



Friends and Other Nuisances

By Jill Irving

Wylie Hansford had set her alarm for 4:00 a.m. on a Saturday. If someone had told her she'd been up before dawn to run a month ago, she would have called them insane. Now here she was, before the sun had even started rising, running through the streets of Farmingham, New Hampshire with Delia Hunter, a crazy woman. Life was funny like that sometimes.

Delia had been in the mood lately and had been avoiding her friends. Zoe and Trim had insisted they all do their part to "be with her" and "bring her out of despair", but so far Delia had been doing pretty well at avoiding them. Wylie wasn't completely sure that Delia was in despair; and frankly Wylie was still a little in shock over circumstances of late. It's not everyday one is turned into a demon-magnet, stands helplessly while someone else is killed, and then has a mind-blowing fight about real life-and-death stuff with someone who was rapidly becoming her best friend.

Still, Wylie agreed to do her part, and after the tough fights that had ensued recently, she decided she needed to start her own personal workout regimen anyway. What could be better than running a zillion miles at a god-awful time of the morning with Ms. Drill Sergeant 2004? Wylie had been running through the list of possibilities for the last three miles. Of course, if it weren't for her Slayer abilities she probably would have dropped dead two miles ago...how did Delia do it without powers anyway?

They'd been running silently for what seemed like hours when they finally passed near Raine's place. Raine was probably the only person she'd seen less of than Delia over the last couple days. Since the two of them had 'exchange words' and blown everything all to hell, they'd both made themselves scarce. Wylie's plan was to stop that, and the best way she could think of to do that was to get close to both of them again.

As they were passing by, Wylie grabbed Delia's arm and started dragging her into the barn. Delia fought the whole way, but Wylie was stronger and more fervent. The lights were off in the barn, Wylie let go of Delia to turn them on.

"What is your damage?" Delia grumbled rubbing her wrist.

"I want to work out." Wylie declared.

"Does it have to be here?"

Wylie looked around at all the equipment. “You know someplace better?”

“Raine was pretty clear that she wanted out.”

“Maybe, but I know she’s still working out. And she doesn’t mind us using the dojo...besides some of this equipment came from you, right?”

“Yeah. I suppose.” Delia huffed out, “I just don’t want to tick her off any more. I’m so sorry I let my temper win in the first place. I never do that!”

“Unusual circumstances...besides, keeping it all in isn’t healthy.” Wylie allowed.

“It’s worked for me for years.”

“Thanks for making my point!” Wylie moved to the weight bench while Delia stepped onto the mats and started to stretch. Conversation ceased while they both went about their own personal workout.

When the sound of a phone ringing ‘Taps’ startled her out of her reverie, Wylie looked over to Delia who was in the zone. Wylie grabbed Delia’s jacket and pulled out the cell phone in the pocket.

“Delia Hunter’s line”

“You’re not Deal” a sleepy voice on the other end complained.

“Delia’s a bit busy at the moment.”

T.J.’s voice woke up for a second. “Really? Doing anyone interesting?” she drawled.

“She’s doing Tai Chi, I think.”

“Too bad!” T.J.’s disappointment rang clearly through the connection. “This Wylie?”

“Of course, who else?”

“Rogue?” She paused at the dead silence. “Guess you don’t know the X-men. Anyway, can you give Delia a message?”

“Of course.” Wylie glanced over Delia did some sort of fancy kick in the middle of a flip-flop.

“You tell Deal to get her sweet ass down here to Portsmouth by six a.m.”

“What’s up?” Wylie inquired.

“Just tell her, please. Damn...the things I do for that girl...getting up at 4:30 in the freaking morning...” T.J. hung up on her own tirade.

“Well, that was interesting.” Wylie hung up and watched Delia practice some more.

“Hey D, let’s spar!”

“Who was that?” Delia asked as she took her stance in the center of the dojo.

“T.J., she said, and I quote ‘get your sweet ass to Portsmouth by 6 a.m.’”

Delia swept in low, forcing Wylie to jump up. “That’s weird. T.J.’s not what you’d call a morning person by choice.”

“I got that sense. She was a bit grumpy.”

Delia grinned evilly. “Really? That doesn’t suck! I wonder how grumpy she’ll be if I’m late.”

“I couldn’t tell you!” Wylie threw a punch which Delia easily dodged. “But I’d ask myself if you could take her in a fair fight in case she decided to take exception.”

Delia dove into a back walkover, kicked out stopping a millimeter from Wylie’s face.

“I guess that would be a safe wager.” Wylie rejoined.

“Where the heck are we going?” Delia asked T.J. for what seemed like the tenth time.

“Just hold on, we’re almost there.” T.J. pulled her car in front of a non-descript hangar. A tall man exited the building as she stopped the car.

“What...?” Delia started and stopped herself mid-sentence. She was out of the car in the blink of an eye and launched herself at the man wearing jeans, a Marine T-shirt, sunglasses and a backpack. “DEVIL!”

He caught her mid-stride in a long, hard hug. “Deal, how are you?” He asked, his voice a low grumble in her ear.

“How did you get here?”

“Military transport.” He released her.

“Wow. I knew you were in for a growth spurt...but you’re like a tree now!”

“And here I was thinking you shrunk.”

“She’s perfect. You must be the problem, bro.” A silky voice said from just behind his shoulder.

“GREY!” Delia was instantly in his arms. “What are you guys doing here?”

Grey pushed her back a few feet to examine her face. “Did you think we would sit around doing nothing after we heard?”

“Jeez, Deal. You’ve been having a pretty rough time. We had to see if we could help.”

“And in person is the only way to say you care.”

Delia looked between the two of them for a couple moments and then turned to grab both of them by the arms. “I haven’t the slightest idea what to say to you guys.”

“How ‘bout you all get in the car and we get some breakfast at my place. Then you can hop in Deal’s jeep and head off into the boonies. And I can get back to my Saturday snoozing.” T.J. suggested from the car.

Grey shot Devil a glance. “Sounds like the best offer I’ve had all day, and my day started at 2 a.m.”

“Yeah, we better feed this skinny girl before she expires on us.” Devil responded scooping Delia up and carrying her to the car.

“Where the hell do you live, Mayberry?” Devil asked watching the scenery fly by on the way to Farmingham.

“I wish!” Delia replied vehemently. “More like Smallville on crack.”

“How’s that?” Grey asked from the back seat.

“Long story.”

“In that case, let’s stop and get some coffee.” Devil suggested.

“Sure.” Delia pulled into the parking lot of the nearest Dunkin’ Donuts.

Grey jumped out the back of the jeep. “You coming in?”

Delia remained seated. “Nah, I’m broke, going in will just remind me what I can’t afford.”

Devil and Grey walked inside, returning a few minutes later with three icy, frothy coffee drinks.

“What is this?” Delia asked as Grey handed her one. “Isn’t this awfully frou-frou for the likes of you manly men?”

“Just try it!” Devil argued. “Thank God for caffeine.” He praised after sipping his.

Grey watched intently as Delia slipped her finger into the whipped cream on top and licked it off.

“Why did we get her whipped cream?” He asked uncomfortably, glancing back to Devil.

“You know I never touch this kind of stuff.” She complained enjoying another fingerful of cream. The boys exchanged a ‘guy’ look filled with innuendo.

Grey reached over the door and tried to pinch her belly. “Yeah, but it looks like you could use a little weight. You look hard and firm, but too skinny. People are supposed to have a little bit of fat...just in case.” He squeezed a quarter inch on his own belly as proof.

Delia glanced up into his eyes. “I haven’t been hungry much lately. That’s all. It will pass.”

“Yeah, we’ll make sure you get plenty to eat while we’re here.” Devil teased. “It’s a tough job, but we’re up to the task.”

“Funny, Trim is always saying stuff like that.”

Grey leaped up into the back of the jeep and strapped himself in. “So how far to Farmingham?”

“About ten minutes, this is the closest Dunkin’s. In town we have to settle for the Double-Rs coffee.”

“The Double-R?” Devil inquired turning in his seat.

“It’s the local greasy spoon and the only fast food in town.” Delia explained.

“Any good?” he asked.

“It was better before Matt started working in the kitchen, but it’s still better than Mom’s cooking.”

“So we’re eating there, right?” Grey asked.

“Probably a good plan! Mom may not feel up to visitors right now.”

“Well, we’re planning on staying at a motel, a cheap one, unless there’s someplace we can camp.”

“We’ll see what can be arranged.” Delia answered thoughtfully.

“**D**amn Deal, what do you do around here for fun?” Devil asked looking at the very brief Main Street selection.

“Well, there’s the Vault for night-time entertainment.” Delia started.

“The Vault?” Grey asked

“An all-age club, mostly local bands play there, but some are pretty good.”

“We’ll have to hit there tonight.” Devil suggested. “What else?”

“Well, other than the Double-R, there’s not much else. We kind of hang out at the Dojo, or sometimes at Jacqueline’s.” Delia explained.

Devil looked over at her. “Dojo? Where?”

Delia shrugged, “it’s really a converted barn. We cleaned it up and put down mats and some workout equipment.”

“You say ‘we’ a lot. Who’s the rest of this ‘we’?” Grey asked.

“Friends, I guess.”

“You guess?” He prompted.

“Things have been a little weird lately.” Delia attempted to explain.

“Your father dies, he gets this posthumous promotion and then your grandmother dies unexpectedly. I guess that could be termed weird. I would think if they were friends they’d be gathering around you.”

Devil added, “Like us.”

“Other stuff happened...” Delia offered.

“Oh, that’s specific. That SO explains why your friends might be acting weird!” Devil remarked.

“I did some stuff...”

“I don’t remember you being this difficult to get a straight answer out of last summer. You were about as straight a shooter as they get.” Grey commented.

“Things are different.”

“I CAN’T STAND IT!” Devil yelled out in frustration. “If you don’t want to talk about it, let’s do something interesting. Let’s go check out this dojo of yours. Maybe I can beat some actual details out of you.”

Delia pulled her jeep in front of MacEnroe motors and shut off the engine. “Guys, can you wait here a minute. I just want to make sure Raine doesn’t mind...”

Devil raised a brow but nodded. Grey slipped into her abandoned seat as she left. “Any thoughts?” Devil asked of him as Delia walked into the garage.

“No. Something bad must have happened to keep our girl so wound up and secretive.”

“You don’t suppose she finally realized she is a girl and is secretly lusting after one or both of us?”

Grey grinned at the idea. “Somehow I doubt it, though I certainly wouldn’t mind...if she was interested in me, that is.”

“Who would notice you with me in the room?” Devil bragged teasingly.

Grey tucked his tongue in his cheek. “I don’t know, someone with more intelligence than the average fruit fly, maybe.”

Devil saluted the barb and then turned thoughtfully to face the garage. “I seriously hope I can get her to loosen up a bit with some sparring.”

“Yeah because beating someone up always makes them more amenable to telling their secrets.” Grey observed.

“For someone like Deal, it’s like foreplay.”

Grey lifted a brow, but kept his mouth shut as Delia started back from the garage.

After thoroughly checking out the Dojo’s setup and equipment, Devil pulled off his shirt. “Okay, let’s see what you’ve got.” He challenged toeing off his shoes.

Delia turned to Grey rolling her eyes, but reached down to unlace her boots. When she had them off, she moved to the center of the mats.

“Aren’t you worried about getting your shirt sweaty?” Devil grinned at her.

“Not particularly.”

“You like going around smelling like sweat for the rest of the day?” He asked.

Delia smiled. “No, I just don’t expect to get very sweaty taking you out.”

“We’ll see!” He launched his first attack at her, and was easily evaded.

As they circled each other looking for openings, Kate and Zoe pulled in behind the jeep. Wylie had said Delia was leaving town, but now her jeep was sitting at Raine’s place.

“You think this is a good thing? Or do we have another explosion coming?” Zoe asked Kate.

“Hard to say. Let’s just go see…” Kate responded, pulling out her cell phone to get Wylie and Trim.

As they walked in, they stopped to watch the two combatants sparring. Wylie joined them a few minutes later. A muffled “yum, yum” was heard from one of them after getting a good look at the muscled guy fighting Delia. Grey moved towards the new arrivals as he watched his friends start to get a little more serious.

“Come on Deal; let’s see what you’ve got!” Devil finally got tired of waiting for her to really fight back.

“Take him out, D!” Kate encouraged from the sidelines.

Wylie could tell that Delia was biding her time letting her opponent waste energy trying to find an opening. Despite the boy’s obvious training, she knew almost instantly that Delia was better. She’d seen enough of D’s real moves to know she was waiting him out.

Delia shifted her attention quickly to the gathered crowd. “Hey guys. What are you doing here?” She asked returning her attention to Devil.

“Saw your Jeep, wondered what was up.” Wylie smiled. “Hi guys!”

“A pleasure to meet you! I’m Grey.” The young man introduced. “That’s Devil out there about to kick our girl’s butt.”

Wylie looked over the two boys and replied. “I’ll take that bet.”

“No wagers!” Delia argued from the floor, slipping easily under one of Devil’s attacks.

Devil tried to draw her into conversation to distract her. “So what have you been doing with yourself, since you obviously haven’t been working on your fighting skills?” She’d been defensive for the most part, not a single attempt at attacking.

“Improving my grades, learning to cook, and attempting to stay out of fights; I even briefly joined chess club before it was disbanded.” Delia ticked off a list.

“Hard to believe, but I think you’ve gotten more geeky.” Devil glanced over at the girls on the sidelines. “You look like a cool kid” he addressed Wylie “how can you let her be such a nerd?”

“Have you ever tried to get her to do anything?” Wylie asked. “I can’t even get her to wear mascara!”

Grey laughed. “That would be interesting to see. Maybe if we held her down; you think it’ll work?”

“It would take a miracle.” Kate remarked in her best Miracle Max impression.

“So are you ladies going to the Vault tonight?” Devil attempted to flirt while fighting, causing him to lose attention and take a kick to the kidney. “Damn, that hurt Deal!”

She appeared chagrined; “sorry” she muttered.

When Trim entered, Delia decided she’d had enough spectator sports. Shifting her weight away from the strike Devil was attempting, she grappled him as he altered his balance. She landed heavily on him, and pinned him, her body straddling his.

“Deal, I didn’t know you wanted me in this position.” He attempted to reverse their positions until she pulled her knee up to within a centimeter of his groin. “Okay, okay. I give.”

Delia shifted into a handstand over him and flipped away, surprising him with the spryness of the move.

Devil did the flippy-uppy thing to stand and turned to the other women in the room. “Anyone else want to pin me?” He grinned as he grabbed a towel and wiped the sweat from his chest before pulling on his shirt.

Grey examined Deal’s face as she approached the group by the door. “Hey Devil, looks like she was right, barely worked up a sweat at all.”

“Yeah, that’s because she barely did anything...completely defensive. When did you start playing it so safe?”

Delia dared a quick glance at the others before answering. “I don’t want to see anyone hurt...”

“A little thing like you really isn’t gonna do much damage to me!” Devil condescended.

Delia glared at him for a moment before wandering back across the dojo to where her jacket hung. “You’re probably right.”

“You’re going to take that?” Trim asked.

“It doesn’t matter.” Delia shrugged her shoulders. “Let him have his delusions, it doesn’t change anything for me.”

“Aren’t you worried that his ego will get so big he can’t fit through the door?”

“Nah. Devil doesn’t really work that way. He says things like that mostly in jest. I think he was trying to impress the ladies.”

“Sometimes you baffle me!” Trim harrumphed.

After promising to meet the others at the Vault later, Delia and the boys decided to take a run through Farmingham. They started with a slow, comfortable pace as Delia pointed out a variety of ‘sites’ in the area, including the houses of her friends. Eventually, they ended up competing to see who could run fastest and longest.

They were all a bit tired of the pace they’d set by the time they approached Farmingham Memorial Cemetery. Devil and Delia’s racing had left Grey winded and aching.

“Guys, I gotta stop.” Grey called through his wheezing. “We must’ve run ten miles. This is cruel and unusual punishment at the pace you’re setting.”

Delia glanced at the rapidly darkening sky. “Let’s move on a little from here; then you can rest.” She suggested impatiently.

“No can do!” Grey stated firmly. “I’m gonna sit here for a few minutes and catch my breath while I rub my poor, sore calves. I should make you do the rubbing since this is your fault.” He glared at his friends.

Deal looked around at the open gates of the cemetery. “Come on, we’ll give you hand getting away from here.”

“What’s the matter? Is the big, tough marine wannabe afraid of the big, dark cemetery?” Devil cracked.

“I’m just not big on hanging out in the cemetery after dark these days.”

Devil gave her his patented devil-may-care look. “See, I think it’s kind of fun.” He moved toward the graveyard’s entrance. “In fact, I think I’m gonna have a look around.”

“Don’t be stupid Devil.” Delia protested. “This is no time for these churlish tricks of yours. We should get back to the house. I’m sure you want enough time to dress nice for the ladies.” She tried to waylay him.

“No, I think I want to see what you are so nervous about.” Devil glanced back at his friend and stepped inside the gates.

The moon was starting to shine down on them clearly against the near-dark sky. Grey finally stood and moved to follow Devil.

“Don’t encourage him!” Delia snapped. “We need to get...”

A yell silenced her argument. Grey and Delia ran in to find Devil pulling himself out of the hole he’d stepped into.

“That’s stupid; they should have this marked somehow.” He remarked brushing himself off and testing his twisted ankle.

Delia examined the grave carefully. It wasn’t an open grave; it had been newly filled and it looked like something had dug its own way out.

“You okay?” She asked looking carefully around her.

“Yeah, my ankle hurts a little, but it’s not bad. I guess we’ll be walking back.”

“I told you this was a stupid idea” she told him still watching for signs of trouble. “Let’s get you back to the house.”

“Deal, come on. Why are you so nervous?” Grey queried watching her go into hyper-alert mode. “You would have been into a wander around a graveyard a year ago.”

“Maybe I’ve grown up!” Delia quipped.

Devil shook his head. “Getting superstitious and paranoid is not growing up.”

Time ran out just as Delia convinced the guys to leave. The vampires attacked from two directions trapping them between the open grave and the exit. One dove directly at Devil while Delia rushed the second one, K-Bar in hand.

“Merde!” Devil yelled as one of the inhumanly strong creatures lifted him off his feet and smashed him down on the ground.

Delia jumped into the air and slammed both feet into the chest of the one rushing her direction. It fell to the ground. Before it could flip up again, she leapt on top of it and grappled it to the ground, holding her knife blade against its throat. While straining to hold it against its greater strength, she shouted out to Grey.

“Right boot!”

Grey reached for her rapidly moving leg and was barely able to slip his hand inside her boot to find the stake she kept there.

“Through the heart!” She instructed as she felt the stake slide out. She twisted allowing the vamp to reverse positions with her. Grey’s aim was perfect and her opponent exploded into a cloud of dust.

“Excellent” she praised as she flipped to her feet.

They turned to Devil, who was being held immobile from the back, the vampire having already sunk its fangs into his neck.

“Hey Ugly” she roared at the vampire. “Looks like your buddy had a little bit of an accident. Now it’s your turn.” She charged it.

It released Devil’s neck so it could fight this new threat. As soon as Devil had fallen away she bellowed “Incendere”. Flames shot forth from her hands in an arc burning its clothing and skin. She followed up with a flip-flop ending in a hard kick to its face knocking it down. As it stood, she spun and kicked it again, forcing it back against the headstone.

“Grey!” She grabbed the vampire by the shoulders. She pulled it down across herself and started a back roll, using her feet to push it away. When it landed on its back on the other side of her, Grey wailed on it with the stake. Grey and Devil both stared at the remaining dust.

“What the hell?” Devil swore.

“Now will you get out of here?” Delia asked petulantly. “We’re under armed!”

As they rushed to the exit, Delia pulled a sweat rag from her pocket. When they were a few blocks away, she stopped and slipped the rag onto Devil’s bleeding neck wound.

“Deal, are you going to explain what we just saw?” He asked.

“When we get inside!” Delia answered trying to think of good answers for their questions.

A quarter-hour later, Delia sat with the boys in her library. She had pulled out the first aid kit and was tending to Devil’s still bleeding neck wound.

“Maybe we should go to the hospital.” She suggested after checking under the cloth she was using to staunch the blood.

“No. I really don’t want to have to explain this to my folks.” Devil argued. “Sew it up.”

“Without anesthetic?”

“Go for it!” Devil told her.

She pulled out a needle, sanitized and threaded it. As she started pushing the skin together, Grey began to ask questions.

“So were those real vampires?”

“Yes. Real, undead vampires.” Delia answered.

Devil gritted his teeth as the needle sunk in, but focused his mind on the conversation. “I didn’t think they were real.”

“They are.”

“How long have you known?” Grey questioned.

“Since shortly after I got here.”

“And you didn’t tell us?” Devil winced.

Delia chuckled at the thought. “Oh yes, because you SO would have believed me. You guys would have thought I’d gone totally mental.”

Grey acknowledged “Probably.”

“It’s the kind of thing you have to see to believe.”

“So you fight them?” Devil surmised.

Delia nodded her head slowly.

“Are they everywhere?” Grey asked seriously.

“I don’t know. I never saw them before I got here...but well, I don’t know if I would have believed what I saw.” Delia tried to explain as she tied off the thread. “A lot of the kids around here seem to see stuff and then explain it off as something else...something more believable.”

“I guess that’s natural.” Devil added thankful to have the needlework done. “I don’t think Grey and I will be doing that.”

Delia snickered then. “I never thought you would.”

“How’d you flame it?” Grey asked.

“Magic.”

“That’s real too?” Devil shook his head in consternation. “This is a lot to take in.”

“It’s real.”

“Can anyone do magic?” Grey queried.

“Some people have the aptitude. Others can learn to cast spells or perform incantations, but it’s easier if you have the intrinsic power.”

“Do you?”

“Yes. It’s in my blood.” Delia shifted her eyes to the portrait of her grandmother on the wall. “I was learning from Grams.”

“You found all this out after losing your dad and moving here?” Grey put it all together. “And then you lose your grandmother? Geez, Deal, you had much more going on than we knew.”

“That’s not all.” She admitted as she moved to her desk. “Grams had told me that the magic in my blood had been initiated by a pact hundreds of years ago with a ‘greater

power', a demon. I have demon blood in me." Delia's head had gone down and she stopped looking in the boys' faces as she spoke.

Grey stepped forward and took her hand. "Do you think that changes anything?" He examined her bent shoulders and guilty eyes. "You do, I see. It changes nothing about who you are. You choose your own path. You're going to be a Marine, a good guy. You fight for the side of good."

Delia looked back up into his intense grey eyes. "I try."

"I'm just worried you are going to get yourself killed trying." Devil added. "Those things are strong. I couldn't shake him."

"I've been working out."

"You couldn't take me!" He argued.

Delia tilted her head to the side and smiled slightly. "I won and I didn't even try."

"Sure!" He harrumphed disbelievingly.

"She did pretty well against them." Grey argued. "Still if there were more..."

"I don't usually fight alone. My friends and I work at stopping them."

"Those girls?" Devil asked in disgust.

"Yeah. Two of them are Slayers, those who are born to fight evil."

"Okay, this is a little much to take in. Girls born to kill monsters?"

Delia shrugged, "I guess it doesn't matter if you don't believe, as long as you stay out of the graveyards here."

Devil shook his head as if attempting to clear it. "I need a shower to clear my head."

"Go ahead." Delia suggested. As Devil left the room, Grey stepped back to Delia's side.

"Are you going to be all right?" He slipped his hand on top of hers. "Things seemed a bit tense with your friends."

"A lot of stuff happened all at once, I have to re-earn their trust."

He smiled at her. "It's hard for me to imagine anything that would make me lose trust in you."

"Maybe they don't know me as well. Or maybe you don't know me as well as you think."

"Or maybe living with all this constantly makes one a little more cynical." He patted her hand. "Did you lie? Did you intentionally hurt one of them?"

"No, but I withheld the truth; things that ended up hurting them...nearly getting them killed."

"Everyone withholds the truth sometimes. I'd be surprised to find any of them don't have their own secrets to hide. They'll get over it; get past it. So will you."

"I hope you are right." She whispered before slipping into his arms for a tight hug.

"I am!" He hugged her back fiercely.

The gang was all at the Vault when they arrived. Devil's white bandage stood out in stark contrast to the bronze of his skin. Wylie immediately asked about it.

"We had a little run-in near the cemetery." Delia answered quietly.

"What were you doing there?" Wylie's voice sharpened as she glared at Delia.

Grey responded quickly. "My bad! We were running past. I got winded and stopped. Then the brain-tumor over there thought it would be fun to wander around inside."

Devil had the grace to look sheepish. "Deal wouldn't tell us why, but she kept saying we should go."

"We found out why." Grey picked up the train of the story. "After Deal kicked their butts and saved ours, we got the rest of the story. I gotta say I'm pretty impressed that you are all in one piece."

"And so lovely to boot..." Devil complimented sideling up Wylie.

"We finally figured out that you were right, Devil's lucky Delia didn't wipe the floor with him earlier."

Trim grinned at the picture of Mr. Muscle getting his come-uppance.

"So who's up for a little dancing?" Devil asked looking at Wylie.

"What are you so happy about?" A very perplexed Delia asked. "You just learned all this stuff..."

"And I'm alive." He declared firmly. "I lived through it and have a chance to try to make it better. I'm here in a club with a bunch of cool, and might I say very attractive, people. What's to sulk about? Tomorrow I go home and start working out harder to get ready for the bad stuff out there. When camp starts, you'll barely recognize me!" He grinned at his own apparent overconfidence.

"And you?" Delia turned to Grey.

"Devil's right. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger. We just learned that there are worse things out there than terrorists. That just means there is something more for us to fight when this war is over. So we'll prepare. But for today, we celebrate being alive."

Wylie smiled with two guys. "You're so right! Let's dance!"

Delia stayed behind at the table as the others moved to the floor.

"You okay?" Darius McAllister asked sliding into the chair next to Delia.

She turned to him, "Not sure yet."

"Who are the guys?" He nodded towards the boys out on the floor with Kate and Wylie.

"Friends of mine from Boot Camp."

"Ah, the infamous boot camp...they're visiting?" He prompted.

"Yes, for the weekend." Delia raised her hands and slipped a pair of earplugs into her ears.

“Kind of loud, let’s step outside.” Dare suggested picking up on her sensitivity to loud noise.

Delia glanced back at the dance floor, but everyone looked to be content. “Okay.”

As the door closed behind them, Delia took out the earplugs.

“Better?” Dare grinned.

“Oh SO much!” Delia gazed at the earplugs in her hand. “I guess I owe you an apology for my outburst the other day.” She glanced up sheepishly. “I...”

Dare laid his hand across hers, “No. Don’t. You owe me nothing. I butted in where I didn’t belong. I guess I thought we were friends...”

Delia pulled her hands from his and slipped the earplugs in her pocket. “I had all this anger. I wanted to hurt something...and you were the unfortunate person who got in my way.” She gestured wildly. “I don’t seem to have a lot of control lately.”

Dare countered. “Delia, stop it! For a couple months after my mother left, I blew up at everyone who got in my face. Trust me! I know what grief can do. You aren’t going to send me away screaming with your searing sarcasm, not when I know it’s your defense mechanism.”

“Do you always have to psychoanalyze me?”

He laughed. “No. I just want you to know that pushing me away doesn’t make me care for you less.”

Delia shoved her fingers through her hair. “Why do you bother with me? I’m such a mess. I shout at people, endanger them, and keep secrets.”

“Delia, we all hide things about ourselves...some big, some small. As for the rest, who’ve you endangered lately?”

“My friends, Devil and Grey, we got attacked while we were running...”

“Vampires?” He continued at her affirmative nod. “Did anyone get hurt?”

“Yes. Devil got bit. It scared the hell out of me. I didn’t want them to get hurt. I didn’t want them to have to know. It’s such a burden.”

“Are they capable of carrying it?” Dare asked seriously.

“Of course, but...”

“Stop there. You rail at Raine because she is trying to protect you, but you do the same to me and you’re doing it to these guys too.”

Delia stopped mid-thought. “I do, don’t I?”

Dare nodded.

“It’s different though. Raine should know I can take care of myself...”

“And your friends can’t?”

“Well...yes. They are both well trained. You on the other hand...”

“I’m not trying to fight monsters.” Dare argued.

“No, but you’ve expressed an interest in ‘helping’. Honestly, you are a really nice guy...surprisingly so, really, but I still don’t know what you would be able to do.”

“Why don’t we table that discussion? Right now, I’ll settle for helping you find your equilibrium.”

“You know, Dare” she stopped for emphasis, “I don’t know what I did to deserve you, but I’m really glad you moved here.” She smiled at him.

He beamed and directed her back inside, “so which one of the guys are you dating?” He inquired casually.

“Me? Dating? You’ve got to be kidding!” She turned to him in surprise. “Do you know me or not?”

“So am I going to turn in to one of them?” Devil asked as they drove to the airport the next day.

Delia glimpsed at him through her peripheral vision. “No. They have to drain you completely and you have to drink their blood. You were just a nummy treat.”

“Well, at least someone enjoyed me.” Devil quipped.

“I don’t know he gave you up pretty quickly when Deal came his way...maybe you weren’t that nummy after all.”

“Yeah, well you are probably sour!” Devil responded.

Grey raised a brow. “That was a pretty lame comeback.”

“He’s just upset he didn’t get any.” Delia remarked.

“Deal!” Devil exclaimed in surprise.

“Tell me it isn’t true. Not a single one of my friends fell for your smarmy charm.”

“Smarmy? Who you calling smarmy?”

“All of them are clearly more interested in the male model that you stepped outside with.” Grey mentioned.

“Dare.” Delia filled in.

“Didn’t think you’d go for the non-military type” he observed.

“He’s a friend” at Devil’s lifted eyebrows she continued, “like you guys.”

Devil smirked at his friend and remarked “Oh, so he secretly lusts after you too?”

Delia’s mouth dropped open in shock. “No...but...”

“He’s kidding!” Grey reassured her.

“It’s true. You are great, but honestly we like girls who are...well...girls.”

“I guess that makes me safe.” Delia jibed in response. Pulling up to the curb at the airport, Delia smiled back at them. “Guys, I don’t know how to say thanks.”

“So don’t!” Grey told her. “Say see you later...because you will.”

“At camp this summer.” Devil agreed.

“I haven’t received word.”

“You will. Dad’s taking care of it. We’ll all be together in a short time.” Devil explained.

“Yeah, we’re going to have a lot to talk about.” Grey continued as he got out of the jeep. “Keep in touch, Deal!” He ordered as they hugged their goodbyes.

“I will!”

Delia arrived home after a long, leisurely drive to clear her head and process all that she’d learned over the past two days. As she entered her room, she lit candles on her dresser. Pushing the play button on her CD player, she sat for a few minutes in the window seat watching the sun set. Finally, she crossed to her desk and pulled out some writing paper; the print across the top read “From the Desk of Captain Jack Hunter”. She selected a pen from the U.S. Marines insignia mug in front of her.

Resting her chin on her hand, she thought for a few minutes before starting to write. After scribing across the page for a while, she stopped to read what she’d written. She crumpled the page and threw it into the trash, then started with a fresh sheet.

An hour later there were several more crumpled sheets in her trash bin. She studied her finished product for a few moments before folding it neatly and tucking it into a matching envelope. Delia set the flap with her family seal, and wrote its destination on the front. She examined the green wax inscribed with a script W surrounded by vines.

With the word on the page emblazoned in her head, Delia ran out the door, the note gripped in her left hand.

Raine,

I am writing because my temper has been a bit volatile of late and I want to avoid making more of a mess of this than I already have. It has been pointed out to me of late that I am guilty of the same offense of which I accused you; being overly protective and untrusting of other’s abilities to take care of themselves. I am reminded that one of the reasons that you made such an impact on me in the first place is that we are similar in nature in fundamental ways. But we are also different and those differences make us react to things differently.

I hope you realize your absence is deeply felt. I wanted to assure you that I value your friendship greatly. It is not, nor was it ever, my wish to alienate you from the group; a place to which you have more right than I. Whatever happens in the days to come and whether you change your mind or not, I will be watching your back. I fervently hope that we can regain the ground lost by my overreaction.

With sincerest apologies and regards,

Delia

At Raine’s house, Delia stopped running. With one last glance at the missive, she thrust it into Raine’s mailbox and rushed home for dinner.