Angel's Pain

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Extract

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MAGGIE SHAYNE

ANGEL'S PAIN



1

"There you are," Briar said, her tone flat and uninterested as she leaned against the doorjamb. The little snowflake was standing on the sidewalk, blinking in the darkness like a doe caught in a spotlight. The perpetually confused look on her face was just as irritating as it always was. "What the hell are you doing outside, Crisa?"

The girl seemed to draw her focus away from wherever the hell it had been—Neverland, probably—and pin it on Briar at long last. Her hair was in its usual style. Briar's initial opinion was that it had been combed with an eggbeater, and that was still the most accurate description. It was pale brown with blue highlights, short and unevenly cut. Her hair-care regimen seemed to be "fold in the mousse and beat until stiff peaks form." She was heavily made up tonight, which was rare. Too much eyeliner, thicker on one eye than the other, bright green eye shadow, lashes like a spider's

hairy legs, straight lines of blush from her chin to her ear on each side of her face, and plum-colored lipstick. She wore a long-sleeved maroon shirt, made of the same material they made long johns from, with a lacy cream-colored camisole over the top of it—a combination that made no sense whatsoever. From the waist down, she sported a blazing orange broomstick skirt and a pair of red Converse high-tops.

As she took Crisa in, Briar came damn close to laughing, and that was something she never did. Besides, even *she* wasn't heartless enough to want to kick a puppy. Okay, maybe an ordinary puppy, but not a brain-fried vampire-woman-child like Crisa.

The girl still hadn't answered her question. She was just staring, blinking those great big brown eyes as if she didn't understand Briar's language.

"Hey." Briar trotted down the three steps to the sidewalk and snapped her fingers in front of Crisa's purple lips. "Ground Control to Major Tom. You reading me?"

"Huh?"

"How come you're outside?"

"Oh. I don't know, he told me to."

Briar frowned a little harder. "*Who* told you to?"

"I don't know."

Suddenly alarmed, Briar clasped Crisa's shoulder in a grip that was as tender as it was protective, and she didn't bother to ask herself about that, or about the way her gut and fists clenched simultaneously as she sought to drop-kick whatever asshole had been messing with *her Crisa.* She sent a quick glance up and down the sidewalk, along with her senses, in search of enemies. Mortal or vampire, it could be either type. God knew their little band of white-hats had made enough of both kinds. She didn't see or sense anything, though.

"Crisa," she said, focusing again on the girl. "It's important that you tell me who told you to come outside."

"But I don't know." The girl's eyes began to dampen, and she pressed a hand to her forehead. "Please don't be mad at me, Briar."

"I'm *not*—" Briar bit her lip, realizing she'd barked the words at the girl. She softened her tone and tried to bank her frustration. "I'm not mad. Listen, you said someone told you to go outside. Was it someone in the house?"

"I don't think so. More…in here." As she said it, Crisa pressed her other hand to her head, cupping it between them. "God, it hurts."

"Your head hurts?"

Crisa nodded, eyes closed.

"So it was a voice in your head that told you to come outside?"

"Yes. A man's voice."

Someone communicating with her, mentally, Briar thought. It had to be a vampire. Few mortals could manage telepathy with any real effectiveness.

"Did he say anything else to you, Crisa? Did he ask you to *do* anything else?"

Crisa nodded, lowering her hands to her sides, opening her eyes. "He wanted me to walk to the corner and look around. But then the boy came, and I got…distracted."

"A boy came?"

Her nod was slow, her gaze turning inward. "He comes all the time," she whispered, almost to herself.

"In the real world, Crisa, or is he in your head, too?"

"In my head. But not like the man. I can see the boy. I can feel him. He's more like a dream." She squeezed her eyes tighter. "It hurts, Briar!"

"Okay. Okay, come on, let's get you inside."

"You're not mad?"

"No, you nutcase. Why would I be mad? It's not your fault you've got a party going on in that head of yours, is it?"

"N-no."

"I'll bet Roxy can help you out with that headache, if you want. She and Ilyana are all into all that hocus-pocus shit. Healing with their hands. I imagine it makes 'em feel like a little bit more than plain old mortals."

"They're not plain. They're Chosen."

"Still, a mortal's a mortal's a mortal, right?"

Crisa nodded, the movement choppy as they moved down the hall. "Will Reaper be mad?"

"No one's mad, okay?" Briar sought to reassure her, and then decided to add a little enlightenment to boot. Hell, it couldn't hurt. "Besides," she said, "what do you care if anyone *is* mad at you? Toughen up, Crisa. If someone gives you crap, you give it right back and then some. Understand?"

Crisa looked at her and smiled just a little. "Yeah. I'll give it right back."

"Damn straight you will. You've got a little bit of my blood in your veins, after all. You go wimping out, it's going to pack up and move."

Briar opened the door at the end of the hall and, still holding Crisa's arm, led the other woman into the apartment. The building was abandoned but was still basically habitable. The bunch of them, Reaper and his misfit gang of fledgling vamps, had headed north from Mexico, traveling cau-

tiously, taking their time. Princess Topaz had volunteered her Emerald Isle mansion for them to use as a temporary base while they planned their next moves in the ongoing hunt for Gregor, the murderous rogue, and his gang. But Reaper wanted to take his sweet time getting there, just to be sure the CIA bastards who'd been jonesing for him were no longer following. Sure, the two agents who'd been on his ass most recently were crowbait by now. But there were others out there, watching.

This run-down hovel was in Atlanta, and it reminded Briar, with a little jab, of times in her life she would much rather forget. When she'd lived on the streets, places like this had been home to her. Yeah. Home, sweet home.

The others were just coming to life in various parts of the apartment. Sundown had been recent. They'd only just risen and begun gathering up their things to continue the journey north. Most of them, anyway, Briar saw, noticing that Jack and Topaz were nowhere in evidence. They were probably going at it like a pair of horny rabbits. Again.

And Topaz's movie-star legend of a mother, Mirabella, was likely still lying in bed, in typical Hollywood starlet fashion. Just because she automatically woke at sunset, like every other vampire, didn't mean she felt any need to get her ass up and moving.

Vixen and Seth stood close to one another, shoving clothes into a backpack, rubbing and touching often, their eyes saying way more than Briar wanted or needed to hear from either of them. Sickening.

"Roxy," Briar said, averting her thoughts from the others to the matter at hand. "Crisa has a pretty severe headache. You think you and Ilyana can work some of that shit you do on her and fix her up?"

"That *shit* we do is Reiki," Roxy replied. She whirled to face Briar as she spoke, and it created a great effect with the scarlet patterned kaftan she wore. It swirled like a cloak, and her wild red curls moved just as effectively. "It's *sacred* to us both."

There was very little Briar enjoyed more than baiting Roxy. Unless it was scaring the hell out of Ilyana. "Yeah, yeah," she said. "To you mortals, *everything* is sacred. All that spiritual garbage must make a nice crutch for people destined for the grave."

"We're *all* destined for the grave in the end," the ageless redhead told her. "Vampires like you, the Chosen like Ilyana and me, whether we eventually choose to be transformed or not, and ordinary humans like the rest of the world. There's no such thing as immortality. Not really. And you're fooling yourself if you think there is."

"Yeah, and I'll be fooling myself long after you're dust."

"Bitch," Roxy muttered.

"Whore," Briar replied.

Ilyana followed the exchange, looking slightly nervous, while Crisa seemed downright frightened by it. Reaper, the arrogant bastard, lounged on the wooden crate he was using as a chair, tipped back against the wall, looking mildly amused.

Roxy sent Briar one last dirty look, then took Crisa's hand and softened her expression. "Come on, Crisa. You can lie down on that old couch in the next room and we'll try some Reiki on you, okay?"

Crisa nodded, and Ilyana beat them both into the adjoining room.

Alone with Seth, Vixen and Reaper, Briar waited until the door to the next room closed. "I found Crisa outside, kind of disoriented. Told me some voice in her head told her to go out there and take a look around."

Reaper's crate came down, the front of it hitting the floor with a thud. "Gregor?"

"That wouldn't make sense," Seth said. "Gregor doesn't even know Crisa exists, much less that she's with us."

"As far as we know, that is," Vixen said softly. "He could have found out."

"It could also be some other vampire, hell-bent on destroying us," Reaper pointed out. "It's not like we haven't pissed off a few along the way." He glanced at Briar. "You know her best."

"I don't know her any better than the rest of you," she denied. It was automatic, and it was a lie.

"You shared blood with her, saved her life. You know that creates a powerful bond, a psychic link."

"I know." She averted her eyes. His were too dark, too knowing, and entirely too full of the sex they'd once had. Once. God, you'd think it had been a three-year affair the way it had affected him. It hadn't even fazed *her*.

Briar sighed and drew her attention back to the subject at hand. "But I still don't know what's going on with her. I don't even know if this is really mental communication from someone outside her. I think it might just be…you know, voices in her head." She made a twirling motion at her ear with a forefinger.

Reaper rose from his chair. "What makes you suspect that?"

She shrugged. "The fact that she's also seeing some boy she says feels more like a dream to her. The fact that she's got a headache the size of Jupiter most of the time. The fact that she was a few

cookies short of a full jar from the first day we set eyes on her. She's *nuts,* Reaper. We already know that."

He was studying her. So was Vixen, far more closely than was comfortable. Her little head tipped to one side and then the other, long copper hair falling over one shoulder, and her nose crinkled up just slightly.

"What?" Briar demanded.

"You…you have a headache, too," Vixen said.

Briar rolled her eyes. "Yeah, I have a pile of headaches. Three out here asking stupid questions, one sleeping in, two banging their brains out, a pair performing hocus-pocus in the next room, and one choo-choo train whose little red caboose has gone chugging around the bend."

Vixen smiled, then laughed softly. "That's funny. I didn't know you could be funny."

"I *wasn't* being funny."

"You're feeling her pain, aren't you?" Reaper asked.

Briar shrugged. "Either that or I've got a simple headache all my own. The easiest solution is usually the right one, Reaper."

"You could let Roxy and Ilyana work on you next," Seth suggested.

"Right. I'm going to lie in a bed and let two

mortal females put their hands on me. Not in this lifetime, pal."

"It was just a thought."

"Thanks. I prefer to suffer. A slight headache or untold agonies. Either way."

After she said it, she glanced toward the closed door beyond which the two women were working on Crisa. Then she noticed Reaper noticing *her,* and she averted her eyes.

"You're worried about her," he accused.

"Yeah, right. And I'm also taking up a collection to save the whales. You wanna contribute?" She rolled her eyes and left the room, heading into the empty bedroom where she'd spent the night.

Sinking to the floor and drawing up her knees, she bent her head and rubbed her temples. She closed her eyes and tried to relax away the pain in her head. But she couldn't relax it away or massage it away, or even will it away, because it wasn't her pain.

It was Crisa's. So all she could do was wait.

Fortunately for her, the two most irritating mortals on the planet were extremely gifted healers. That shit they did, they did very well, though she would die before she would acknowledge it to either of them. Roxy was already far too cocky, while Ilyana was petrified of her, and Briar preferred to keep it that way.

Still, she thanked them silently when the pain in her head began to ease and finally faded to almost nothing.

She rested only for a few moments, then got up when someone tapped on her door. She opened it to see Jack, with his dirty blond hair that was always a little too long and his slightly scruffy whiskers, making him seem like a rebel, wearing the satisfied smirk of a man who'd had far better sex than he deserved.

"We're getting ready to move out, Bri. You got your stuff together?"

"Two minutes," she told him.

He nodded, his eyes doing a quick survey of her face. "Your headache better?"

"Gone," she told him.

"I figured. Crisa's is, too."

She frowned at him.

"Reaper filled us in. I'll help you keep an eye on her. Don't worry."

"I wasn't. And I don't need your help 'keeping an eye' on Crisa, because it's not my job to keep an eye on Crisa. Jeez, who appointed me the keeper of the nuthouse?"

He shrugged. "Need help packing?"

"Go jump your freaking princess again or something, and stop pestering me, will you?"

"Okay." He winked and left the room.

Why the hell, she wondered, was everyone so determined to see things in her that didn't exist? She wasn't *worried* about Crisa. She didn't give a *shit* about Crisa—or anyone else, for that matter. This pile of do-gooders just couldn't seem to accept that about her. They didn't understand it, sought to project their own moral bullshit onto her. But she didn't believe in it. Never had.

She was out only for herself, her own best interests and the fulfillment of her own needs. And right now those needs included only two things. The basic need to devour living blood in order to survive, and her sole purpose for wanting to.

She had to kill Gregor for what he'd done to her.

Revenge was the only reason she continued waking up each night. It was her life force. And once it was done, well, hell, she would probably be done, too, despite her tough talk to Roxy about being a true immortal.

There really wasn't, as far as she could see, much of a point to it, after all.

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