks and short-sleeved business shirt. "I - um - I - "

"That's Kevin," Gunn said. "The new temp."

Angel shot Gunn a look. "We don't need a new temp."

"The hell we don't," Gunn replied. "Angel - "

"We *need* a Wesley." Angel stabbed his right hand at Kevin. "We need somebody who can research, and know demons, and translate, and handle the clients, and do all the little things that Wesley does - "

"Did," Spike murmured.

" - and something tells me Kev here doesn't have the qualifications," Angel finished, ignoring him.

"Kevin is *more* than qualified," Gunn said.

Kevin cleared his throat. "Actually, I don't know anything about demons, or translating, or any of that."

"You're fine," Gunn told him.

"I go to UCLA business school," Kevin explained. "I - I saw the job posting on the web. The hours were perfect. I thought the part about battling monsters was a metaphor."

"All we need is somebody who can file and answer the phones," Gunn said.

"I don't know," Angel said. "If Kevin here thinks he'd rather go back to school, I say we let him."

"He *stays*," Gunn said. The phone rang downstairs. "Except now. Kev, go answer that, would you?"

"Right," Kevin said, vanishing back down to the lobby.

"We need a Wesley," Angel repeated.

"Well, we *got* a Kevin," Gunn said. "I'd say somebody has to deal."

"Angel was going to bore us with a story before everybody got their knickers in a twist?" Spike prompted.

Angel leveled a glare at Gunn, then sat down again. "Nina and I were attacked."

"In Newport?" Gunn asked.

"Right in the hotel room," Angel said. "Last night, in fact. You know what that means."

"You forgot to tip the bloke who brought the room service?" Spike guessed.

"Three months," Angel said. He pressed his hands onto the desk blotter. The burn scars on the left were even more livid in the sickly fluorescent light. "It's been three months since the battle. The Senior Partners are getting their revenge, and they're not waiting around anymore. We need to mobilize and we need to mobilize *now*."

Spike and Gunn continued to sit there.

Angel stared at them. "What did I just say?"

"We heard you," Spike said.

"We just don't believe you," Gunn said.

"I'm not making it up!" Angel said. He rolled up his shirt sleeve, exposing the dark red and purple on his arm. "See?"

"I see dragon burn," Gunn said.

"It's worse than it was," Angel said. "Last night I got hit by these freaky floating things that looked like those demons that stabbed Elijah Wood."

"Wait," Spike said. "In the movie, or just last month?"

"The movie ones," Angel clarified. "They broke into the room, tore the place up - "

"Nina okay?" Gunn asked.

"Shaken, but okay," Angel said. "I'm the one they were after."

"Sounds serious," Gunn said. "So what happened?"

Angel looked at him. "What happened when?"

"Freaky Wood-demons," Gunn said. "Tearing things, coming after you, then what?"

"They hurt me," Angel said.

"And then?" Gunn asked.

"And then they tore the place up," Angel said.

Spike frowned. "Thought that was before they hurt you."

"It was both," Angel said. "There was more than one. Easily three. Maybe five."

"Must've been hard to kill," Gunn said.

"I didn't kill them," Angel said.

"Maim them?" Spike asked.

"I - no," Angel said.

"Wound a little?" Gunn asked.

"They *left*, okay?" Angel said. "They came in, tore the place up, and left."

"You sure they didn't just get the room number wrong?" Spike asked. "Maybe they were renting the suite across the hall."

"It was the Senior Partners!" Angel snapped. "In case you've forgotten, it's been three months since the battle."

"Actually, it hasn't," Gunn said.

"It's close enough," Angel said. "Besides, I was out there, I was alone, I was clearly vulnerable - "

"Don't actually need to know what you and your pet furry were doing when the nasties came in," Spike told him.

"It's revenge," Angel said. "Plain and simple. We hurt them; they want to hurt me."

"Us," Gunn supplied.

"Us," Angel coughed.

"And no offense, mate," Spike said, "but right now a particularly brutal postage stamp could take you down."

"I can't imagine how that would offend me," Angel said.

Spike reached across the desk to poke Angel on his left side. "All I'm saying is - "

"Ow!" Angel slapped Spike's hand away.

"Angel, we're just saying right now you might not be the best judge," Gunn said.

"Don't lawyer-voice me," Angel said. "I know what happened. I know what I saw."

"I'd believe you too," Gunn said. "Except this isn't the three month anniversary, and we've already had this conversation."

Angel shook his head. "We haven't - "

"Two month anniversary," Gunn reminded him. "You saw a group of thugs you thought were evil bodyguards. Turned out just to be a summer school class taking a trip. One month anniversary, you had us breaking and entering into a warehouse that wasn't actually filled to the brim with vampires but with pillowcases and that nice bedding I'm currently using in my new digs. Three week anniversary - "

"Okay, I get it," Angel said.

"Two week anniversary, one week anniversary, then days six, five, four, three, two, and one," Gunn said. "To say nothing of all the times in between when you had us running around town with no proof of any attack and not even a pretty timeframe for you to point to. Angel, there is no plan for revenge. At least, not the one you think you're seeing."

"They didn't just let us go," Angel said.

"Maybe not," Gunn conceded. "But until the Senior Partners show themselves for real we're wasting time here jumping at shadows."

"They are *planning* something," Angel said.

"Let 'em plan," Gunn said. "In the meantime we have people who need our help."

"Speaking of which," Spike said, nodding at Kevin, who was hovering in the doorway.

"What's up?" Gunn asked.

Kevin cleared his throat. "That meeting? It's on."

"Thanks, Kev," Gunn said.

"What's all that about?" Angel asked.

Spike drew himself up proudly. "I got a case."

Angel looked at him. "You?"

Spike nodded. "Yeah."

"You?"

"Yeah."

"*You?*"

"What the bloody hell is so hard to believe about that?" Spike asked.

"For starters, you don't officially work here," Angel said. "And second, I'm not hearing the words 'of beer' coming out of your mouth to help finish off the sentence."

"It's a real case," Gunn said.

"Found it myself and everything," Spike said.

Gunn drew Angel's attention towards a file folder sitting on his desk. "Local shop, not far from here. Said they're having problems with somebody intimidating them."

Angel flipped open the folder, glanced at it, then flipped it closed again. "So?"

"He's mocking my case," Spike complained.

"So, intimidation of upstanding community members is something that we deal with," Gunn said. "Or did I misread that sign out front?"

"I don't know," Angel said. "I don't have a translator here to tell me what Hlping Th Hepss means."

Gunn grabbed the file back. "Angel - "

"It's a case," Spike said. "That's what we do."

"It's an annoyed store owner," Angel said. "That's what the *cops* do."

"Not this time," Gunn said. He took a picture out of the file and put it in front of Angel's face. "Store owners are part demon, and the guy doing the annoying is all the way. Cops don't want this one, believe me."

Angel sighed, taking the picture. "Are they paying?"

"Not that it should matter," Gunn said. "But, yes, they are."

"Fine." Angel threw the picture down onto his desk. "But we're taking separate cars. I don't want to waste any more time on this than I have to."

"I can see why everybody calls you a hero," Spike drawled.

"Just for that - " Angel fished the keys to his Viper out of his pants pocket, " - you get to ride with Gunn."

"Thirty years I been in this neighborhood," Joey Gerace said. He stabbed a tobacco-stained fingertip down onto the counter of his convenience store. "Thirty years. No trouble."

"We don't *cause* trouble," Rebecca, his wife, said. She was plump, with greying hair that mostly hid the gill slits on her neck, which seemed to match those of her husband. "We're good people. We don't mix with bad crowds."

"Except for Spike," Angel murmured. He reached over to help himself to the display of free candies.

Rebecca jerked them out of his way. "Those aren't for you."

"Be nice," Spike told Angel. He leaned against the counter as though he were the one who owned the place. "These are friends of mine."

"Right," Angel said. "Because you and they have *so* much in common."

"They're the only place that sells Silk Cuts within ten blocks of here," Spike said. "Which as far as I'm concerned is the highest form of community service."

"Who are the people bothering you?" Gunn asked the Geraces.

Joey shook his head. "Not people. Demons. This one, he comes in. Threatens me and my wife. Says we owe him money."

"Do you?" Angel asked.

"Never seen him before in my life," Joey said.

"What does he look like?" Spike asked.

"Tall." Rebecca held a hand over her head to illustrate. "And yellow."

"With horns," Joey said. He tapped a finger behind each ear, then on the middle of his forehead. "Three of them, all around his head."

Rebecca clung to her husband's arm. "He said he would hurt us if we didn't honor our contract."

Gunn raised his eyebrows. "Contract?"

Rebecca nodded solemnly. She reached underneath the cash register and produced a thick stack of papers. "This. He said this was a copy. He said that it means that his boss owns our store."

"Nobody but my *family* owns my store," Joey said. "My *grandfather* built this place. Then my father took over. Now it belongs to me."

"Midnight," Rebecca added. "He said he would be back by midnight tonight to take everything if we didn't give him what we owed."

Joey put his arm around her. "He threatened my wife. He threatened my *home*."

Spike shot a look at Angel. "Good thing us hero types are around to help."

"This is a mystical contract," Gunn said, looking up from his scan of the document. "Big surprise, it's not in English. It's going to take me a little while to go through this, figure out what's going

on."

"You'll help us?" Rebecca asked.

Gunn nodded. "You bet."

"Guys?" Angel moved over to the privacy of the magazine rack and beckoned the other two to join him. "What's the plan here?"

"I'm going to camp out here and go through this," Gunn said. "Try to crack through the demonic mumbo-jumbo and see if this guy actually has a case. Spike? The Geraces trust you. How's about you keep talking to them? Find out their family history, maybe go through the old mementos. Joey might not have signed any contracts, but that doesn't mean that his pop or his grandpa didn't. And Angel - "

"Actually, I've got an idea," Angel said.

"Great," Gunn said. "What?"

"We go home," Angel said.

Gunn frowned. "If this guy's coming back tonight, I'd rather we all stay here. Protect the place. Maybe keep them safe from - "

"From what?" Angel asked. "Paper cuts?"

"They got threatened," Spike said.

"Yeah, with a legal problem," Angel said. "How is that something we deal with?"

"We help the helpless," Gunn said.

"I know you like that fancy fake degree you got from selling your soul just a tiny bit more than the rest of us," Angel said, "but the sign on the marquee says *Angel Investigations*. Not *Angel Law-Difficulty-Problem-Solvers*."

"Okay," Gunn said, "not that I am *ever* going to help you with this argument, but you *do* know there was a word you could've used there that would've scanned and made your point and everything, right?"

"This isn't our problem," Angel said.

"The first three letters are l-i-t," Gunn said. "That's the only hint I'm giving you."

"What *is* our problem?" Spike asked.

"Senior Partners," Angel said. "Wolfram & Hart. *Actual* evil. *That's* our problem."

"Haven't made a peep," Gunn replied, ticking each point off on his fingers, "are still a big pile of dust where there used to be a building, and if protecting innocent store owners isn't part of the whole fighting evil gig then what the hell is?"

"This is a waste of time," Angel said. "It's a *distraction*."

"And you're the master of clear-headed thinking?" Spike countered.

"I'm the one with his eyes on the goal," Angel said.

Gunn stepped forward, locking eyes with him. "My goal is helping those who need it. What's yours?"

"Not this," Angel replied and left the two of them standing there.

THREE YEARS AGO

"We need to talk," Wesley said.

Angel watched as Wesley navigated the car through the streets of Los Angeles. "What about?"

Wesley glanced at him, the movement only detectable by the reflection of light on his eyeglasses. "Buffy."

Angel turned his attention back outside the passenger window. "There's nothing to say."

"With all due respect," Wesley said, "I think there is."

"Look," Angel said, "I already had this talk with Cordy. Buffy's dead, I'm not. True love doesn't mean you can't go on when you've lost a loved one. I know that. I got it. So can we drop it already?"

Wesley brought the car to a stop, waiting for the light to change. "That's not what I wanted to discuss."

Angel looked at him again. "It's not?"

"Buffy was your muse," Wesley said. "Your inspiration. She was the thing that convinced you that you could fight in the battle against darkness. That your soul gave you a purpose."

"Yeah," Angel said, frowning. "So what?"

Wesley met his eyes. "Now that she's gone, I need to know if you've lost your inspiration as well. Do you still have it in you to do this?"

"Of course," Angel said. "I'm here, aren't I?"

Wesley put the SUV into gear again. "There's more to the battle than that."

PRESENT DAY

Angel parked his car out in front of the movie theater, not feeling like bothering with navigating the garage downstairs. The sign above read "Angel Investigations, We Hlp Th Heps." Angel sighed and looked down at the 's' that had fallen. He stepped over it, not bothering to pick it up.

The lobby was dim and quiet. Kevin was behind the counter, sipping an iced latte.

"Mr. Angel," he said, bobbing up out of his chair. "I was just - "

Angel took a hundred dollar bill out of his wallet and slapped it on the counter in front of him.

Kevin frowned. "What's that?"

"That's your bonus for doing what I tell you," Angel said. "Take it, go away, and don't come back."

Kevin fainted for the bill. "Is it - Look, I'm sorry about the monster thing, but I really thought - "

"I'm sure you're a wiz with a phone," Angel said, "but that's your last paycheck. Now leave before I throw you out."

Kevin snatched up the bill and his latte. "Okay. Thanks!"

Angel savored the quiet that resulted. He went upstairs, not bothering to turn on the overhead lights in his office and instead contenting himself with the desk lamp. He sat in his chair, rubbing at the itch on his chest. The bright glow of the lamp painted the room in a sharp contrast of light and shadow. Angel stared at it, wondering if it were possible for a vampire to burn out his retinas.

The tightness of his burned skin bothered him. He wanted to settle down and stop moving, but he knew that would only make it hurt worse later. He stood up, stretching his arms. He thought about when he had done this with Nina, and how soon after -

There. Just for a second. The lamp had flickered.

There! It did it again.

Angel stepped forward, watching it carefully. The light blinked in and out, each time staying longer and longer in darkness. As it did Angel's eyes were drawn to the door, the window, the corners, feeling that ache along the back of his neck just as he had before -

He attacked, leaping across the room. He grabbed a sword off of the wall and swung, slicing a perfect arc through the air, his body long having forgotten the pain, the protest, as he moved as he was meant to, taking all his strength and anger out at the demons that had followed him and tearing them limb from -

The light flickered on again, full strength this time.

"Oh *crap*," Angel said. His sword was covered with the remains of his spare jacket, which had been hanging on the coat rack. He lowered the blade, surveying the damage he had done to the garment. "And I just bought this, too."

He turned back to the light, tapping it experimentally. It flared brighter. He reached under the green lampshade and touched the bulb. It burned his fingers, but he managed to give it a few twists. The light grew bright and stayed that way. There wasn't a flicker to be found, though his left side felt worse for all the exertion.

"Crap," he said again. He jerked the chain to turn the light off, abandoned the sword, and abandoned the office entirely.

The basement of the movie theater was darker than Angel's office and a labyrinth in its own right. It wasn't often that any of them went down there. Spike and Angel did because it gave access to the sewers - and to Nina's cage - but Gunn refused to set foot on the staircase. None of them could blame him.

Illyria was the only one of them who wasn't bothered by it. She lived in one of the spare storerooms and showed no interest when anyone asked her if she might want to move upstairs.

"Decorating again, huh?" Angel leaned against her doorway. He needed no invitation to enter, but he liked to show Illyria some respect, partially because it was the polite thing to do and partially because he wasn't one hundred percent certain she'd gotten past the stage of randomly snapping people's spines just because she had nothing better on her agenda.

"I cannot make sense of it." Illyria stood in the middle of the room, surrounded by what looked to be chaos, but Angel quickly saw the order of it. She had taken all of Wesley's things and reorganized them. Last week she had done it by shape. The week before, by size. This week she had apparently grouped things by color. The room was a rainbow of green books next to green pens, paperclips next to shotgun shells, and clothing stuffed into whatever crevice had seemed appropriate. "I have examined every item that belonged to him. I do not understand them."

Angel came inside, gingerly sitting down on a chair that had once resided in Wesley's living room. "Can I help?"

"These things are meaningless," Illyria said. She held up pads of paper, then tableware, then a box which read "Puzz-3D." "This was his kingdom, yet there is nothing here that matters. Nothing of any power or importance."

"They were important to Wesley," Angel said, though in truth he didn't know how much Wesley had ever valued his possessions.

Illyria came forward, thrusting a now-dead potted plant into his hands. "You knew him. You make sense of it for me."

"Not really sure where I'd start," Angel said.

"Humans cling to that which is fleeting," Illyria said. "Why?"

"Probably asking the wrong guy for the human perspective," Angel said. "Maybe Gunn - "

"He does not mourn the loss," Illyria said. "Not as you do."

Angel swallowed that. He toyed with the wilted leaves of what might have been the violets that Wesley kept in his bathroom. "I don't. I mean, I do. But not in the way that you do."

Illyria tilted her head. "How do you mourn it then?"

"Let's maybe get back to your other questions," Angel said. He stood up, putting the plant aside. He patted a stack of books that was on the table. "You know these were important to him. Good ol' Wes and his books."

"I have memory of that," Illyria said. "The shell - "

"Fred," Angel reminded her. It was one of the few points he ever stuck to as far as the god-demon was concerned.

Illyria inclined her head to acknowledge this. "Fred had affection for him and his books. She felt they were a part of him."

Angel ran his hand over the volumes, brushing dust off as he did. "Pretty close to it, yeah."

"He read for her," Illyria said. "He would not read for me. I do not know why."

"I don't either," Angel admitted.

"He read for you," Illyria said. "That was his job."

"He had a lot of jobs," Angel said.

"Why was that so important to him?" she asked.

"Maybe because it helped us get the ultimate job done," Angel said. "Actually, that's why I'm here. I need to borrow some of his stuff. I'm trying to research something."

"I have read these books from back to front," Illyria said. "They have no answers to anything."

"Could be because you were doing it the wrong way," Angel suggested, knowing it teased close to the line of Illyria's patience, but lately she had been giving him more leeway than she gave to anyone else. "So, can I borrow them?"

"Take if you have need, but they will not solve your problem." Illyria stepped away, giving Angel room to pick up whatever he wanted. "And return them when you are through. The collection must be complete. I cannot solve it otherwise."

"Don't think you're going to find your answers here either." Angel looked through the titles, selecting a few likely volumes. He wasn't sure what he needed, but Wesley had always seemed to like starting with these three. He turned, catching Illyria as she ran her fingertips over the shelves. She traced patterns that he couldn't recognize. It reminded him disconcertingly of Fred. Moreso than usual. "You - uh - okay?"

"It disturbs me that I have been made to feel emotions," she said.

"Ironic, that," Angel said.

Illyria stared at him, clearly not getting the joke.

"Never mind," Angel said. He started to leave, then stopped himself. "Illyria when you - when you found out you no longer had your kingdom, did you feel - "

"I felt anger," Illyria said. "I wanted to destroy."

"Yeah, sure," Angel said. "But did you feel, I don't know... lost?"

"I felt the loss of what had belonged to me," Illyria said. "I felt the agony of being raped of my power and my glory."

"No, not *loss*," Angel said. "I was asking if you felt - "

Then he looked at the demon and remembered who he was talking to.

"Never mind," he said again. "Thanks for the books."

"You attempt to solve the wrong puzzle, vampire," Illyria told him.

"Maybe," Angel admitted. "But it's the only one I've got."

Angel went back upstairs. He put the books onto the countertop and began to skim through them. Most of the words made no sense to him, and he didn't even know what he was trying to find. He gave up and flipped through the pages, watching as the text became a blur of movement, intersected only by the occasional engraving, and -

Angel stopped, carefully turning the pages back.

There. Halfway through the book was a color photograph that Wesley had apparently used as a bookmark.

Angel lifted it up into the light, staring down at the picture of himself, Cordelia, and Wesley.

He quickly looked around, wondering if there was anyone there to notice him. Finding the lobby empty, he turned back to the photo. He caressed the outline of it with his thumb, remembering the sound of Wesley's voice and the smell of Cordelia's hair.

"I'm losing too many soldiers," he confessed. He looked right into Cordelia's eyes, hoping that somewhere out there she could hear him. "I don't know what to do. You gave me one vision. I don't know what I was supposed to do after that."

Cordelia didn't answer him. She remained as she was, stuck in a single moment when life had been happy.

"It's better for you," Angel said. He put the photograph back, carefully folding the book closed over it. "Both of you. Wherever you are, it's better than this place. Hell, maybe you're together up there with Doyle." He put the books behind the countertop, out of the way of any passing hands that would touch them. He started to leave, then added one final thought. "It all works out in the end, right?"

The lobby rang out with resounding silence.

"Yeah, that's pretty much the answer I was expecting." Angel pushed through the doors, and went back outside.

The street around Angel was empty. The neighborhood their office was in had once been a bustling part of town, but the capricious nature of the movie business and every other form of wealth in California had thrown it aside. Now it was filled with seedy businesses, slums, and abandoned buildings that made the movie theater look like a palace in comparison. Angel walked to his car. The red Dodge Viper stood out in sharp contrast to everything around him, but luckily nothing had happened to it so far. He didn't know what he'd do if he lost his only souvenir of the necro-tempered glass that allowed him to drive around while in sunlight.

He pressed the button on his remote to turn the car alarm off, then started to get in.

"Stop!"

Angel paused. The shout didn't sound as though it was that far away.

"I said *stop* it!"

Angel slammed the car door shut. It was a cry for help. In spite of what he'd told Spike and Gunn, he couldn't *not* answer it when the need was so obvious.

He ran down the block, looking around to find the source of trouble. He located it in an alleyway. A young woman was there, dressed as though she had just come from a club and locked in an uncomfortable embrace with a man who loomed over her.

"No!" she said.

Angel came forward and jerked the guy off of her. "The lady said *no*, asshole."

The guy looked up at him, utterly perplexed. "What the hell?"

Angel punched him directly in the face. "Guess nobody taught you any manners, huh?"

The guy fell back, his hand covering his quickly swelling eye. "Son of a *bitch*."

Angel readied to hit him again. "I think you owe her an apology."

"What, are you *psycho*?" the woman asked. She grabbed at Angel, pulling him out of arm's reach. "Oh my God. You *freak*!"

Angel faltered. "I - but - you were shouting for help."

"Like hell I was," she said. "I was telling my boyfriend to cut it out."

"But he wasn't," Angel said.

"He *would* have in two seconds if you hadn't come barreling through," she shot back. She went over to her boyfriend, cooing as she saw the damage done. "Barry? Honey? You okay?"

"He hit me in the eye," Barry said.

"We'll get some ice," she promised. She leveled a glare at Angel. "That is if this weirdo doesn't have any problems with that. You're lucky I don't call the cops on you, pal, you know that?"

"You shouldn't shout like that if it's not a problem," Angel said.

"People yell sometimes," she said. "They argue. It doesn't mean they need some idiot thinking he's a superhero coming in to save the day."

"I was only trying to help," Angel said.

"Newsflash," she retorted. "We don't need any. Now get out of here before I *do* call the cops."

"Not like they'd come to this part of town in a hurry," Angel shot back.

"I know people," she said. "I could get you in trouble."

"Already got plenty," he dismissed her, walking back to his car. "Okay, that's the *last* time that I try to - "

He stopped, seeing his car begin to move down the street. Then he broke out into a run.

"No, *no*," he shouted. "Stop! It's okay! That's my parking spot! Wait! Stop!"

It was no use. His car had been towed, and the truck had been moving too fast for him to catch it.

"God *damn* it," he said. He looked up skyward. "So, got anything *else* planned for today?"

There was a rumble overhead, a drop, and then a sheet of water came pouring down.

"Okay," Angel said, wiping the rain out of his eyes. He tried to keep a sense of humor about it. "Okay. That's fair. I was asking for it. I'll just call the others, and we'll find a way to take care of this."

He pulled out his cell phone and watched in disbelief as the bars on it vanished one by one until the screen read "No Signal".

"*Damn* it." Angel threw the phone down onto the ground, watching in satisfaction as it smashed into pieces. Then he said "*Damn* it" again when he felt the rebound of pain as his burn reacted to the sudden motion.

"Hey," a voice called out.

Angel looked up. There was a woman on the other side of the street. He squinted, trying to get a better view of her through all the rainwater. She appeared to be young and Japanese and was clutching a wet trench coat around her. "Are you talking to me?"

"Yeah," she called back. "Are you okay?"

Angel tried to remember the last time someone had asked him that question. "I'm having a bad day," he said.

"I saw," she replied. She gestured towards a nearby storefront. "Do you want to come in? I could make some tea, and you can use my phone if you need to call somebody for a ride."

"Actually, I can - " Angel started to gesture back to the theater but decided he needed a friendly face just then. "Yeah, okay, thanks."

"Great," she said. She waited for him to cross the street, then led the way to the store. The front of it was dark, and what parts weren't boarded over were covered with curtains. "My name's Mari."

"Angel," he said. He looked up at the sign overhead, which read "ST R UCK" "Looks like your sign is missing an 'a' and another 'str'."

Mari frowned, turning the lights on. "There's no 'str' missing. Well, there's an 'r' and an 's'. But we're actually missing an 'e' and an - "

"I can guess the other letter," Angel quickly told her as the store itself came into view. He was surrounded by displays of sex toys and lingerie. There was a neon sign in the back that read "GIRL GIRL GIRL" and had an arrow that was pointing upstairs. "Isn't that one missing three 's's'?"

"Actually, it's not," Mari said. She went behind the glass and chrome counter, turning a few more lights on. "It's a small stage. Only one of us can stand on it at a time."

"Right," Angel said, getting the full picture. "So you're not so much a clerk here as you are - "

Mari peeled off her jacket, revealing a tight blue dress that plunged low and was cut high. "Part of the entertainment, yeah."

"Suddenly wishing I'd kept that hundred bucks just to make sure my girlfriend never finds out I was in here," Angel said.

"There's rules that say no touching *unless* a hundred bucks is involved," Mari said, "so you're pretty much safe with me."

"Do you own this place?" Angel asked.

Mari shook her head and disappeared behind the counter, popping up a moment later with a small electric tea kettle. "No, Simon's the guy who owns this place, but sometimes he asks me to open up early in case the store gets any customers."

Angel wandered up and down the aisles, taking in the merchandise. "You get a big market for all this out here?"

"No clue," Mari said. She went behind a curtain, and Angel heard the sound of running water. "All I do is move next to a pole and try to look sexy. I don't know the first thing about all this."

"Seems to be standard," Angel said, ducking under a feather boa that hung from the ceiling.

"Maybe to you," Mari came back out and plugged the kettle in. "To me it's all freaky. Whips. Chains. Costumes. And I don't even *want* to know why anybody would need a snakebite kit in the bedroom."

Angel saw the row of them lined up along the countertop. "Actually, controlled bursts of very high-powered suction can cause a reaction which can be very pleasurable for - um - never mind."

Mari smiled at him. "Thanks. I'm happy with the ignorance."

"Most people are," Angel agreed.

"What about you?" Mari asked.

"Sometimes I wish there *were* things I was ignorant of," Angel said.

"I meant *what about* you." Mari gestured to take in the whole of him, her gold bracelets tinkling with the movement. "What's a guy with a car like yours doing in a beat-up neighborhood like this?"

"I own the building across the street," Angel said. "I'm trying to start a new business. Well, not *new* business, but rebuild an old one."

Mari's face lit up. "You're reopening the Walden? That's great! We could really use some regular entertainment around here. None of the chains bother coming down this way. I had to take two bus transfers just to see the new Jude Law flick."

"I'm not - " Angel started to protest but decided not to get into it. "I'm hoping to improve things around here, yeah."

The kettle whistled. Mari poured the hot water into mugs before adding tea bags. "Good luck to you. As you can probably tell, there's nowhere to go but up."

"What about you?" Angel asked. "No offense, but - "

"What's a nice girl like me doing in a hole like this?" Mari shrugged. "What any girl does: try to earn money."

Angel nodded towards the outside. "Isn't this a dangerous place to try to earn a few bucks?"

"I have good reason," Mari said.

"There's plenty of jobs out there," Angel pointed out.

"None with these hours," Mari said. "None that pay like this."

"There's got to be something that fits the bill," Angel said.

"I need something that *pays* the bills," Mari replied. She reached into her purse and pulled out her wallet. "Here. Tell me that's not a good reason."

Angel opened the wallet up and looked at the picture inside. It was of a young girl, maybe no more than a year old. A pink ribbon was attached to her head, almost lost in a tangle of black curls. "Your daughter?"

Mari nodded. "That's Miki. You tell me another job that pays what this pays but lets me be at home almost all the time so that she's not getting raised by some stranger."

Angel handed the wallet back. "Even so, aren't you worried about what this does to you?"

"This job is just a job," Mari said. "It doesn't define me. It's not who I am. Who I am is somebody who's with her and makes sure that she gets raised right. I don't suppose you've got any kids of your own?"

"Sort of." Angel moved away from the countertop, using the pretense of examining the leather goods to avoid her gaze. "It's complicated."

"If you had kids you'd know what it's like to do whatever you have to do to make sure the world is okay for them," Mari said.

"No," Angel said. "That one I do know."

"Sometimes that means taking a job you don't like," Mari said. "Or doing things you don't want to. But as long as you don't lose sight of yourself, then it doesn't matter."

Angel looked over his shoulder. "We *are* still talking about stripping, right?"

"I said I'd do what I had to," Mari said. "Not that I don't still draw a line."

"But what if you can't draw a line?" Angel asked. "What if choosing the job isn't even up to you? What if they *give* you the job, and nobody listens when you try to quit? Then you're stuck. You're the hero. And you always have to *be* the hero, even if sometimes maybe you think you want to try something different. Because that's what *they* want. They just *love* to see you get knocked down and screwed over and over again. And who cares if you want to be the grocery store owner, or the teacher, or anybody else? If maybe just *once* you'd like to try to find out what it would be like if things didn't all hinge on your every move and action? No. They decide what happens to you, and you just have to sit there with a great big smile on your face and *take* it."

Mari stared at him.

Angel gamely swallowed some of his tea. "Or maybe I over-shared?"

"Oh my *God*," she said, coming out from behind the counter again. "You're *that* Angel?"

"I don't think we should make a big deal about this," Angel said.

"How did I not recognize you?" Mari asked.

Angel tried again. "I *really* think - "

"I totally loved you in *Hairy Porter and the Prisoner of Asskaban!*"

" - that it would be a bad idea to..." Angel ground to a halt. "Wait - what?"

"You played Professor Rimus Lickin, right?" Mari asked.

Angel quickly reviewed the conversation and realized how it had taken a wrong turn. "Oh, no. *No*. Mari, I - I'm not - not that I look *down* on anybody in your profession or anything, but I - uh - I don't *act*."

Mari grinned up at him. "It definitely didn't look like acting to me."

"Of course it wouldn't," Angel said, suddenly feeling very tired.

"Granted, not that I was spending a lot of time looking at your *face*," Mari admitted. She jabbed her thumb in the direction of the theater. "So, wait, is that your latest? Angel Investigations: The sexy story of a handsome PI?"

Angel gave up. "Yes. Yes, it is."

"Can't wait to see it," Mari said. "So can I have your autograph?"

"I'm a little leery about signing things these days," Angel said. A thought struck him. "But that blond-haired British guy I work with *loves* when people ask him for one."

"He's in the movie too?" Mari asked.

"Plays the hooker with the heart of gold," Angel said. "Or at least that's what he's doing now. He used to play the villain, but I don't know if anybody's buying that his character had a motivation change."

"It's hard when you're typecast," Mari said.

"Tell me about it," Angel replied.

"But it sounds like you're on the right track," Mari said. "You're working for yourself, trying to strike out on your own."

"Definitely got that striking out part down pat," Angel said. "But what about you? This can't be what you wanted to do with your life."

"It's only temporary," Mari said. "But you'll laugh when I tell you what I want to do next."

"Anything's got to be better than stripping, right?" Angel asked.

"It's just such a cliché," Mari said. "Exotic dancer by night, girl who's working for her law degree by day."

"Law degree?" Angel asked.

Mari nodded. "Not yet, but I'm saving up for it."

"You know, stripping is a *fine* and noble profession," Angel said. "Centuries of tradition and everything."

"Law has a lot of tradition," Mari said.

"Yeah, like ritual sacrifice," Angel muttered into his teacup.

"Did you say something?" Mari asked.

Angel quickly swallowed. "I'm sure you'll do fine. Just avoid any place with an animal name. Trust me on that."

They were interrupted by the sound of the front door opening.

Mari put down her cup. "Can I help you?"

"Which one of you is Simon?" the newcomer asked. He came into the light, revealing a pressed suit, a briefcase, yellow skin, and three horns on his head.

Angel stepped in between him and Mari. "Who's asking?"

"Who's asking is the guy who owns Simon's ass," the demon said. "But for short you can call me Pete."

"Simon's not - " Mari started to say.

Angel held out a hand to quiet her. "Do you have business with me?"

"Depends," Pete said. "Are you Simon?"

"I'm the only guy here," Angel pointed out.

"This is L.A.," Pete said. "I've seen plenty of girls with guy names, guys with girl names, and everything in between with names so trendy they could make you puke. Now, if you're Simon, great. If not, you're gonna need to either start sucking my dick or stop wasting my time. Frankly, I'm amenable to either."

"We don't do that kind of business here," Mari said.

"More's the pity for me," Pete said. He propped his briefcase on a display of crotchless panties and popped it open. "I am here on behalf of my employer - "

"Your employer have a name?" Angel asked.

Pete ignored him. " - to say that I am here to collect as per what it says in this contract and what it says in my book."

"What contract?" Angel asked. "What book?"

Pete handed over a thick stack of papers, then held up a loose leaf notebook. "That contract. Which says that you owe my employer money. And this book, which says the amount you owe is a quarter million dollars."

"Simon doesn't have that kind of cash," Mari said.

Pete made a note of that in his book. "This is a shame. Can you get it by midnight tonight?"

Angel folded his arms. "Just for fun, let's say no."

Pete made a note of that as well. "Then I am obligated to tell you that per *my* contract if you do not pay up by midnight tonight it will be my job to take everything."

"What's this about anyway?" Angel asked, holding up the stack of papers.

"You signed it, not me," Pete said.

"Let's say my memory's bad," Angel said.

"Then it sucks to be you, my friend," Pete said. "All I do is collect based on the book. I could not give a single rat's ass about the why of it."

"So you're the muscle," Angel said.

"A vulgar way of putting it, but apt," Pete said.

Mari took the contract from Angel. She turned it over in her hands. "This isn't even in English! Simon can't read this. There's no way he could have signed it."

"Perhaps we need to revisit my not caring about anyone's past or motivations," Pete said. "You are in my book. That means that you owe. Pay up by midnight, or I collect in my own way. It is just that simple."

"Perhaps we need to revisit me telling you to kiss my ass." Angel stepped forward, crossing into Pete's personal space. "Oh. Wait. I haven't told you that yet."

"This is a bad time to choose to be macho," Pete said. "The girl's here, there's still the outside chance that you'll be able to raise that money... Have you thought about a bake sale?"

"Pound cake sounds good right about now," Angel said. He swung a fist, aiming it for Pete's jaw.

Pete used his briefcase to block the blow. "See, now you're wasting my time."

"I'll remember to feel bad about that later." Angel shoved both hands onto the briefcase, slamming it back into Pete's nose.

There was a satisfying crunch, but Pete quickly recovered. He lashed out with his knee, then quickly followed with an elbow.

Angel staggered as the blow connected with his left side. "Okay, now you're pissing me off."

Pete lifted his briefcase again, readying it to come flying down on Angel's head. "That'd mean something, if I gave a crap about you."

"Stop!" Mari threw herself in between them, holding up her hands. "Stop it! He's not who you want! He's not Simon! His name is Angel!"

Pete aborted the attack, jerking his briefcase out of the way at the last minute. "What did you say?"

"His name is Angel," Mari repeated. "He owns the place across the street. He's not the guy you're looking for."

"Angel," Pete said. He flipped the case open, hauling out the book again. "Angel, formerly Angelus, current owner of Angel Investigations?"

Angel nodded, avoiding Mari's questioning gaze. "Don't tell me I've got a contract, too."

"No," Pete said. "No contract at all."

"Good, because I've been trying to get out of all of those," Angel said.

"You're still in my book, though," Pete said.

Angel frowned. "For *what*?"

Pete shoved Mari out of the way as he lifted a rifle out of the case. "Something my employer found to be a lot more valuable."

Angel didn't have time to protest before the gunshots slammed into his body.

THREE YEARS AGO

"You have a role," Wesley said. "A function. You have a place that is so much more than your

relationship with Buffy."

Angel squirmed. "Can't we skip past this and get to the part where I hit stuff?"

"I'm quite serious," Wesley said.

"So am I," Angel replied.

Wesley parked the car, then turned to face him. "Angel, you are a hero. A Champion. You have been given a destiny. This isn't something that can be joked about or taken lightly."

"I don't take it lightly," Angel said. "You think that after everything that's happened I think destinies are something to laugh about?"

"I think you don't understand that your destiny is something that closely binds you to the lives of other people," Wesley said. "Whether you'd like it to or not."

PRESENT DAY

"Oh my God, oh my God, oh my *God*."

Angel slowly swam up towards consciousness, feeling the ache inside of his body where each bullet had struck. He focused on the female voice that provided an anchor to the waking world.

"Hello? Yes, there's been gunfire. My friend has been hit, and - "

Angel reached over and hung up the phone before Mari could say anything more.

"I'm fine," he told her.

Mari gasped, leaping backwards from where she'd been squatting on the floor. "You were *dead*."

"Still am," Angel said. He sat up and began to fish the bullets out of his body.

Mari stared. "You - you - "

"Vampire," Angel said. "One of the good ones."

"I thought those were a myth," Mari said.

Angel nodded in the direction of where Pete had been. "*Demons* you're fine with, but *vampires* -"

"*Good* vampires," Mari said. "We get plenty of the bad ones under-tipping me upstairs."

"Sounds like my kind," Angel said. "Actually, that sounds like Spike."

She grimaced, giving him a sheepish look. "So I overreacted to the whole you not having a pulse concept?"

"It's okay. I appreciate it," Angel said. He dropped the last bullet to the floor and waited for the room to stop spinning. "What happened?"

"He shot you."

"I was going for the part that was after that," Angel said.

"He left," Mari said. "He told me his boss wants what's owed to him or he's coming back at midnight."

"Nothing new?" Angel asked.

Mari shook her head. "Sorry. Didn't seem to like you much, though."

"Feeling's mutual," Angel said. "Do you know *anything* about this? Anything at all?"

"Only rumor," Mari said. "Simon said - "

"Bet that's a joke that annoys him to hell and back."

" - that a few of the store owners around here were talking about some guy demanding stuff," Mari said. "But it all seemed so shady. Simon figured it had nothing to do with him."

"Because he's the one strip club owner in this town who *doesn't* have a few ties to the shady side?" Angel asked.

"He's a good guy," Mari said. "No drugs, no hitting on the girls. Even pays his taxes."

"He's got one up on me then," Angel said. "Where is he now?"

"Vacation," Mari said. "He's not coming back until Sunday."

"Okay," Angel stood up, clamping down on the sounds of pain that wanted to escape him. "You need to go. Call the girls, tell them you're closed, then go home and stay there. It's not safe for any of you tonight."

"What about you?" Mari said.

"I'm going to find this guy," Angel said, "and I'm going to take care of this."

"How?" Mari asked.

"I was thinking lots of violence," Angel said.

"No, *how*?" Mari gestured to the wounds that were still oozing blood into his formerly nice, clean, white shirt. "You're hurt. You can barely *stand*."

"Easy," Angel said. "I've got friends."

"Holy hell," Gunn said, looking up as Angel limped his way back into the Geraces' store. "What truck ran you over?"

"Not a truck," Angel said. "Demon. Your demon. The yellow guy. He's coming around later tonight, and he's not bringing party favors."

"Yeah, we appreciate the bulletin from three hours ago," Spike said. "Got anything else you can entertain us with?"

"This is bigger than we thought," Angel said. "Bigger than this store. He's hitting every place in the neighborhood, and he's saying his boss has a claim on it."

Gunn frowned. "He didn't hit our place."

"Didn't have to." Angel pulled his coat aside to expose the bullet wounds. "He hit me."

Gunn gave a low whistle. "Suddenly thinking this isn't just about contracts."

"It's not," Angel said. "There's something going on here. The guy knew my name. He said his *boss* knew me. He didn't say why, but judging by the reaction I'm gonna guess -"

"Angel, so *help* me if the words 'Senior Partners' are about to come out of your mouth - " Gunn warned.

Angel looked him in the eye. "I think they've done their research. I think these guys are professionals and that they know just how much firepower to bring in order to hurt everyone here. Us included."

"We need a plan," Spike said.

"We need *info*," Gunn said.

Angel nodded towards the pile of paperwork. "Any luck with the research?"

"Not much," Gunn said.

"Hard to track without names or visuals," Spike said. "Did my best but the Mr. and Mrs. had to put the little ones to bed, and they weren't too keen on trying to play spot the mug shot in the 14th century boring text and all things Latin extravaganza in the first place."

"I'll do it," Angel said. "I got a good look at the guy. Even got a name. We just need to figure out who he's working for."

"And then take our complaints right to the top?" Spike said.

Angel nodded. "Exactly."

"We'll have to canvass the neighborhood," Gunn said. "Find out who else was threatened and what they might know."

"Warn them, too," Angel said. "He said he'd be coming back at midnight. I'm thinking this is a good night for everyone to close early."

"Sounds like you might actually give a damn," Gunn said.

"I want to help," Angel said and left it at that.

"There!" Angel jabbed his finger down into the book.

Gunn's truck swerved to the right. "Okay, we need to have ourselves a lesson in how *not* to distract a man when he's behind the wheel."

"Can that be after we do the lesson on the proper way to call shotgun?" Spike asked from his spot between them. He kicked his legs out, trying to find space for himself in all the room taken up by Angel and Gunn. "Because Angel cheats."

"I didn't cheat," Angel said, skimming the text by the picture.

"That seat was *mine*, ponce," Spike told him. He frowned. "And what are you doing with us, anyway? I thought you had your fancy car."

"Can't read and drive," Angel reminded him.

"I continue to be surprised you can read at all," Spike said. "But I would've thought you wouldn't want to keep your little precious out in the big bad streets."

"It's not in the streets," Angel said.

"Don't tell me that you got so overprotective that you *walked* rather than take a chance on it getting a ding," Spike said.

"Well, the thought that you might get near the paint and mar it with your reflection did worry me a bit," Angel said.

Spike jerked his thumb towards his chest. "Vampire, *idiot*. I don't *have* a reflection. Christ, how many times do we have to go over this? We're *both* vampires, we *both* have souls - "

"I'm a better dresser than you," Angel added.

"In no dimension has that ever been true," Spike retorted. "Bloody - what does it *take* to get through to you? Because if I have to start in with the tiny words and the hand pu-"

"*Watch* the p-word," Angel said.

"Oh my God," Gunn said. "It's true. I died three months ago, and hell is having to listen to the two of you for the rest of eternity."

"Angel started it," Spike said.

"Don't make me whup both your asses," Gunn said. "Because I will, and I'd really enjoy it. Angel, what did you find in the text?"

Angel lifted the book up and began to read. "Nort'trick demons - "

Spike peered over his shoulder. "Don't you mean *Nort'treek*?"

"There's a 'q'," Angel said.

"That'd be my point," Spike said.

Angel gave him a look. "If there's no 'u' then you wouldn't pronounce the 'i' like an 'e'."

"If there's no 'u' then you *would* pronounce the 'i' like an 'e'," Spike said, "as anyone with half a brain and understanding of Latin - "

"You're challenging *me* on the Latin?"

"All I'm saying is -"

Gunn brought the truck to a screeching halt and snatched the book out of Angel's hands. "Nort'triq demons. Part of a violent species of demons known for their color-blindness and fondness for eating their victims' internal organs while the organs are still attached."

Angel looked through the back window. "Do you maybe want to move? Because there's traffic."

"Often single-minded in pursuit of a goal," Gunn finished reading, "but most famous for being one of the most annoying demons you're ever likely to cross." He threw the book back into Angel's lap. "So I'm guessing that whoever wrote this never met either of you."

"Was he this cranky before he got the mystical lawyer knowledge?" Spike asked Angel.

"Not saying he wasn't known for his moods," Angel replied.

"Pretty sure he made up that bit about them being annoying," Spike said.

"If this guy is the foot soldier," Gunn said, "how are we going to find ourselves the general?"

"Should be easy," Spike said. "Just canvass the neighborhood, like we planned."

"Right," Angel said. "Somebody's bound to know something."

"I can't believe nobody knew anything," Angel said as they regrouped in the theater's lobby.

"Still say it's your fault for looking more like Night of the Living Dead than usual," Spike told him. "Hard to get people to open up when you introduce yourselves as two detectives and their friend, Mr. Sucking Chest Wounds."

"I'm getting changed," Angel said, climbing the stairs up to his office.

Gunn sat down behind the counter. He searched through the drawers, then pulled out a map. "At least we've got some idea of the scope of this. Looks like our boy has been everywhere from here, to here, to here, and here."

Spike bent over the map from the other side of the counter. "Looks like most of the neighborhood, that."

Angel came back downstairs, adjusting the black button-down shirt that had replaced his ruined turtleneck. "He's had at least a week to get started. Maybe more. This is a big operation."

Gunn drummed his fingers on the countertop. "Only thing I don't get is *why*?"

"Does evil always need a reason?" Spike asked.

"For something like this it does," Gunn said. "Why bother? Why go through all the trouble? Hell, why mess around with the weird contracts in the first place?"

"Contracts scare people," Spike said. "Plus it makes it all legal, as much as they can. Shove the ignorant blokes out into the streets and wave a piece of paper saying they're the new kings on the block."

"Maybe," Angel said, studying the map. "Why here? Why *now*?"

"Because we're not the first ones to decide to be hands-on with urban development?" Gunn guessed.

"It's not a half-stupid idea, Charlie," Spike said. "Plenty of room around here to store up an army if you wanted. Might even find yourself a few new recruits in the bargain."

"We're not going to let that happen," Angel said.

"Yeah, again thanks for the latest from Already On That Page magazine," Gunn said.

Angel ignored him. "What we need is more information. We need a clue. We need a *lead*."

Angel's statement was punctuated by the sound of shattering glass as a brick sailed through the front windows and came to a sliding halt at their feet.

"I'm taking that as a cosmic apology for the rain," Angel said to no one in particular.

"The hell are you talking about?" Gunn asked.

Spike came jogging back from his attempt to catch a glimpse of the assailant. "No idea who did it," he said. He then looked admiringly at the note that was tied to the projectile. "You know, it's nice to see some blokes aren't so fancy they can't honor the classics. Everybody uses cell phones these days. It's so boring."

Angel picked the brick up and tugged the piece of paper free. "Of course, if this is another pizza delivery menu I'm just going to get cranky."

"What's it say?" Gunn asked.

Angel unfolded the paper and read. "We have what you need. Come to Cocetti's to get what you

want."

"Not really certain that's *not* a pizza delivery place," Spike said.

Angel unfolded the piece of paper further, then held up a Polaroid of his car. "Did I mention I had some problems earlier today?"

Cocetti's turned out to be an auto body shop that fell just outside of the boundaries of their neighborhood. Gunn parked out front, scanning the area for any sign of trouble.

"If they hurt my car I'm going to kill them," Angel said. "Just so you know."

"Can we maybe focus on our actual priorities?" Gunn asked.

"It's a *Viper*," Angel said.

"He's got a point," Spike said.

"Get the hell out of my truck," Gunn told them.

Though it was late, there was the sound of metal-on-metal and a high-powered buzzing that indicated the shop was active and open for business. The three of them entered, Angel taking the lead.

"Stay on guard," Angel said. He kept his sword in his right hand at the ready. "We're dealing with dangerous people. Any second now one of them could leap out and - "

"Hi-i!" a small voice sing-songed. "Would you like a cookie?"

Angel looked down at the six-year old girl who stood in front of him. " - offer us refreshments," he finished lamely.

Gunn hefted his axe. "I don't know how big I am on trusting good things come in small packages."

"That scared of a toddler, are you?" Spike scoffed.

"You don't know the little girls I've hung out with," Gunn answered.

"I made them myself," the girl said, holding up a plate filled with oatmeal raisin and chocolate chip. Her blue eyes blinked up at them, her face perfectly framed by two pigtails.

"Frannie!" a voice called out. It was soon followed by the appearance of an elderly man who wore black slacks and a faded grey sweater. "You're up too late. Go and have G.G. tuck you in, eh?"

"Mr. Cocetti," Angel guessed, as the little girl scampered off.

"Please, call me Cossi," the man said. He gestured for them to follow. "Everybody else does. Come, sit. Eat something. Especially you." He pointed to Spike. "Have a cannoli. My wife sees I let somebody so skinny leave this place she'll have my head."

"Not much for the cream filling," Spike said, then added thoughtfully, "least, not from pastries."

"You took my car," Angel accused Cossi.

"It's in the back." Cossi sat down at a folding table, grunting as he shifted his weight. "We rotated the tires. Plus it wouldn't kill you to change the oil every three months. Not that your species would know from being dead, no offense to you leeches."

Spike gave him a look. "None taken, you big, ugly - "

Gunn silenced him with a nudge. "You said you had what we wanted?"

"What *he* wanted," Cossi gestured at Angel. "You guys I don't know about. Actually I do, but I don't care. I'm old. I don't have time for this shit. Most days it's all I can do to keep Frannie's mother from putting me in an early grave, but that's what I get for letting her marry a Pollack. Perfectly nice boy down at Our Lady of the Holy Martyr, but does she care? No. She's American, she tells me. She marries who she wants. Now my shop has a manager who thinks manual transmission is a car dealer down in Little Mexico. But do I complain? No."

"Was there a point somewhere in all of this?" Angel asked.

"That you need to take better care of your car," Cossi said. "And of your neighborhood. Frankly my money's on car first, but that's only because I've seen what it looks like. Have you even *met* a garage?"

"I parked it on the street *one time*," Angel said.

"What was that part about the neighborhood?" Gunn asked.

"And you could've just *called* if you wanted to give me information," Angel continued. "Now I've got to get back my car *and* fix my window *and* -"

"Did I mention I'm old?" Cossi said. "I'm old. Maybe not corpse-old like you, but my time is valuable. Besides, something tells me the famous Angel isn't going to come calling when the head of the Cocetti clan invites him over to tea."

The three of them exchanged looks.

"Head of the who?" Spike asked.

Cossi sighed. "This is the lack of respect that comes these days. I blame you kids," he pointed at Gunn. "Not because you're black but you're modern. You have no respect for rules or tradition."

"Actually, I know that name," Gunn realized. "You guys used to be pretty heavy mafia back in the 50s and 60s."

"Cosa Nostra," Cossi corrected. "I look like some fat Sicilian to you?"

"I'm noticing the words *used to be* in that description," Angel pointed out.

"Things change," Cossi said. "Crime changes. Me? I don't like it. In the old days if you had a problem then you killed the guy or buried his brother underneath the baseball stadium. It was simple. You knew where you stood."

Spike gave a wistful sigh. "Good times."

Gunn nudged him again. "And that's what you're trying to do now? Recapture the glory days?"

"I wouldn't go in with the crime families these days if Capone himself offered me a blowjob," Cossi said. "It's too much. You got your drugs, your demons, plus this shit with the rap music. That's not singing. Give me The Chairman any day, God bless his bastard soul, even though he still owes me a thousand bucks."

Spike cleared his throat. "You know he's dead now?"

Cossi gave him a look. "That's what *you* think."

"So why are you trying to take over my neighborhood?" Angel asked.

"You lose your brains when they give you the Champion gig?" Cossi asked. "I don't *want* your neighborhood, mosquito. I want *my* neighborhood to be left in peace. But in case you didn't notice when you drove that straight line from your place to here, I live right next to you. You fuck up this little showdown and then *I* have to deal with it. I don't want to. I'm retired. Plus my son-in-law is

close enough to retarded that I don't actually know the difference. But at least my granddaughter takes after her mother. Or the parts of her I don't want to smack. Not that I'd ever hit a woman, mind you."

"Because there's rules," Gunn said.

"Don't make fun," Cossi said. "I sneezed more power before breakfast than any of you three put together. Than *this* asshole did before he decided he was going to fill the void."

"Wait." Angel held up a hand to stop him. "*Which* asshole?"

Cossi looked back at him. "Ymo Ga. Head of the Ga family. Three-horned bastard who used to control the crime syndicate out in Chicago. Now he's coming out here."

"Yeah," Spike said. "Because our pissant little neighborhood is such a step up from Chicago's gangster high life."

"Your pissant neighborhood is part of Los Angeles," Cossi said. "And I don't know how you plasma-suckers used to do it in your day, but in mine you pick your battles wisely."

"You hit the easiest targets first," Angel said. "Then use that to your advantage."

"Yeah." Cossi gave him a look. "Or you find out where your competition lives and then set fire to his neighborhood. Hopefully with him in it."

"Wait - what?" Angel asked. "How the hell am I anybody's competition?"

"Holy Mother of God." Cossi drew his eyes Heavenward. "It's a good thing my daughter isn't here. She might think you're her husband."

Angel raised his sword and pressed it into Cossi's chest. "What do you know that I don't?"

"Apparently volumes," Cossi said. "But with regards to this I know that you used to be in charge of Wolfram & Hart. And when you destroyed the company you left a huge gap for every demon-monster-crime syndicate *freak* to try to fill in. That law firm kept control of this town. Maybe they were more evil than most of us, but at least we all knew who was in charge. Now they're gone, and it's chaos. If this town goes to shit while every underground cabal battles it out for control of this place, then that's *your* fault. *You* made it happen."

Angel lowered his sword, blinking as he took that in. "Oh."

Cossi stood up. "I'll give you your car back, but you better fix this mess. Otherwise everybody who dies because of this is going to be on your head."

Cossi left them alone. The three of them stood in silence, absorbing that information.

"Just out of curiosity," Gunn asked. "Is there going to be a time today when you *don't* feel like a jackass for refusing to help us with this case?"

"I'm working on it," Angel admitted.

THREE YEARS AGO

Angel thought about it. "So I'm the center of the universe?"

Wesley gave him a look. "I didn't say that."

*Angel got out of the car, then waited for Wesley to join him. "No, no. I think you just did. **I** have a destiny, **I** affect the lives of other people, **I** -"*

"Am an enormous wanker?" Wesley finished.

"Leave my enormous wank out of this," Angel replied. He shared a grin with Wesley while falling into step beside him.

"A curse on whoever gave you the idea that you understood British swear words," Wesley declared.

"I'm sure Darla's got enough problems to deal with," Angel said.

Wesley moved aside to let two young women pass. "Let's not start that again."

"Behind me, promise," Angel said. "Cross my heart and everything."

Wesley adjusted his glasses. "You realize that promise might mean a bit more if your heart actually did something?"

Angel stopped and touched Wesley's arm to get him to stay still. "My heart does things."

"Of course," Wesley said at once. "Angel, I apologize. I didn't mean - "

"I know what you meant," Angel said. "About all of this. And I know that you're worried about me. I can't say I blame you. But it's okay. I'm okay. Buffy's gone, but I'm still all right."

"You don't have to be," Wesley said. "Not if you aren't ready to go it alone."

"I'm not alone," Angel said. "I've got you. I've got Cordy."

Wesley smiled. "No man is poor who hath friends?"

"Not friends," Angel said. "Family."

PRESENT DAY

"We need info," Angel said, pacing around the lobby.

Gunn tapped furiously at the keyboard on his laptop. "Working on it."

"Something, anything," Angel said.

"Can't you polish a sword or something?" Spike asked from his perch on the countertop. He gestured to mimic Angel's back and forth path across the carpet. "It's like a vampire shooting gallery, and believe me I don't need the temptation."

"Give me something to hit, and I'll stop," Angel said.

Gunn's computer beeped. "Okay. Looks like all I gotta do is bypass the primary mainframe, break through the standard encryptions, disable the security devices, and I'm in."

Angel halted. "You can do that?"

"No," Gunn said, "because I got zapped into being a mystical lawyer, not being the mystical IT department. But I'll see what I can do."

"This went a lot faster when we had the firm," Angel said, his shoulders slumping.

"Oh, those carefree days," Spike drawled. "Whyever did we leave?"

"All I'm saying is we had resources," Angel frowned. "Don't we *still* have some resources? I mean,

I've got the car, Gunn kept his knowledge - "

"Sorry, bro," Gunn said, still typing. "But when you told us to live out the day like it was our last I didn't exactly put 'run full system backup' high on my To Do list."

"You realize I have no idea what any of those words mean," Angel said.

Gunn smirked. "I didn't make any copies of the Wolfram & Hart computer database on the day before we all tried using killing ourselves as a way to quit."

"Too busy drinking and shagging?" Spike said, nodding his approval. He squinted at Angel. "What'd you do on your day off anyway?"

Angel opened up the weapons cabinet and began to sort what was inside. "I went for coffee."

"All right," Spike said. "All joking aside? One of these days I need to teach you what fun actually looks like, because it's getting embarrassing being related to you. More so than usual."

Gunn's computer beeped again. "Okay. I think I found something."

"Finally." Angel came over to look. "What'd you do? Break into old police reports? Sneak your way into the private records of their dummy corporations?"

"Checked out old copies of the Tribune," Gunn said. "You gotta read in between the lines, but once you get past all the euphemisms you can find our friendly neighborhood Ga family."

"What can you tell us?" Angel asked.

"For starters," Gunn said, "the good news is Cossi wasn't lying. Big time family, long term ties to Chicago, the works."

Spike cocked his head. "If that's the good news, what's the bad?"

"All those euphemisms?" Gunn asked. He swiveled his computer around, revealing a headline that said 'CHICAGO SHALL RISE AGAIN'. "Looks like this was the one they used to describe a hostile takeover."

Spike frowned. "Isn't rising again a happy thing?"

Angel shook his head. "It's not. That's from the Great Fire."

"1666?" Spike asked.

"1871," Gunn corrected. "Chicago. The presses burned along with everything else. Took two days before the Tribune could report anything."

Spike gave an appreciative whistle. "Cossi wasn't joking around. They're going to torch the place, ideally with us in it."

"Exactly," Gunn said. He opened up a few more windows. "Apparently - I'm getting this from older reports now - apparently the Ga family wanted to control L.A. before it was even a fully formed city, but Wolfram & Hart snuck in and stole it out from under them."

"And now that Wolfram & Hart is gone," Angel said, "they're trying to reclaim what belonged to them."

"Hence the contracts," Gunn said, pulling up an online example of one. "Apparently what your pal Pete's been handing out are copies of documents that are centuries old and date back to the original settlers."

"Doesn't explain what his boss wanted with Angel, though," Spike pointed out.

"Doesn't matter," Angel said. "They're coming to destroy this neighborhood and everyone in it,

and we're not going to let them."

"Not to sing a pessimistic chorus," Spike said, "but *how*?"

"We are running low on time," Gunn said. "Midnight's just about here."

"We'll find them," Angel said. "We'll find them, and we'll stop them. Because that's what we do. We're the heroes, and we're going to protect every last person in this city even if that means risking our lives all over again. Senior Partners, mafia, whoever. Let them come. Let them attack. And just let them *try* fucking with me."

Gunn stared at him for a moment. "Feeling better now that you got that off your chest?"

"Little bit, yeah," Angel admitted.

"Don't suppose you've got anything that resembles a plan?" Spike asked.

"I do." Angel went back to the weapons cabinet, and hauled out his sword. "We track them down, and then we kill them. A lot."

Spike grinned, jumping down off of the counter. "Now *that* I can get behind."

Gunn joined Angel by the cabinet, lifting out his axe. "No offense, but with you pretty much out of commission I'd feel better if we had a plan B or a secret weapon or something."

"We do," Angel said. He opened the door to the basement and called down, "Illyria? Time to earn your rent."

"It's all so much show and drama," Spike said as they canvassed the streets and alleyways. "Deadline looming, midnight coming, big battle deciding it all."

"And when *Spike's* the one saying you've got too much show and drama...", Angel said.

"I still say what we need is a tollbooth, then an exact duplicate of this town in between us and the bad guys," Gunn said.

"Not enough time to learn the musical number," Angel replied. He stopped, looking around. "Okay, let's split up. Illyria, get up on top of the buildings. Keep your eyes peeled for anything suspicious."

Illyria barely turned her head in his direction. "I do not follow your orders."

"Consider it a personal favor, then," Angel said. "Gunn? How about you go right and do the same? Spike and I can take left."

"I've told you once, I've told you a hundred times," Spike said, "you *can't* hold my hand in the middle of a brawl. Might make people think I like you."

"There's a fork in the road one block down," Angel retorted. "*Believe* me, we're going to split up."

Spike started down the alleyway. "And here I thought our relationship was finally starting to work."

"I might kill him," Angel said to no one in particular. "I make no promises at all about not doing that."

"Bad guys first," Gunn reminded him.

Angel mimed throwing his sword at Spike, then dropped it back down to his side. "Yeah, all right."

Gunn chuckled as they all parted ways.

The streets were still annoyingly quiet - not even a stray car or two - as Gunn did his sweep. He didn't mind so much, though. This was the good stuff. Keeping the hometown safe. Maybe even doing a fight or twelve. *That* was a mission he could get behind. No more of this lawyer bullshit. Though it didn't hurt that he still knew how to negotiate the hell out of a parking ticket.

Without supernatural senses to guide him, he had to rely on instinct. He fell into the easy walk he'd used when he was with his crew. Not a rush, because that'd tire you out before the nasties had a chance to attack. Not too slow, because then you looked like a victim. No, right in the middle. An easy stride that said you weren't worried, because you owned the place.

His eyes were both focused and unfocused. He didn't stare too intently at one thing, but rather let everything familiar retreat into the background so that the unknown leapt to his attention. Over there was a flash of movement, but a hiss soon after identified it as a cat. Behind him was a noise, but it was the hum of an air conditioner turning on.

To his left was a shadow, and -

"Hey!"

Gunn grabbed hold of the shape that had just tried to sneak into a doorway. He pushed it back against the wall and held his axe up.

"Okay, talk and talk quick, or else you're going to be feeling my sudden weight-loss plan," Gunn said. "I call it my no-head diet."

"Sounds kinky," the thing said. It moved out of the darkness and smiled up at him with dazzling eyes and bright red lips. "Though I'm not so sure if that's a promise or a threat."

Gunn blinked, staring. "*Gwen?*"

"It was *not* Milan, and you bloody well know it," Spike said. "It was *Athens*."

"You and I have never been to Athens," Angel said.

"Hence my point," Spike said. "My best holiday ever was *Athens*, sans you, plus Dru and a great little dance club not far from our hotel."

"Fair enough," Angel said. "I can agree with enjoying a holiday where I don't have to watch you looking like an idiot out on the dance floor. Or anywhere else, for that matter."

"Oh no," Spike said. "If you're opening up the game for comments about dancing then we need to discuss the great Parisian debacle of 1889."

"Sure," Angel said. "Because then I'll just mention London, 1892."

Spike frowned. "I don't remember dancing in London in 1892."

"Two words," Angel said. "Striped pants."

"That was *fashion*," Spike protested.

"That was *tragedy*," Angel said. "And I say this as the only one of us who's actually been to hell, so that's saying something."

Spike sighed. "Bloody - okay, *one* more time. We're *both* vampires, we *both* have souls, we've *both* been - "

"Your noise is endless," Illyria said, appearing beside them, "and distracts all who hear it."

"No luck on the rooftops, huh?" Angel asked.

Illyria swiveled a look at him. She remained silent, but Angel felt safe in translating her expression as "Duh."

"No luck down here, either," Spike said, as capable of understanding Illyria's silences as Angel was. "Are we *sure* we're on the right game?"

"We had warning," Angel said, though in truth he wasn't so certain about it either. He rubbed the back of his neck with his left hand, wincing past the twitches of pain that it caused. "Cossi said - "

"Yeah," Spike said, "and what you always want to do is take the word of the man who nicks your car."

"Pete said he'd be back, too," Angel said. "That he was going to collect."

"Can usually trust a shylock," Spike admitted. "'Least as far as it goes."

"There is an imbalance of power," Illyria said. She was walking ahead now, her back to the both of them.

"The Wolfram & Hart thing was probably right," Angel agreed. "Pete and Cossi both said I had something to do with it."

"Plenty of reasons to hate you," Spike reminded him. "For example, I'm still content to go on about that shirt you were wearing earlier."

"Spike - " Angel shot him a warning glare, the irritation behind it fueled by the itching of his wounded skin and the headache that was slowly building behind his temples. "I have had a *long* day."

"And I haven't?" Spike asked.

"Not liking my shirt doesn't qualify you for a bad day," Angel said.

"Putting up with you bloody well does in my book," Spike said. He pressed his thumb to his right temple, closing his eyes for a moment. "Angel, for the love of - "

"Something is wrong," Illyria said.

"We *know*," Spike said. "We're trying to fix it."

Illyria turned to face them. "There is death."

Angel and Spike looked at each other before running in the direction Illyria had indicated. It took them only a few blocks before they found what she had sensed.

"*Bloody* - " Spike said, momentarily at a loss for any other words.

"Don't touch them." Angel squatted down, getting a better view of the twisted heaps of demon bodies that littered the street around him. The streetlights above them buzzed, flickering on and off and bathing the area in an eerie blue glow from the spatters of demon blood that had managed to reach up that high.

"This them?" Spike asked, nudging a limp hand with his booted foot.

Angel spied Pete's face amongst the mix. "Yep."

"Who got here first, you reckon?" Spike asked. "Cossi's boys?"

"Cossi didn't have any boys," Angel said.

"Had boys enough to steal your car," Spike pointed out.

"That's different," Angel said. He didn't know demon physiology, but he knew what sadism looked like. "That was planned. This was pleasurable."

"There are more," Illyria said, standing amongst the carnage as though it meant nothing to her. "They run in fear like vermin."

"Like *smart* vermin," Spike said.

Angel stood up, rubbing his neck again. "Let's track them down. Figure this out. If we've got something even more dangerous hanging around then I want it dead *now*."

"No arguments here." Spike walked the perimeter, peering down alleyways. "Either of you two catching a scent?"

"No," Angel said. He stuck to the immediate area, his eyes searching for clues. The on/off buzz of the lights made it hard for him to focus. "I'm not seeing anything either."

"Something is wrong," Illyria said.

Angel opened his mouth to borrow Gunn's crack about already being on that page. Then he slowly closed it again.

Itching. Headache. Wrongness. *Lights*.

He lifted his sword up, whirling around. "Spike, do you - "

But it was no good. The world plunged into darkness, and there was the sickening sensation of everything being pulled inside-out. Angel dropped to his knees, seeing Spike falling back in much the same way as the air around them exploded into life.

No, not life. *Demons*.

"What the - " Spike shouted across to him.

"They're not on our side!" Angel shouted back. It was self-evident information, but it was all he had. It was them. The same ones that had attacked in Newport. Dark and vaporous and flying about looking like Death itself with robes and swords.

Angel smiled. Swords he knew how to handle.

He got up, bringing his blade right into the path of a swooping demon. It connected, sending a painful clang directly through his wounded side, but he bit down on the pain and kept going. Thrust, kick, parry, jab. They were hard and tough, but he knew he could take them. He'd faced the Beast. He'd faced a dragon. He could face anything, no matter what. All it required was the rhythm of him and his weapon and that beautiful dance of hit, hit, duck, slice, jump, kick, dodge, see the opening, force the exposure, feint and then *thrust* -

- only Angel's blade fell right through the demon, as though it were made of air, and he fell through along with it.

He slammed down onto the ground, his sword skittering out of his reach. "What the - ?"

He looked around. Spike and Illyria were at it as well. Both of them fighting and being matched hit for hit.

Except when the hits came close to doing damage, at which point the demons vanished, disappearing into a haze of air, only to re-form behind their attacker.

"Problem," Angel said.

"Just a little," Spike agreed. He dove down, narrowly avoiding being hit by Illyria as she was picked up and thrown by one of the demons. She went flying across the street, not stopping until her body connected with the brick wall of a building. The bricks and mortar sprayed red and grey dust all around, and Illyria slid to the ground, leaving the imprint of her body in her wake.

Angel and Spike met each other's eyes. "*Big* problem."

Spike helped Angel to his feet, and they resumed their attack. The demons came at them faster now, vanishing and reappearing in a constant, swirling, disorienting dance. Angel tried to focus, keeping his eye on the weapons when nothing else would do.

But the demons were faster than that, and he and Spike were outnumbered. Angel's hits began to meet nothing but air, his side ached, his head was spinning, and he could see nothing but darkness.

He tried again, summoning the last of his strength to lift his sword and stab -

- and fell forward, but this time not to the ground. This time he fell right into a demon's grasp.

He struggled, or tried to, but the demon was stronger and had lifted him into the air. Without anything to brace against, Angel had no leverage. All he could do was try to get free. Somehow to break the hold, get out, regroup, fight *back*.

He'd gotten as far as forming that plan when the demon's sword disappeared and in its place was a rotting, skeletal hand.

The hand lifted up, caressed his cheek, and then clamped onto his face.

It was then, as Angel's body filled with a pain so exquisite that a dragon burn seemed almost pleasurable in comparison, that he understood how Pete and the other demons had come to die.

Their bodies had exploded from the agony.

TO BE CONTINUED...

Feedback!

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