

## 6.4 Deceivers

**By: The Brat Queen**

Madlyn Fortune crossed the red-tiled patio of the back porch, her two-hundred-dollar flip-flops making rhythmic slaps against the ground. A breeze danced across the yard, catching a few wisps of her highlighted but otherwise natural blond hair. She was a picture of California beauty, with tanned skin, a purple and aqua Varatello sarong slung casually but sensually around her hips, straight, blinding white teeth, and a sky blue bikini top that matched her eyes while showing just the *right* amount of cleavage - also natural - without crossing the line into slutty.

A musical chime rang out at the exact same moment that she passed through the sliding glass doors that led inside to the kitchen, as though the timer had merely been waiting for her to arrive. She pushed the stop button on the pink and silver device.

"Kids," she called out. "Snack time! The seven layer bars are done!"

A stampede of six- and seven-year-old feet quickly followed.

"Awesome, Mom!" Ellen, the seven year old, proclaimed as she took her seat by the island that served as their informal dining table. She had her father's brown hair but her mother's eyes.

Nathan wasn't as convinced. "Do these have walnuts?"

"Walnuts are good for you," Madlyn told him. She ruffled his blond hair. "They make your brain big, just like your Daddy's."

"I want a big brain like Mommy's," Ellen said, drawing herself up to her full height.

Madlyn began cutting into the bars, making sure that each one had the right amount of chocolate chips sprinkled on top. "You can have that, too."

"Hi, hon." Allen came into the room and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Something smells good. Are those new?"

"I found the recipe in a magazine," Madlyn said. She used a crystal-handled dessert knife to lift each bar onto a china plate. "It's not low-carb, but it's a great way to get certain people to eat some f-r-u-i-t."

"Mo-om," Ellen whined, "I can *spell*."

"That is because *you* are a smart cookie." Allen leaned across the counter to kiss each of the children on the tops of their heads. "Both of you."

"I drew a fish today," Nathan told him.

"I did a cat," Ellen said, not to be outdone.

"Sounds like some more masterpieces for the wall," Allen said. "Why don't you two go get them for me while your Mom and I say hello?"

Madlyn ducked out of the way as the children ran back into the playroom. "It's been quite a busy day."

"Any problems with the plumber?" Allen asked.

"Late, *again*," Madlyn said. She set the glasses and plates on the table. "You know I don't like to make a fuss but -"

"I'll call him," Allen promised.

"The faucet's been dripping for weeks," Madlyn reminded him.

Allen pulled his cell phone out of his coat pocket. "I'll do it right now."

Madlyn wrapped her arms around his waist. "Thank you, darling."

"Mommy!" Nathan's voice sang out. "Ellen won't share the tape!"

Allen gave her a sympathetic grin. "No rest for the maternal."

"Coming!" Madlyn called back. She gave Allen one last squeeze before heading down the hall. She wondered how it was possible for the house to contain four people and nine tape dispensers, yet still come up short.

As she entered into the playroom, she saw Nathan and Ellen standing with their backs to the wall. Their eyes were wide and focused on something just out of view.

Madlyn rushed over to them. "Kids? Kids? What's wrong?"

"M-mommy?" Ellen stammered.

Madlyn turned around, putting the children protectively behind her. "What is it? What do you - "

The words died as Madlyn's eyes locked on the disgusting creature that was standing on the far side of the room. As soon as it saw Madlyn staring at it, it dropped the china vase it was holding and bolted.

Allen came running in at the sound of the crash. "Honey? What is it? Oh my God, you look like you've seen a ghost!"

---

In the lobby of the Walden Theater, the members of Angel Investigations stared at the man who had just walked into their midst.

"So," Wesley said, when no one else would break the silence, "what's new?"

---

## [Watch the Credits](#)

- **Episode 6.4:** Deceivers
- **Written by:** The Brat Queen
- **Story Developed by:** The Brat Queen and Stakebait
- **Edited by:** Kara and Wolfling
- **Research by:** Adoxerella
- **Produced by:** The Brat Queen and Flaming Muse

---

Spike was the first to speak. "Didn't think we'd be seeing you again."

"Ironic words from the resurrected vampire," Wesley pointed out, his eyebrows quirked.

"But this is great, right?" Gunn asked the world at large. He stepped forward, claspng Wesley in a rough, masculine hug. "You're alive."

Angel, however, heard what Gunn could not. Or, more accurately, he knew what *none* of them was hearing: Wesley's heartbeat. "No, he isn't."

"He is a dead body," Illyria declared. She grabbed Wesley by the arm, drawing him away from Gunn and into the light. Her blue eyes seemed disappointed. "No more than an animated corpse with a life force artificially trapped inside."

"And they said you and I would never have anything in common," Wesley mused.

"Don't smell like vampire," Spike observed, his head cocked. "Don't smell like demon either. What brings you back, then?"

"Wolfram & Hart." Angel met Wesley's eyes. "That's it, isn't it?"

Wesley nodded, watching Angel carefully. "It's rather awkward, dying while still under the employ of the very enemy you are attempting to annihilate."

"I don't get it," Spike said.

"Standard perpetuity clause," Angel said. "Contracts with the firm extend beyond death."

"We *had* that?" Gunn frowned. "How the hell did I *miss* that?"

"Might want to worry if you *still* have it," Spike said. "Myself, this is why I don't work for anyone but yours truly. You, on the other hand - "

"You aren't still under contract," Wesley interrupted. "None of you are. I made certain of it."

"You remain bound to them." Illyria walked a slow circle around Wesley, her eyes never leaving him. "Your very life force throbs with the connection."

"Yes, that's a very awkward way to put it, but true nonetheless." Wesley stepped away from Illyria, apparently made uncomfortable by her scrutiny. "I won't lie to any of you. I'm on their payroll. You are looking at someone who works for Wolfram & Hart."

"Why'd you come 'round here, then?" Spike asked.

Wesley answered the question while looking directly at Angel. "Because this is where my loyalty lies."

"He stays," Angel told them all.

Annoyance flashed across Gunn's face. "Angel - "

"He *stays*."

"I'm not saying he doesn't." Gunn held up his hands in a gesture of peace. "I'm just saying let's keep our eyes and minds open. You're the one who's been jumping at Senior-Partner-shaped shadows all summer. You're telling me finding out the firm's coming back for real doesn't ring a warning bell in your head?"

"Senior-Partner-shaped shadows?" Wesley asked.

"Long story," Spike said, dismissing it with a snort. "*Don't* make Angel talk about it."

"The vampire sees danger in every corner," Illyria said. She had managed to move closer to Wesley's side again. "He battles illusions and fantasies."

"Don't exactly think I'm having a fantasy about Wes here." Angel paused, hearing his words. "Okay, that might have come out wrong."

"The firm hasn't rebuilt itself yet," Wesley said. "In point of fact the offices haven't even been finished. But it won't be long before it's fully operational, complete with all the dangers that entails."

"Any of those dangers include floaty demons?" Spike asked. He fumbled in his pockets for his cigarettes and a lighter. "Angel got himself into a right tizzy about those."

"I think I have a right to be," Angel said. "Considering they tried to kill me, my girlfriend, and all of us."

Wesley's forehead creased with concern. "Someone's been trying to kill you?"

"Who *doesn't* want to kill him?" Spike asked, the words muffled around his cigarette.

"Let's focus on the dangers in front of us," Gunn said.

"I *am* focused on the dangers in front of us," Angel shot back.

"The Haunters do not concern us now," Illyria told Angel. "They do not currently cry out for your blood."

"*They* don't," Angel stressed the word with a sharp gesture of his hand. "But somebody *else* could."

"Could," Gunn agreed, "but in the meanwhile there's the law firm."

"Could," Spike said, raising his voice over the ringing of the phone. "But in the meanwhile there's clients."

"I think perhaps someone needs to tell me what's going on," Wesley said.

"Demons, clients, danger," Angel said, bottom-lining it. "You want in?"

The corner of Wesley's mouth twitched with a smile. "I wouldn't be anyplace else."

"I got the phone," Gunn said, grabbing the receiver before the machine kicked in.

"And we need - " Angel hesitated, then grasped onto something that wasn't entirely untrue " - research. That's downstairs. Wes, you're with me."

"I will come." Illyria looked up at Wesley. "I gathered your possessions and - "

"It's not that kind of research," Angel said, almost hating that he had to stop her.

Surprisingly, Wes seemed to understand. "Yes, I think it's best if Angel and I do this one alone."

---

"It's been quite the summer holiday for you, hasn't it?" Wesley said as he followed Angel down into the bowels of the theater.

Angel turned on lights as he went. "Well, it's no being trapped under the ocean, but we've tried to keep busy."

"I like the new office," Wesley said.

Angel's mouth twitched in a wry grin. "Best we could afford."

"It's fine. It has character." Wesley paused before adding, "The new slogan, as well - "

"Oh no."

"Angel: A Seething Penis Tit," Wesley quoted. He tilted his head thoughtfully. "A bit more adult than 'helping the helpless', granted, but even so. It's refreshingly frank."

"Spike was supposed to put the real slogan back up," Angel said as he shouldered open the door that lead

to Illyria's hallway.

Wesley smirked. "And you believed him?"

"We've been having problems with temps," Angel said.

"Spike works here as a temp?" Wesley asked.

"More like a hanger-on," Angel stopped outside of Illyria's room. "After the battle things got a little weird. Actually, *during* the battle - "

"I'm sure you did fine," Wesley said. He looked into the room, his eyes widening as he saw the collection inside. "Oh my."

Angel twisted the dial to make the overhead lights brighter. "This is everything of yours she could get her hands on. Don't have your bike or anything, but if it was in your office or your apartment she's got it."

Wesley walked around the room, taking it all in. "Well, that's... remarkably obsessive of her."

"For a while there I kept expecting her to shove *you* into a corner," Angel watched Wesley carefully. "But I guess now I know why that didn't happen."

"The Senior Partners do make it rather difficult for one to have a proper burial," Wesley agreed. He immediately turned his attention to the bookshelves. "How on *earth* does she have this organized?"

"She does it by category," Angel said. "Shapes, colors, textures, you name it."

"I see." Wesley frowned. "No, actually, I don't. *Why?*"

"She wants to understand you," Angel said. "She thinks if she can find the right pattern then she can figure you out."

"If she has any luck with that by all means let me know," Wesley said. He gestured around him. "So what was the pattern this week?"

"This was a hard one," Angel said. "Took me a while before I got it."

"The books are all together - " Wesley pointed. " - but the clothing is scattered about. And my weapons and magic supplies are everywhere."

"It's based on the sound they make when you drop them," Angel said.

A look of horror crossed Wesley's face. "Good Lord. Do I have any glassware left?"

"Some," Angel said. He opened up the cabinet where Illyria had put anything that could shatter. "She didn't actually drop everything; she just guessed."

Wesley immediately began searching inside. "Excellent. That dragon obviously didn't treat you kindly. If Illyria has my things then I should have a jar of aloe vera in here somewhere."

"How'd you know this was a dragon burn?" Angel asked. "Wait - you mean aloe vera would *work?*"

"Of course it would; it's helpful for any sort of burn damage." Wesley handed over a glass jar before carefully shutting the cabinet again. "Why? Did you think otherwise?"

"I... kinda." Angel shoved the jar into his coat pocket, then tried to change the subject. "Speaking of what happened, how *are* you?"

Wesley shrugged. "As well as could be expected."

"Do you need to talk?" Angel asked. "Cause if you need somebody who's got experience with the whole coming back from the dead thing, I think I know a guy."

Wesley smiled. "I don't, but thank you."

"You sure?" Angel searched Wesley's face for any sign of pain or fear. British stoicism looked right back at him. Angel decided to up the stakes just a tiny bit. "Tell your folks yet?"

That earned him an eyebrow quirk. "And lose the only acceptable excuse I've ever had to not have to call home come Christmas?"

Angel didn't have to imagine what a true parent would feel like to find out they hadn't completely lost their son. "Your mom would want to know."

"You should use that lotion at least three times a day," Wesley non-answered. "It's not much, but I can get you more."

Angel decided to let Wesley avoid the more uncomfortable topics if he wanted to. "You that ready to get back into the swing of things?"

"If you'll have me," Wesley replied.

"We need the help," Angel admitted. "You up for it? How's your damage, anyway?"

"Negligible, compared to yours," Wesley said. He lifted up the front of his shirt, exposing the deep red scar that was etched into the skin beneath his ribcage.

Angel bent down to study it. He had no problem picturing the size of the blade or exactly which organs of Wesley's it had torn apart. "Must've hurt."

"It passed quickly enough." Wesley smoothed his shirt back down. When he spoke, his voice was distant, as though he were saying the words to himself. "It's fascinating."

Angel straightened up. He kept his voice just as quiet. "What?"

"To have a heart that doesn't beat but a body that can still feel pain and bleed." Wesley let the words hang between them for a moment before dismissing the mood with a brittle smile. "Who knew you and I would end up having so much in common?"

Angel tried to reach out to him, knowing how easy it would be for Wesley to fall back into the madness that had shaped his life after Fred's death. "Wes - "

"You're right." Wesley met his eyes. "About what you've been thinking."

Angel frowned. "Which part of it?"

"The Senior Partners," Wesley said. "Your fears are absolutely correct."

Angel was surprised to discover that he hadn't expected ever to have confirmation of that fact. "They are?"

Wesley nodded. "You hurt them more than anyone ever has in the past. They hate you for it. They want to punish you."

"Not that I don't enjoy knowing I get another smug round of told-you-so with Gunn," Angel said, "but what's the catch?"

"You're looking at him," Wesley said. "The Senior Partners want to make you suffer, and they want to use me to do it."

Angel took a moment to let the truth of that sink in. "Okay," he said, carefully, "and how's that working out for them?"

"If they were relying on the element of surprise," Wesley said, "I daresay it's not going as well as they'd hoped."

"Not planning on helping them?" Angel asked.

To his credit, Wesley didn't look offended by the question. "I'm not on their side, Angel. I'm on yours. They may have brought me back, but I am here for you, and I made that expressly clear to them from the start."

"They let you come back anyway?" Angel asked.

"I believe they think they can use me in spite of it," Wesley said.

"You disagree?" Angel asked.

Wesley shook his head. "No, I do agree. But my hope is that I can be of some use to you before it happens."

"Okay," Angel folded his arms. "What's the plan?"

"Theirs? I don't know," Wesley admitted. "However, I have reason to believe that they don't know either. If they are using me as a key figure, then they've left me remarkably in the dark. But in the meanwhile I shall have full access to the firm and can give you information as I find it."

"Think you can handle a life of a double agent?" Angel asked.

"As my choice is the life of a double agent or no life at all," Wesley said, "my answer is unequivocally yes."

"What about the rest of what you said?" Angel asked. "About you working here?"

"I work for Wolfram & Hart in name only," Wesley said. "My loyalty is to you. My goal is the good fight. If you wish to turn me away I won't hold it against you, but my strength and resources are yours if you want them."

"We've got clients," Angel said. "And demons."

Wesley spread his hands in a gesture of invitation. "Which do you wish me to help with first?"

Angel smiled, feeling as though hundreds of pounds of weight had lifted off of his shoulders. "Upstairs. Pretty sure we've got a meeting."

---

"Wes is joining us," Angel announced as the two of them returned to the lobby. He guided Wesley over to a chair by the counter. "Take a seat. Tell me what you think of all this."

Wesley looked around at everyone. "Where's Illyria?"

"She likes to be busy in the back rooms when we've got new customers," Gunn said with a wink.

Wesley nodded, clearly thinking that idea wise. "All right, then. Could someone tell me what I've missed?"

"Big battle with the demons ended but we've got bugger-all idea of why," Spike said, flicking his cigarette ashes down onto the carpet. Two crushed cigarette butts decorated the floor as well. "We're inside a place that's better at selling those mints with the chocolate on them than it is for battle. Charlie here's got some electro-bird he doesn't want to admit to everybody he's keen on shagging. Angel's being a right pain in everyone's arse, and - "

"Yes," Wesley interrupted, clearing his throat. "As fascinating as all of that is, I meant that perhaps someone could tell me what I've missed about our *clients*?"

Spike paused, looking at the man and woman standing by the counter as though he'd forgotten their existence. "Oh. That. Dunno. Been tuning them out for minutes now."

"Allen and Madlyn Fortune." Gunn handed Wesley the file he'd drawn up. "Came to us because they think maybe their house is haunted."

"Which sounds silly, I know," Allen said, apparently too wrapped up in his own problems to have noticed or cared enough to respond to Spike's insult. He exuded a nervous energy that kept him in constant motion, and he stepped back and forth between the countertop and his wife. His wife, for her part, remained silent and withdrawn. "I mean, seeing dead people, that's straight out of the movies, right?"

Angel's eyes flickered over to Wesley. "Not as much as you'd think."

"It's not dead people," Madlyn said, her voice barely above a whisper. She appeared frightened by the attention and stepped behind her husband as though he were a shield.

Allen patted her shoulder comfortingly. "We're not sure what it is, but for weeks now we've been seeing all sorts of strange things around our house."

Wesley began to take notes. "Strange in what manner?"

"Things being moved to rooms they don't belong in," Allen said. "Doors opening and closing when nobody's around to touch them. Weird voices. Things smeared across the walls." Allen gave a half-hearted chuckle. "We've got two kids. For a while we assumed it was them."

"What changed your mind?" Angel asked.

Allen hugged his wife one last time before stepping forward and handing out photographs. "These. They started about a week ago."

Angel studied the pictures he'd been given. "Blood on the walls, knives slashed through pillowcases, clothes torn apart..."

"All my wife's," Allen said. "None of my things. Not the kids' either."

"Does your wife have any enemies?" Wesley asked.

Allen looked shocked at the suggestion. "Maddie? She's a peach. Everybody loves her. Just ask our friends or our kids' teachers. Heck, even the neighborhood association."

"What about you?" Spike asked. Off Angel's irritated look he finally dropped his cigarette into a coffee cup. "You got anybody who'd be happy to turn the screws on you?"

"I - I don't know," Allen admitted. He appealed to Angel. "I'm a powerful man. I deal with powerful people. You know Soloman?"

"Head of company number thirty-two on the NASDAQ's favorite up-and-comers," Gunn answered, sparing Angel the awkwardness of having to fake it. "Yeah, we know him."

"I just got the deal to handle his investment accounts," Allen said. He shrugged helplessly. "That means I come in contact with a lot of influential people. Maybe one of them doesn't like what I do? Maybe it's part of a hostile takeover or something?"

"Why come to us?" Wesley asked. "Why not the police?"

"There's a ghost," Madlyn said, still barely visible from her spot behind her husband. "The police can't help with that."

"Are you sure it was a ghost?" Gunn asked. "If somebody's trying to scare you, they could just be giving you a Hollywood-style mind trip."

"It *was* a ghost," Allen said. "Or a *something*."

"What'd it look like?" Angel asked.

Madlyn shuddered. "Horrible. Misshapen. *Hideous*."

"We've all seen it," Allen said. "Me, the kids. It's never a full view, but we've all had a glimpse of it."

"And you think this is the source of your threats?" Wesley asked.

Allen nodded. "The voices, that's all they talk about. Nothing but threats."

"What kind?" Spike asked.

"The kind that sound like my wife wanting to kill herself," Allen said. "That's the worst of it. Whoever's talking sounds just like Maddie."

"It's not me," Madlyn insisted. "I don't want to die."

"It's not a recording, either," Allen said. "I had a tech friend of mine check the house. No hidden bugs or speakers or anything."

"So what are we dealing with?" Angel asked.

Wesley put his pen down. "My guess? A demon. Or a spell of some kind. Possibly a business rival attempting to use this as a tactic of intimidation."

"Is there anything we can kill?" Spike asked.

"I'd need more evidence to be certain," Wesley replied.

"Whatever you need," Allen said. "You've got it." He turned to his wife. "Maddie? Why don't you go sit over there while we iron out the details?"

Madlyn nodded, looking grateful for the opportunity to move away from everyone's attention.

Allen waited until she was safely on a bench by the windows before speaking. He pitched his voice low, "I didn't want to bring this up where she could hear, but you should know I nearly lost my wife once already. She was sick and *this* close to being gone. She's better now, but - " Allen shook his head " - Maddie means the world to me. If something happened to her, I don't know what I'd do. *Please*. Whatever it takes, you've got to save her."

"Don't worry," Angel said. "That's exactly what we'll do."

---

"I can't *believe* you made me ride in the truck with Charlie," Spike complained as soon as Angel and Wesley rejoined the others in the front hall of the Fortunes' home.

"The Viper only seats two," Angel reminded him.

"It's also got the fancy *glass*," Spike shot back. "I had to get here under a blanket."

"Bitching all the way," Gunn added, giving Spike a look, "so you can shut up *now*."

"Where are the Fortunes?" Wesley asked. He frowned, noticing the fifth member of their party. "And why is Illyria here?"

Gunn didn't seem fazed by the presence of the blue demon. "She wanted to help."

"I go where it pleases me to go," Illyria said, though whether she was agreeing with Gunn or answering Wesley Angel couldn't tell.

"Couple of the year went to drop the kiddies off with a neighbor," Spike said. He tilted his chin up defiantly when he saw Angel looking at him. "What? I can be useful."

"I know," Angel said. "It's just *weird*."

"We should split up," Wesley said. "We can cover more ground that way. Whether this threat is supernatural or not, there will be evidence."

"I vote Angel checks the pool," Spike said. "Maybe gets a suntan while he's out there."

Wesley ignored him. "Gunn, you and I should take the yard. Angel, you and Spike stay inside and find out what you can in here."

Illyria stepped over to Wesley. "I will go with you."

Wesley stepped back. "I think not," he said. He then noticed the other men staring at him. "I mean to say, she's too obvious. The neighbors might question if they saw her."

"I could assume the Burkle form," Illyria said.

Angel suspected that as far as Wesley was concerned, that was part of the problem. "All the violent stuff has been indoors. Let's keep the strong people inside and have the humans go out."

Gunn looked as though he was on that page, too. "Sounds like a plan. Meet back here when we're done?"

"Right," Angel said.

---

It took all of two seconds for Illyria to dismiss them with the announcement "I will find my own way." The path she took seemed to lead to the basement, so Angel and Spike stuck to the first floor.

"You going to shut up now?" Spike asked as they began their search of the family room.

"I wasn't talking," Angel said.

Spike gave him a look. "You know what I mean. Three months now I've had to listen to you rabbit on about how you need Watcher-boy - "

"*We* need Watcher-boy," Angel corrected, then quickly realized that wasn't the right wording either. "Wesley. Angel Investigations needed a Wesley."

"Right," Spike drawled, giving a cursory look around the entertainment center. "Which is why you were on the phone with Rupert as soon as you knew we were starting the business again. You were so keen on finding someone with book skills. That's me using what you'd call 'irony', by the way. Or you would if you knew what it meant."

"You know, the fun part of you being ironic is that I always know I can tune you out and not miss anything important," Angel said. "Come to think of it, I can do that the rest of the time your lips flap too."

"I can try it with rude gestures if you prefer," Spike said.

Angel decided to get back to the point. "It's not like Giles would have helped."

"Might, now that you're not working for evil and lawyery anymore," Spike said. "Though dunno if putting Percy back on the payroll tips the scales."

"Don't have to ask, 'cause we got him back," Angel made a gesture of finality. "End of discussion."

Spike, of course, couldn't care less about gestures of finality. "Does a thing to you, coming back from the dead. I remember when I did - "

"Spike," Angel interrupted, "I was *there*. Okay, maybe not *right* there, but I've done it myself and been around long enough to get it, the website, and the T-shirt. This is different. Wes isn't a vampire."

Irritation flashed in Spike's eyes. "Wasn't talking about being a vampire. Was talking about thinking you've cashed it in in the final battle only to find out you're still stuck on the playing field."

"Oh," Angel said. He covered his embarrassment by making a show of looking through the paperwork that was scattered across a desk. It looked like nothing but bills and PTA memos. "I knew that."

Spike kept talking. "Gear yourself up for the end then find out you might not've even hit the middle. It's not easy. Endings are nice, simple. Being forced to stick around is what takes it out of you."

Angel avoided Spike's gaze. "Yeah, that."

"Don't suppose you'd know what that's like," Spike said.

Angel lied, "No, I don't."

---

"So how's it feel?" Gunn asked as he and Wesley walked around the perimeter of the house.

Wesley was squinting in the sunlight. "How does what feel?"

Gunn rolled his eyes. "How's it feel being in the US during an election year when being British means you're not allowed to vote? How does it feel being *dead*?"

"Oh." Wesley shrugged. "All right, I suppose. Although you of all people should know that my being dead in no way harms my ability to vote in this country."

"Was it freaky?" Gunn asked.

"All elections are freaky," Wesley replied.

"You want me to hit you," Gunn said. "That's what I'm hearing."

"It was death, it was brief," Wesley rattled off the details as though they were discussing buying a different brand of paper for the office copy machine. "It was momentarily painful, and then it was simply

momentary. And here I am."

"Why'd they bring you back now?" Gunn asked.

Wesley squatted down to study something in the white and red flowers that decorated the side of the house. "They're rebuilding the offices."

"Same as before?" Gunn asked. "Full staff and everything?"

Wesley apparently didn't find anything worth keeping. He stood up, brushing off the front of his pants. "Full staff and everything. What about you? Has the business been doing all right?"

"We hold our own," Gunn said. "Just reopened a couple months ago, but people are coming in."

To Gunn's surprise, Wesley looked pleased by the statement. "Excellent. I'm sure it's only bound to get better."

Gunn waited for the punch line. "You're not going to fight with me about that?"

Wesley frowned. "Why would I do that?"

"Because *Angel* sure as hell fights me on it," Gunn said. "And because I'm on your turf. Traditionally that doesn't go too well with you and me."

"I was *dead*," Wesley pointed out. "That hardly puts me in a position to say I could have done better."

"I dunno," Gunn replied. "You could but be making a joke out of it. You know: 'Man, a *dead* guy could've done a better job than this.'"

"I've seen Angel try to be in charge of the financial aspects of the business," Wesley said. "Believe me, a dead guy could not."

Gunn grinned, slapping Wesley on the back. "I'm glad we're cool."

"We are, although now my shoulder blade hurts." Wesley scanned the area around them. "What do you think is in that building over there?"

Gunn shaded his eyes, looking across the lawn at what appeared to be a shed. "Tools, maybe?"

"Let's be certain." Wesley began to make his way across the grass.

Gunn fell into step beside him. "So Illyria must be really screwing with you, huh?"

Wesley half-stumbled, then righted himself. "Pardon?"

"Seeing her again," Gunn said. "Look, it's okay. You don't have to lie to me. I can tell it's weird."

Wesley cleared his throat. "I don't know that 'weird' is the term I would use for it."

"She's not bad," Gunn said. "Not saying she's been winning the L.A. County good citizenship award, but she's been trying. She's better behaved; there's not a lot of what you might call accidents of the fatal variety. I bet you'd be proud of her."

"She's not a pedigreed poodle, Charles," Wesley said. "She's... well, I don't know what one would call her at the moment. But regardless of the status of her powers she should not be taken lightly."

"I don't take her lightly," Gunn said. "I don't take her heavy either. She is who she is. I'm just saying maybe now you're back you take a sec to say hi to her. She missed you."

Wesley gave him a look. "I saw the collection."

"Okay, she was freaking all of us out," Gunn amended. "But I think her intentions were good. I don't know. It's not like we're tight."

"You were hoping that I'd talk to her," Wesley translated.

"Please," Gunn said.

"I'll see what I can do," Wesley promised.

---

A splash of color caught Angel's eye, and he knelt down to examine it. A thick smear of purple sludge was spread across the floorboards, leading towards a vent that had almost been covered up by carpet. "Here. I found something."

Spike looked over his shoulder. "Great, slime. Always the sign of a fun demon."

Angel pulled an evidence bag out of his coat pocket. "We should show Wes. Help me collect it."

Spike spoke as though explaining something to someone very stupid, which, Angel was well aware, was the tone of voice Spike often used while speaking to him. "Or we could bring him back here and then *none* of us would have to touch the nasty purple mucus. You see how that works?"

"Actually," Angel said, "I think it's blood."

"If you're feeling peckish, by all means have a lick," Spike said. "Besides, how d'you know it's not something the kiddies left behind?"

Angel cupped the plastic bag in his hand and carefully scooped some of the slime into it. He then just as carefully closed the bag up. "I don't. That's why I want to ask Wes." He stood up, looking around. "What next? Upstairs?"

"Could see if Illyria found anything down below," Spike suggested.

"Assuming she's still there and not stalking Wesley," Angel said. He shook his head. "You know, between Lilah and her he gets more women obsessed with him than I do."

Spike raised his eyebrows. "And that surprises you because...?"

"Mostly because I said that thought out loud and where you could hear me," Angel answered. "Okay, for now let's assume Illyria's still downstairs. Let's check up in the bedrooms and - what?"

Spike was shaking his head and holding his hand up for silence. "You hear that?"

Angel tilted his own head, letting his supernatural senses drink in the world around him. "Sort of a rattling, bump-bump-bump sound?"

"Yeah," Spike said. "You hear it?"

Angel folded his arms. "No."

Spike either missed or deliberately ignored the sarcasm. "It's coming from this way."

They left the family room and went back into the hall. They arrived there just in time to catch a glimpse of something dark and misshapen running away from them, its feet and clothing making the rattle bump-bump-bump that Angel and Spike had heard.

"Oi!" Spike called, darting after it.

Angel joined him. They ran down the hallway together, but whatever they were chasing had vanished.

"Side room, maybe?" Spike said, looking around.

Angel concentrated. He could hear breathing, and heartbeats, and angry voices, which sounded like -

Angel jerked a hand out, grabbing Spike before he could get near the doorway to the kitchen.

"Bloody - " Spike started to protest.

Angel clamped a hand over Spike's mouth and dragged him off behind a corner. He motioned for silence, indicating that Spike should listen.

"God *damn* it, Maddie!" Allen swore. There was a loud bang, as though he'd pounded his fist down onto a countertop.

"I was only trying to help!" Madlyn spoke more loudly than Angel had ever heard from her. The words were thick, as though she'd been crying.

Allen, for his part, sounded exasperated or maybe pissed off. "This isn't help! How is this helping? I love you, Maddie, but you get these - these *ideas* in your head, and I don't know *what* I'm supposed to make out of them."

Madlyn grew quieter, her words punctuated by sniffles. "It was just a suggestion."

"I don't *want* it," Allen snapped. Angel moved forward enough that he could peer around the corner. He saw Allen swipe his hand through the air in a gesture of frustration, though Madlyn was far out of the reach of any danger from the movement. "Do you hear me? I don't *want* it!"

Madlyn nodded, her eyes down on the floor. "All right. I'm sorry."

"This isn't - " Allen made another gesture, this time of giving up. "Never mind. Forget it. I'll be in the garage."

"Yes, dear," Madlyn murmured. She kept her hands held tightly in front of her as Allen stormed out of a door on the far side of the room.

Angel and Spike exchanged a look before joining Madlyn inside.

"Everything all right?" Spike asked, the very picture of charm and chivalry.

Madlyn jumped. She quickly wiped her eyes with delicate dabs of her fingertips. "I - I'm sorry. I didn't hear you come in."

"It's okay," Angel said. He tried to project an aura of calm, or as close to calm as he ever got. "Spike and I were just looking around, trying to find out what's threatening you."

"I know what that must have looked like," Madlyn said. "Please - that's *not* what it seemed. Allen and I, we have these misunderstandings."

Angel and Spike exchanged another look.

"Of course," Spike leaned against the countertop. He did that thing with his eyebrows that women found endearing and that made Angel want to hit him. "Everybody fights sometimes, right? Take me and Angel for instance."

"Oh," Madlyn pointed to the two of them. "I didn't realize that you two were - "

"Bad example," Spike quickly said. "Let's *not* take me and Angel."

"What are these misunderstandings about?" Angel asked.

Madlyn shrugged. She busied herself by brushing dirt off of the already clean countertop. "Silly things. Little things. I - I'm sure you heard. I get these ideas sometimes. Allen doesn't like them."

"What kinds of ideas?" Angel asked.

Madlyn dumped imaginary crumbs into the garbage bin. "Ways that we could run the house better. Ways that we could be happier. It's nothing, really. Allen doesn't like them."

"Why not?" Spike asked.

"They're not good enough," Madlyn said. "Allen - he has these standards about perfection, and I guess I don't meet them. But it's nothing. He's right, I'm not good or smart enough to make these decisions. He's the one in charge, and I should be grateful that he's so patient with me." Fake cleaning done, she turned a bright smile towards Angel and Spike. "So - you said you were trying to figure out who wanted to hurt me?"

Angel tried to choose his words carefully. "Madlyn, have you considered that maybe you and Allen - "

"Oh my god, Allen!" Madlyn interrupted. She leapt across the room to grab an eyeglass case from off of the counter. "He forgot these. I'd better bring them to him."

Angel tried to stop her. "Madlyn - "

"It's okay," she said, giving him another smile. "I'll be right back."

---

"It's locked up pretty tight," Gunn said, giving the shed's door a firm tug.

Wesley motioned him aside. "Locks can be picked."

"You sure we should do that?" Gunn asked. "This could be private."

"With three padlocks on the door I've every confidence that it *is* private," Wesley said. He studied the locks, then pulled out a piece of metal from his coat pocket and began to manipulate the top one with it. "Which is precisely why we should look inside. We've been told that everything here is free for us to examine. Why is this off-limits?"

Gunn shrugged. "Maybe it's where Allen keeps his porn."

"He can't use a nightstand like normal people?" Wesley asked. Catching Gunn looking at him, he added, "Theoretically, of course."

"Of course." Gunn put his back to the shed, keeping his eye out to make sure that nobody spotted them. "This case feel weird to you at all?"

"A bit, yes," Wesley admitted. He exchanged one pick for another. "I confess that while I have some ideas, I'm not certain what our demon might be. We don't lack for information, but nothing that we have been told adds up to a species I'm familiar with."

"Maybe you haven't heard of it before," Gunn suggested.

"Possibly." Wesley finished with the second lock and turned his attention to the third. "Or possibly we aren't being given the correct information. If someone is threatening the Fortunes they might be attempting to make this appear like something it isn't."

"Including whatever it is that's running around the house?" Gunn asked.

"We don't know what's running around the house," Wesley pointed out. He popped the third and final lock, allowing the door to swing open. "It could be an actor, or the result of someone's over-active imagination, or..."

"Or what?" Gunn asked, when Wesley trailed off into nothing.

"Or something worse," Wesley finished. He stepped aside, letting Gunn take a look into the shed.

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. Once he did, he saw that the walls of the shed were covered with every sort of ID card that any self-respecting resident of L.A. would carry: passport, driver's license, credit cards, gym membership - even preferred seating at Spago. The only catch was that all of them sported Madlyn's name and photograph.

"What the *hell*?" Gunn said.

"There's pictures of her as well," Wesley said, pointing. "It's as though someone has been making a study of her."

"Someone or *something*?" Gunn asked. "And if it's the second one why don't you skip ahead to the part where you tell me what all this means on a demon scale of kind of annoying to big and nasty."

"Not necessarily big, but decidedly nasty," Wesley answered. "That is, if my guess is correct."

"Care to fill me in?" Gunn asked.

"I don't think we're dealing with a demon that merely wishes to harm Madlyn," Wesley said.

Gunn raised his eyebrows. "We're not?"

Wesley shook his head. "No. I think we're dealing with one that wants to steal her life entirely. Come on; we need to tell the others."

"Mr. Gunn, Mr. Wyndam-Pryce," Madlyn called out to them. She waved a hand to get their attention. "Hurry, I need your help."

Gunn and Wesley immediately jogged over to her. "What's wrong?" Gunn asked.

"My husband," Madlyn said. She pointed towards the far side of the house. "I was going to the garage to give him his glasses and - and - oh God, you'll think I'm crazy."

"I'm sure we won't," Wesley told her. "What is it?"

"I saw something go after him." Madlyn said. "Something that looked like *me*."

"Get the others," Gunn told Wesley.

"But - my husband," Madlyn protested.

Gunn took her by the arm, motioning for her to lead him. "I'll help him. Just show me the way."

"We're dealing with a shape-shifter," Wesley warned her. "Be careful. You can't trust your eyes."

"Keeping mine peeled," Gunn promised. "Now go."

---

Illyria walked through the basement. She thought that it was typical of the humans and the half-breeds to ignore her. She did not mind it when it was the others, but for Wesley to do it brought about emotions inside of her that she refused to name.

Still, it did not matter. His body was dead. He was clearly weakened from it. She would do this task for him, track down this thing that sulked in shadows and draw its mewling body out into the light for Wesley to see and deal with. Then he would remember who she was and why she was important.

After all, who better to do the task? There was nothing at all that could escape her.

---

In the shadows of a room that Illyria had passed, something stirred. A large, oval shape rolled forward into the center of the floor. It rocked, see-sawing back and forth until cracks formed along its side.

The oval shuddered, then split apart, giving birth to a misshapen mass of thick purple sludge that grew and elongated, parts of it separating out from the center to form head, arms, hands, legs, and feet. As it grew, the features became more specific and distinct, as though sketching in the details of hair, eye color, and clothes out of information drawn from the air around it, until finally all of the purple was gone, sloughed off to the floor below, and all that remained was the first body the newborn demon had chosen.

In the case of this demon, it was the shape of Wesley Wyndam-Pryce.

"Illyria," the demon said, testing the sound of Wesley's voice. "I'm glad I found you. I thought I'd never see you again."

Behind the demon, more eggs began to tremble and glow.

---

"There you are," a familiar voice called.

Angel looked up to see Wesley walking into the kitchen. "Good thing you're here. There's some weird stuff going on."

Wesley stopped beside Angel and Spike. "You don't know the half of it. I believe I've found out what kind of demon we're dealing with."

"Don't suppose it bleeds purple," Spike said.

"Not as such, but close," Wesley said. "It's a Belial demon."

Spike frowned. "Never heard of it."

"It's a type of shape-shifter," Wesley explained. "A mimic. But there's a twist."

"Always gotta be one of those." Angel folded his arms. "Okay, what is it?"

"They imitate the *ideal* version of their victim," Wesley said. "A perfect form of them, if you will."

"What?" Spike asked. "Ten pounds lighter, three inches longer, that sort of thing?"

"Nothing quite so obvious," Wesley said. "Rather, they are the victim, but better."

Spike gave a low whistle. "Must be a nice group to hire if you want to know somebody's secrets."

"If you can find an adult, yes," Wesley agreed. "They can plunder whatever personal information they like from the minds of those around them. The children aren't quite as skilled."

"You keep using the word victim," Angel said. "Something tells me I won't like the reason why."

"Belials are parasites," Wesley explained. "Once they assume a form their goal is to *take* that life entirely. Put themselves in the place of the original by any means necessary."

"Kill them," Spike translated.

"It's not as simple as that," Wesley said. "A connection is formed between the Belial and the victim. Once the imitation is in place, it becomes impossible for them to harm one another."

Angel started to see where this was going. "But somebody *else* could."

Wesley nodded. "Precisely. A Belial will do anything it can to manipulate someone into killing its victim."

"What about killing the demon?" Spike asked.

"That's the good news," Wesley said. "The victims can be freed so long as someone else kills the demon. The trick is making sure you're going after the right person."

"You think you know which person?" Angel asked.

"I'm certain of it," Wesley said. "I've reason to believe that someone has brought one in to replace Madlyn. I'm just not certain who or why."

"Got that one covered," Spike told him.

"We caught the Fortunes arguing earlier," Angel said. "From the sound of things, Allen isn't too happy with his wife."

"He loves her, but she's not *perfect* enough," Spike said, stressing the word with a knowing look.

Understanding shaped Wesley's face. "So he finds a way to keep her, but without any of the problems."

"Which means the next step is killing her," Angel said.

Spike held up a hand. "Hang about. Why bring *us* in then? If you're going to off your missus the last thing you'd want is a bunch of detectives recording all the evidence."

"Simple," Wesley said. "It's all an elaborate trick. He doesn't want to do it himself; he wants us to do it for him. He hopes to fool us into thinking his wife is the demon, and then the blood will be on our hands."

"There'll be blood all right," Angel said, "but it's not the kind he's hoping for. Okay, how do we handle this?"

"Find the fake Madlyn," Wesley said, "and do it quickly. Belials want to breed. If there's one in here it will hatch others, and they will take over every person they can."

"It'll go after Allen," Spike guessed.

"Not just him," Angel said. "The kids."

"Precisely," Wesley said. "Belial aren't limited to a single imitation. Right now there could be demons pretending to be anyone, including us."

"Can't say I fancy some demon stealing my unlife out from under me," Spike mused. Catching the other

two looking at him, he added, "Or anybody else, of course."

Angel responded to that with a feral look. "Let's stop it before it starts."

---

"Ah, there you are."

Illyria saw Wesley appear out of the shadows of the basement. "I am here. As I have been."

If Wesley noticed there was a hint of reproof in that statement, he gave no sign. "I'm glad I found you. I believe I know what sort of demon we are after. Belial. Parasitic shape-shifters. They imitate the ideal form of their victims and then try to bring about their death so that they can take over their lives. We need to warn the others."

Illyria was surprised by this. "You did not warn your friends before choosing to warn me?"

"Spike and Angel aren't with you?" Wesley asked.

Illyria leveled an accusing stare at him. "I prefer not to share the company of those who cannot bring themselves to show me the respect I am due."

"Yes," Wesley said, seeming to weigh her words carefully. "There's a bit of a lesson for me in that pointed comment, isn't there?"

"Do you think you have shown me proper respect?" Illyria asked.

Wesley held up his hands in a placating gesture. "You're right. I'm sorry. Things have been... strange, since I've come back."

Illyria frowned. "Something troubles you?"

"Nothing you need to concern yourself with," Wesley assured her.

"I could destroy whatever dares to make you unhappy," Illyria pointed out.

"A generous offer, to be certain," Wesley said. "But right now I'm more concerned about our demon."

"An insignificant worm," Illyria said. "I will tear its body into thousands of pieces and scatter them across the universe."

"That *might* be a bit of overkill," Wesley said, "but I can't say you're not on the right track."

---

"Mr. Fortune?" Gunn approached the garage with caution. The side door was open but didn't reveal much of what was inside.

"Allen?" Madlyn called out.

"Maybe you should wait here," Gunn said. "If there's some demon trying to kill you hiding in there, I'm thinking we don't need to make that job any easier for it."

"But, my *husband*," Madlyn protested.

"I'll take care of him," Gunn promised. "Now wait *here*."

---

"I want this thing taken care of and fast," Angel said as the three of them made a quick search of the

remaining rooms.

"Indeed," Wesley said. "When we find the demon we should act at once. No hesitation. The longer it holds a shape, the greater its ability to bring harm to the victim."

"We so sure it's a walking bull's-eye?" Spike asked. "Maybe they've got a new plant or twelve hiding about the place."

"Belial cannot imitate something so small," Wesley said. He paused long enough to check a walk-in linen closet for any inhabitants. "They need something that's human-sized at the very least."

"Okay," Angel said, "let's think this out. If the demon is here then it wants to protect itself."

"Angel's right," Wesley said. "It wouldn't be acting without motivation. Even if it doesn't know that we've detected its ruse, it would still wish to make sure its initial plans weren't thwarted."

"Let's focus on what those plans might be," Angel said. "Wes, you mentioned something about breeding?"

Wesley nodded. "The Belial can asexually reproduce. Once they have inhabited a home, they make nests and immediately set about trying to create offspring to help them take over the residence."

"They get much help from the toddlers?" Spike asked.

"Oh, yes," Wesley said. "Not when the eggs are first laid, granted. But once they hatch there is a link between them and their parent. They can immediately set about trying to perpetuate whatever lies are necessary to support what their mother has created."

---

Gunn retrieved his axe from the truck before approaching the garage again. He moved with caution, not wanting to give away any more than he had to. Madlyn had already blown his cover; Gunn figured the only thing he had going for him was maybe the hope that the demon didn't know he was on to him.

"Allen?" he tried again.

"Be careful," Madlyn whispered.

Gunn motioned for her to keep it down. He slowly pushed the garage door open, letting his eyes adjust to the muted light as he stepped inside. "Allen?"

He looked around. Nothing. There was junk and usual miscellaneous garage-related debris, mostly from obviously abandoned do-it-yourself projects, but otherwise the space was empty. No Allen, no Madlyn look-alike.

"I don't think they're here," Gunn said, turning around to go back outside.

Madlyn was standing right behind him, holding a hammer. "Oh, you don't?"

The world exploded into white before Gunn had the chance to duck out of the way.

---

"I find no more pleasure in this place," Illyria said as she and Wesley made their way out of the basement. "I do not want to spend any more time here."

"Our clients seem like a nice enough couple," Wesley said.

Illyria sneered. "Their home is empty and reeks of death."

"Yes," Wesley said, drawing the word out over several syllables. "Perhaps we won't mention that to them before they pay us?"

Illyria stopped, hearing movement in the shadows. "There is a something here."

"That would be our demon," Wesley said. "We need to find it before it finds the others. If it starts to imitate any of us we won't know which one to kill."

"I would know," Illyria said. "I am not fooled by simple deceits and trickery."

Wesley looked at her for a long moment. "You feel quite confident of that, do you?"

---

"How many are we talking about?" Angel asked.

Wesley shrugged. "Impossible to tell. We'd need to find the nest to be certain."

"I'm thinking finding those kids is our new priority," Angel said.

"Why?" Spike asked. "Look, I know from demon eggs. They can't hurt you if they haven't hatched yet."

"It's not them I'm worried about," Angel said. "It's the mother."

"Angel's right," Wesley said. "Having created the nest, the demon will go to any lengths to protect it. If anyone were to get near the children - "

"Wes," Angel interrupted, "where do these demons like to keep their nests?"

"Nowhere unexpected," Wesley said. "Somewhere dark, quiet, out of the way."

"Like underground," Angel said.

"For example," Wesley said.

All three men looked at one another.

"Illyria!" Angel shouted, then led the charge.

---

Illyria looked up. "They call to me."

Wesley held out a hand to stop her. "We should be careful. We've no idea who we're dealing with. It could be one of the demons."

"You think a lower life form would dare lie to me?" Illyria asked.

"I have no doubts about that whatsoever," Wesley said. "Come on, we shouldn't run headlong into the others until we can determine friend from foe."

"Have you a way to do that?" Illyria asked.

Wesley smirked. "Don't trust your eyes, for a start."

---

"How do I kill these things again?" Angel asked.

"Any way you could kill humans," Wesley reminded him. "And *quickly*. Angel, if one of them has done

something to Illyria - "

"They won't," Angel promised.

"Blue can handle herself," Spike said.

"The adult Belial are strong," Wesley said. "The children are weaker, but if Illyria were to find the parent there's no telling how badly she might get hurt."

"That's not going to happen," Angel said.

"Angel, you *must* kill the demon as soon as you see it," Wesley said. "Otherwise it could hurt Illyria, or Fred."

Angel stopped. "What did you say?"

Wesley faltered. "I - nothing. I only meant we should take care."

Angel turned around. "Quick: when was the last time you talked to your dad?"

"Angel, I've been *dead*," Wesley reminded him. "I've hardly had the opportunity to - "

"Son of a bitch," Angel slammed Wesley up against the wall. He pinned him in place with the weight of his left elbow and tore Wesley's shirt open with his right hand. "How good are you, huh?"

"Uh - " Spike cleared his throat. "Should I leave you two alone?"

"Angel, it's me," Wesley insisted. "I swear to you. I know you. It's *me*."

"Wes would never forget that Fred died," Angel said. Done getting the shirt out of the way, he punched the demon directly on the unmarked skin below its ribcage. "And he's got a scar on his chest."

"I'm not going to ask you how you know that," Spike said.

Angel snapped the fake Wesley's neck before it could fight him. It gaped at him, shocked, then slumped down to the ground, spilling purple sludge onto the floor.

"Surface thoughts," Angel said. "It picked up Fred's name but not enough to know the full story of her relationship to Illyria."

Spike gave him a look. "I meant how you knew what Watcher-boy looks like naked."

Angel ignored him, resuming his path towards the basement. "We gotta go. Something tells me this is not going to be good."

---

Gunn groaned, rubbing his head where Madlyn had hit him. Orange-red light filtered through the garage windows, letting him know that he'd been unconscious long enough for the sun to start setting.

He staggered to his feet. Pounding headache or no, he had to warn the others.

---

"There." Illyria pointed towards a wall. "The one who hides."

"The demon?" Wesley asked.

"The other," Illyria said.

"You *do* realize that you're pointing at architecture?" Wesley asked.

Illyria punched both hands through the wall and tore apart the crumbling plaster. A shower of debris and dust fell down around them.

As the dust cleared, it revealed the shape of six eggshells, all broken in two and scattered across the floor.

It also revealed a woman who had been hiding on the other side.

"Don't hurt me," she begged.

Wesley frowned. "Oh dear."

---

"Guys, we've got trouble," Gunn said as he joined the others back in the front hall.

"No kidding," Spike said. He was scanning the area defensively. "Nasty shape-shifters. We know."

"One of them already got Wes," Angel said.

Gunn looked shocked. "They killed Wes?"

"Copied," Angel said. "Don't know about the rest yet."

"How do you kill a walking corpse, anyway?" Spike asked.

"Lucky for us I don't think the Belial know either," Angel said.

"There's more to it," Gunn said. He jerked his thumb back in the direction from which he'd come. "One of them got Madlyn. It knocked me out back in the garage."

"Woman herself might still be alive then," Spike pointed out.

"Let's find her, Illyria, *and* Wes, and then get the hell out of here," Angel said.

"And do what with the demons?" Gunn asked. "Leave a fruit basket?"

Angel pulled a foot-long dagger out of a sheath in his jacket. "I felt the violence part was kind of implied."

"Oh God, there you are!" Madlyn came rushing into the room. She ran directly for Gunn and clung to him with relief. "Mr. Gunn, I'm so glad to see you."

Gunn pushed her off. "Didn't act like it back when you were trying to make me the Man With Two Skulls."

Madlyn shook her head. "I - what? No! I saw you in the garage. I saw that *thing* that looked like me." She turned to Angel. "I tried to get help but I didn't know where to find you."

"So if this is the live bird," Spike said, "where's the Memorex?"

"Who says it's still imitating Madlyn?" Gunn pointed out. "Could be somebody else now that it knows we're on to it."

Madlyn's eyes widened with fear. "What's going on? What are you talking about?"

"Maybe we should move her to a safe place," Angel said.

"Got any idea where?" Spike asked. "House isn't exactly high on the list, and it'd need to be somewhere hubby can't find her."

"Something's wrong with Allen?" Madlyn asked.

"Yeah," a male voice said. They all turned to see Allen standing in the front doorway. "Something's wrong with me?"

---

"We're not going to hurt you," Wesley said.

"We may maim you if it pleases us," Illyria added.

Wesley shot her a correcting look, which Illyria tolerated purely out of her own generosity. "Who are you? Why have you been hiding here?"

"I should have left." The woman wiped her hands over her dirt-smearred face in a vain attempt to move her dull, thinning hair out of her eyes. Her clothes were similarly filthy and worn enough to almost be rags. "I should have left, but I couldn't. Please, I need your help. The demons - I had *no* idea."

"You have been attacked by the lying demons?" Illyria asked.

"No," Wesley said. Understanding shaped his features. "It's not quite that. Help me get her upstairs."

---

"Don't you know?" Angel asked. He stepped in between Madlyn and her husband. "After all, you started this."

"What?" Allen looked stunned. "What are you talking about? I haven't done anything except drop the kids off at the neighbors like Maddie asked me to."

"Big time businessman," Angel said. "Starting to get a real taste of success. And you decide you can't deal with any problems. With anyone *human*. So you replace your wife and trick *us* into trying to kill the real one."

"Are you *insane*?" Allen asked. "I *love* my wife. I would *die* if anyone hurt her."

"Oh yeah?" Spike asked. "Then what's the Belial doing in your house then?"

"Guys," Gunn's voice said as someone jogged into the room. "We've got trouble."

Angel turned to see two Gunns staring back at him. "Oh, *great*."

---

"You don't understand," the woman said. She was struggling against Illyria's hold as they walked through the basement. "I can't go up there."

"Her noise bothers me," Illyria said.

"Put up with it for a moment longer," Wesley replied. "We're almost there."

"We're not alone," Illyria told him. "I can hear them slithering in the shadows. They come after us, and the others."

Wesley didn't look pleased about that. "Yes... perhaps we'd better walk quickly, then."

---

"Which one's which, d'you think?" Spike asked.

"Think fast," the first Gunn said. "'Cause for some reason I can't move my arms to try to punch this guy."

Angel studied the doppelgangers. He thought really hard about how much he'd love to hit Spike then asked, "Gunn, what happened to that fifty bucks you owe me?"

The second Gunn blinked. "The *hell*? Since when do I owe you fifty bucks?"

Angel threw his knife into the chest of the first one. A gush of purple sludge came out. "Okay, everybody clear their minds of any distinguishing information about anybody and - oh come *on*."

Two Spikes looked back at him. "What?" they asked in unison.

"It is so, so wrong for either of you to assume I won't kill you both," Angel said.

Gunn raised his hand. "Who votes we lock the doors so no more of these guys can sneak in?"

"I vote you kill the fake me first," the Spike closest to Angel snapped. "There's a bloody *bond*, remember? I can't do it myself."

"Wait, I got this one," Gunn said, stepping forward. "Spike, who kicked your ass the last time you and I played Madden NFL?"

"You," the Spike closest to Gunn said.

Gunn immediately punched him. The fake Spike stumbled from the blow, falling directly into Angel's path. Angel snapped the demon's neck, then shoved its lifeless body down onto the ground.

"Like I'd play girly American football games," the real Spike said, snorting.

"What the *hell* is going on?" Allen demanded.

"You," Spike grabbed him by the lapels. "What's your favorite color?"

Angel gave Spike an exasperated look. "That'd be great only if any of *us* knew, moron."

"Yellow," Madlyn said. "He likes yellow."

"Sure," Spike said. "Give the state secrets away."

Allen tried to break free from Spike's grip. "What is all this, and what does it have to do with protecting my wife?"

A second Allen came through the front door to stand by his side. "*Your* wife? She's *my* wife, you bastard!"

Madlyn fell back a few steps. "Oh no. *Allen*."

The first Allen tried to reach for her. "Maddie - "

"Ah," Spike stopped him, "no touching 'til we figure out who's who."

"Yeah," another Spike said, walking in from the hallway. "Wouldn't want to kill the wrong one."

"Again," Angel said, "with you two I actually don't find that a problem."

Illyria stormed into the room. "Wesley found something. He needs help."

Another Illyria appeared from the opposite doorway. "Wesley found something, he - "

"Got it the first time." Gunn looked around the room warily. "Also starting to get a headache. Angel? We got a plan?"

"Act quickly," Wesley - or something that looked like Wesley - said. He was holding a struggling person in his arms. "There are seven demons total, including the parent. We need to destroy them before any escape this room."

Angel made a gesture of invitation. "And I trust *you* because...?"

"You drank from my left arm," Wesley replied. "Now *do* it."

Angel immediately turned to hit Spike. The younger vampire made a sound of pain, then glared at him, his nose dripping red.

"Wrong one," he snapped.

"Still fun to do," Angel said. He turned, kicking his foot directly into the kneecap of the fake Spike before it could transform. The demon fell to the ground, then cried out as Angel stabbed a stake through its chest. It didn't dust, but it slumped down dead all the same.

One of the Illyrias bolted. The second glared after her. "How *dare* you pathetic life form presume to pretend to imitate even *half* of my brilliance and power? If it would not harm me I would tear out your lungs through your ribcage and make you wear them for a vest. I would peel your skin like an apple and make you devour every inch. I would - "

Gunn clothes-lined the first Illyria, stepping aside as Spike swooped in to slam her head into the wall. "Ain't nobody like our demon-god."

Angel looked around for the fake Allen. "So that just leaves - "

Two Madlyns stared back at him. "Help us," they said.

Allen stepped forward. "Maddie?"

Angel put a hand out to stop him. "First you tell me where's the real Allen."

"That *is* the real Allen," Wesley said. "There are only two demons left."

"Right," Gunn said. He pointed. "So one's the real Madlyn, and the other one - "

"*This* is the real Madlyn." Wesley let go of the woman in his arms, gently propelling her forward. "Both of those women are fake."

"Sounds like good odds to me," Spike said. "Angel?"

The two vampires leapt forward. Spike took the first demon, Angel the second.

But the second demon was a whole new version, and it didn't take long for Angel to realize that all of the other ones they'd encountered were the babies. *This* was the mother, and she was pissed off.

She and Angel fell to the ground, wrestling for control. He tried to incapacitate her with a kick or a punch, but she was much too fast for him. Her grip felt like iron, and if it weren't for sheer stubborn pride Angel would've probably asked Illyria or Spike to tag in to help.

He didn't get the chance, though. Before he could she smiled at him with a far too satisfied grin and pulled him into a dizzying rolling twist. It didn't stop until Angel's back thumped into the wall, and she pushed

away, leaping to her feet.

No, not her. *His*.

Angel looked up at himself.

"That's not me," he said at once, except of course the demon said it right back at him.

"Could kill 'em both," Spike pointed out.

Angel got to his feet. "Spike, this is no time for revenge."

The false Angel stared at him. Then he pointed, annoyance shaping his otherwise handsome features. "Wait, no fair. How is that *thing* imitating my burns? I thought you said the demons could only do the ideal version."

"Within reason," Wesley reminded him. He stepped forward, making a careful study of them both. "An obvious change such as that would alert us to the deception."

"That's *not* me," Angel insisted. He strained to lash out at the demon, but something inside him kept him from even moving a muscle in that direction. He made a sound of frustration. "It's *not*."

"No, *that* isn't," the other Angel said. He appealed to the room at large. "C'mon, I can prove it to you."

"No, *I* can," Angel said. He turned to Spike. "Go on. Ask me anything."

"Can I borrow your car?" Spike asked.

"No," both Angels said at once.

"Shouldn't the fake Angel have said yes?" Gunn asked.

"It's the parent," Wesley said. "Its powers are greater than that of the children. It will know more of Angel's thoughts and feelings than the others might have."

Angel felt uncomfortable at the idea of this *thing* knowing what was going on in his head. "*I'm* Angel. I swear it. I - I could go into game face. I could say things only Angelus would know."

The fake Angel held up his hands to placate everyone. "Okay, I think the only reasonable thing to do here is for me to sacrifice myself for the good of everyone. It's the only solution."

Spike gave an appreciative whistle. "Damn, they're good."

"I can sense no difference in either of them," Illyria said. "One is precisely like the other."

"No, we're not!" Angel snapped. He appealed to Wesley. "Wes, come on. You *have* to know how to handle this."

Wesley stared him, then nodded. "I do."

"Thank God," Angel said.

Wesley reached into the back of his coat and produced his shotgun. Before either Angel could react, he fired a blast directly through the false one's chest. The demon fell to the ground, spattering purple sludge across the pale white carpet.

Angel looked at Wesley, letting him see the relief that coursed through him. "Good job. How'd you know it was me?"

Wesley shrugged. "Simple. You're the one who doesn't die if I slam a shotgun shell through your chest."

"Okay, you and I need to talk about clearing that kind of plan with me *before* you act," Angel said.

"There was only a fifty percent chance of me hitting you," Wesley reminded him.

"That's *my* point," Angel said.

"We maybe wanna talk post-game strategy after we deal with our clients?" Gunn asked. He looked around. "Where *are* our clients?"

Angel cocked his head, hearing voices coming from down the hall. "This way."

---

Allen and Madlyn were back in the living room. Madlyn was curled up on the couch, her face hidden by her hair. She looked weak and tired.

"I don't understand," Allen said. "Did those monsters do this to her?"

"Starting to regret that deal with the devil, are you?" Spike asked.

"It wasn't Allen." Wesley came forward, his eyes trained on Madlyn. "Was it?"

"I'm sorry," Madlyn said. Her voice was soft and wet with tears. "I only wanted things to be perfect."

Allen shook his head, clearly unable to comprehend her meaning. "What?"

Angel recognized one of the scents coming off her. "She's sick."

"No," Allen said at once. "We went to the doctor not too long ago. He said Maddie was fine."

"I'm not," Madlyn said. "Allen, it's not in remission anymore. You know what they said. If it comes back there's even less of a chance - "

"No," Allen said.

Madlyn kept going. " - for me to - "

"*No*," Allen stood up in a rush. He glared at everyone in the room, as though challenging them to fight him. "No. That's not happening. I won't believe it."

"I didn't want you to be alone," Madlyn said. "I didn't want you or the kids to suffer. I - I thought if I brought her in then you could be happy. You could have everything you needed, no complications."

"I want *you*," Allen insisted. "I don't *care* about complications."

"I didn't know anyone would get hurt," Madlyn said. "All I wanted was what was best for everybody. What was best for *you*."

Allen dropped down to kneel beside her. He pulled her into a tight embrace. "Then you *stay* with me. You. Nobody else. I don't want perfect; I want *you*."

Angel caught the eyes of the others. "We should go."

Wesley nodded, looking just as uncomfortable by the intrusion into this private moment as Angel felt. "Yes, I think that's wise."

---

Spike, Illyria, and Gunn went back to the office. Angel drove Wesley home.

"New place thanks to the company?" Angel asked when Wesley directed him to an apartment building that was nowhere near Wesley's old address.

"Turn left at the light," Wesley said. "And yes. New everything, thanks to them. I don't have my car yet, but I'm told it's on the way."

"Can't beat the company cars," Angel said.

Wesley gave him an arch look. "Apparently not. You know I could turn you in for stealing their property."

Angel looked at him. "Are you going to?"

Wesley shook his head. "No."

"So how's this work, anyway?" Angel asked. "They got you punching a clock?"

"I'll have to spend some time in the offices once they're operational," Wesley said, "but I don't anticipate that getting in the way of my work for you. I fully plan on being at the theater first thing in the morning, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed."

"That makes one of us." Angel pulled the Viper into an empty parking spot. "This it?"

"Home, sweet home," Wesley confirmed. "Angel, I don't know if it's necessary considering my current form, but if it is I wish to make it clear that you are welcome there at any time. You have my invitation."

"Thanks," Angel said. "You too, for my place. Should come by and have a beer some night."

"Tonight I'm planning on several." Wesley tilted his head, thoughtfully. "And three cheeseburgers, perhaps. After all, what's the harm to my cholesterol level *now*?"

"Lemme know if you want to take up smoking," Angel said. "Apparently Spike knows where you can get the good cigarettes."

"I'm not feeling called to it, but thank you," Wesley said.

"Me, I've got a date with Nina tonight." Angel noticed the time. "Which I'm running late for, actually. That's probably not good."

"Bring flowers," Wesley told him. "Flowers and expensive dinners are always a sound way to apologize."

Angel rubbed his hand over the steering wheel. "It's going good, me and her. Had to do the apology thing after I broke up with her before the battle, but she forgave me, and we're together now. Hit our three month anniversary. From the getting back together part. Not the when we first met part."

"Congratulations, I'm happy to hear it," Wesley said.

"Wasn't easy," Angel said. "Had to, you know, learn a lot. Try new things. *Talk*."

Wesley smirked. "What horror for you."

"You don't know the half of it." Angel gave a half-hearted laugh. "But, hey, I should let you go, right? You've got burgers calling."

"And you have a werewolf," Wesley reminded him.

"See you in the morning?" Angel said.

"First thing," Wesley confirmed.

"If the front door's locked you can come in the back," Angel said. "There's a door to the basement that Illyria always keeps open. Shouldn't be a problem. Gunn's usually there early if I'm not. Just go on in and make yourself comfortable. I can bring you up to speed when I get in. We keep the coffee behind the front counter. The bathroom's near the entrance to the actual theater."

Wesley nodded, his hand on the door, "All right. I'll see you in the - "

"I signed away the Shanshu."

Wesley stopped. He let go of the door handle and gave Angel his full attention. "Pardon?"

"I signed away the Shanshu," Angel said. He grimaced. "And my ability to segue, apparently."

Wesley's expression was instantly sober. "What happened?"

"Circle of the Black Thorn," Angel said. "I'd already joined, but they wouldn't trust me unless I gave them a reason to."

"Killing Fred and Drogyn wasn't enough?" Wesley asked.

Angel tightened his hands on the steering wheel. "I still had hope. They said that as long as I had hope of redemption because of the Apocalypse they wouldn't believe that I was on their side, that I wasn't manipulating everything just so I could become human again."

"So you gave away your chance of that happening," Wesley said, his voice quiet.

"Signed it in blood," Angel confirmed.

Wesley shook his head. "That hardly means - "

"It hasn't been the same," Angel said. Now that he'd started talking, the words he'd been hoarding all summer came out of him in a rush. "It's not. Maybe it was just a piece of paper, but ever since then I've had no idea what I've been doing. I thought the battle was going to be the end of it. I thought it was okay to give it up because we were all going to die and so what was the big difference? But we didn't. *I* didn't. And now I'm here, and I don't know why, and I don't have *any* idea - "

"Angel." Wesley stopped him by putting a hand on his forearm. "You were not that prophecy. You never were. It might have been *about* you, but it did not make you who you are as a person. You fought evil long before you were told there was any certainty of reward in it. You are a hero. More importantly, you are a good man. You never needed a prophecy to confirm that for you."

Angel looked at him. "I'm lost, Wes."

"Then we'll find you a map," Wesley told him. "But don't think for one moment that what you did has changed anything. I wouldn't be here otherwise. I signed my contract so that I could fight by your side again. That you would be willing to sacrifice something that meant so much to you only tells me that I made the correct decision."

"But what if it's true?" Angel asked. "What if I gave away my only shot at redemption?"

"Life gives us more than one chance to make things better." Wesley gave Angel's arm a final squeeze before letting go. "I can assure you of that personally."

Angel allowed himself to feel the first glimmer of hope. "You really think it's going to be okay?"

"I have no doubt of it," Wesley said. He made a shooing gesture. "Go. Enjoy your date with Nina."

"Okay." Angel turned the engine on again. "I will. Thanks."

"Don't mention it." Wesley got out of the car, then ducked his head back inside. "Out of curiosity, did you tell Spike about this?"

Angel smirked. "Yeah, that's a conversation that'll happen."

Wesley laughed. "I thought not. Goodnight, Angel."

"Night, Wes," Angel said. He felt possessed of a sentimental urge and added, "It's nice to have you back."

Wesley answered that with a smile and a wave as he walked off to the entrance of his apartment building.

---

Wesley began unbuttoning the top of his shirt long before the elevator deposited him on the top floor. He felt tired, rather like the walking dead, which was apt enough, all things considered, but it didn't make the sensation any more pleasant.

Sleep, then. Perhaps after a hot shower. The water pressure in his new apartment was ironically heavenly, and he wasn't entirely certain that parts of him weren't still stained with Belial sludge.

Indeed, he thought as he unlocked his front door. Shower, change of clothes, perhaps food for the nostalgia of it, then curling up in bed with a good book and -

Wesley stopped, staring at the woman who was sitting in the middle of his living room. Her jet black hair was long and unbound. Her grey suit was well-tailored and perfectly pressed.

Her dark eyes gleamed with a catlike satisfaction.

"Johanna," Wesley said, feeling his good mood drain away as he faced the intruder.

"You've had quite a busy day," she replied by way of greeting. "It must have been fun. Your first day back, all your friends gathered around you, everybody working together like one big team - "

"Get out," he told her.

"The Senior Partners want a word with you," Johanna said. She reached into a briefcase that she'd placed by her side. "Nothing too big, of course. They understand that you have so much on your plate right now. Wouldn't want to distract you from the mission."

Wesley came forward, throwing his keys aside so he could free up his hands. "The Senior Partners and I have a *deal*."

"I know." Johanna held up her paperwork. "That's why I'm here."

Wesley grabbed her and slammed her up against the wall. He wrapped one hand around her throat, choking her with all the strength he had in his possession. "You are not welcome here. You are *never* welcome here. If you cross my threshold again I will find a way to kill you, and I don't care how quickly the Senior Partners send a replacement. If I can't kill you, I shall find a way to make your unlife exceedingly painful and unpleasant. Have I made myself clear?"

Johanna made an attempt to dislodge his hand. When she couldn't do so, she nodded, her voice a rough rasp as she said, "Crystal."

"Excellent." Wesley manhandled her into the hallway, throwing her with enough force to make her stumble to the floor. "Now leave."

Johanna climbed back onto her feet. "This only delays the inevitable."

"The Senior Partners and I have a deal," Wesley repeated. He dropped her briefcase down in front of her. "They can have what I have given them and nothing else."

"True," Johanna said. "But - "

"Don't *ever* come back here again," Wesley punctuated the statement by slamming the door.

---

Alone in the hallway, Johanna took a moment to pat down her hair and gather her things before heading to the elevator.

As she traveled the distance down to the first floor, she pressed her fingertips into the bruises that were forming around her throat. The marks were faint, but the pain was still there.

Johanna smiled.

The Senior Partners were going to be thrilled with everything she had to tell them.

The end.

---

Page printed from:  
<http://ats-nolimits.com/episodes/ep0604.php>