

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE CHRONICALLY STUPID

PART 1: STRANGE MEETINGS

I blinked with surprise as Darcy's home came into view, then whistled in appreciation. Every rotten thing I'd been thinking about the woman and her bad timing faded into the recesses of my mind. Darcy's taste was a lot better than the previous Watcher they tried to stick me with. He'd lived in a studio apartment. Been into that modern look, I just don't get. He'd been good enough at his job, but his interests in me were not purely professional; it was for that reason he was removed.

I hadn't been having much luck in the way of men in my life lately. At this thought my mood turned sour once more. I decided not to dwell on the matter any further as I pulled into the circular drive out front of the multi-leveled mansion, or was castle closer to the mark I wondered.

It was then I noticed that there were other vehicles already parked in the drive. Hmm, that was odd. In my various years as the Slayer there had never been outsiders present during a slayer meeting before.

That was why I was here. Hadn't I just, till moments before, been cursing Darcy for calling me in the middle of the hunt with obscure passages that could wait until morning? So, what was with the other cars?

I turned off the engine, stepped out of my storm gray Toyota Tundra as the light rain became a down pour. I cursed as I rushed for the door step. As I passed them the assortment of vehicles struck me as odd. There was a sleek black sports car, a green Forerunner, and a pristine white Rolls Royce. The Royce seemed out of place among the rest. It set my tempter rising. I studied

it closer. In my disdain I suppressed the urge to go back to drag my keys over the car. I had a certain dislike of that particular car. Instead I rang the bell focusing on the appointment at hand.

After ringing the bell I brushed water droplets off my black leather trench coat. I hoped that Darcy wouldn't comment on my blood stained jeans. I hadn't taken the time to run home to change. Now that I saw the house I found myself wishing I did. I combed my fingers through my hair using the glass on the door to tidy it up.

When the door opened rather than a grown woman I was faced with a small girl. She appeared to be no older than eight. Her strawberry blonde ringlets blew across her face caught in the breeze. I envied her for the curls. I wanted those same ones at her age. My hair refused to be tamed. Instead it ended up a frizzy mess. She smiled. Her pale blue eyes like that of winter frost gleamed with mirth.

“Oh, you must be Zoe. Come in, come in. Mommy's told me so much about you. I'm Natasha.”

Funny, I never heard anything about her. How was it that Darcy knew anything about me anyway, I wondered as I followed the doll like child into the house. We passed down a warm, welcoming hallway. Natasha opened a door on the left side, led me in. When the door opened I knew something strange was happening. Within the room I heard raised voices.

“I was told this was a tutoring session for algebra.” Her voice was moody, hinting at a whine; young, naïve, not adult at all.

“No, I was informed that this evenings' festivities were to be a mask.” That voice belonged to the Rolls Royce. It screamed high society, privilege. The English accent also spoke of high station.

“Yeah, well, I keep telling you, you’re both wrong. I was called about a tip on the location of a perpetrator I’m looking for.”

A cop something was definitely off here.

“Do you know why we’re really here?” I whispered to Natasha.

“Mommy just said she invited some friends over.” Natasha replied before she slipped back out the door, closing it behind me.

I heard the unwelcome sound of the lock clicking into place before I stepped further into the room. Whatever was happening here Darcy didn’t want any of us leaving. The trio of arguing voices started again. I walked across the decorative rug glad of my relative stealth; the others were not yet aware of my presence.

“I’m telling you, my note has this address 8:30pm, tutoring session, algebra.” As she came into view I saw she was an early teen with chestnut brown hair. Her eyes were like chocolate. Based on the way she was smoothing out non-existent creases in her sundress she was nervous. Probably not happy at the prospect of having lied to her parents either. She dug through her back-pack, pulled out an envelope.

“Let’s have a look at that sweetie.” The owner of this voice had jet black hair cut to shape her face. She wore a pair of sharp black dress pants with a royal blue blouse. Her gray eyes were like that of steel. This one didn’t miss a trick. She was the police officer I reasoned.

After looking over the note she blew out a breath. “Ah, hell, she’s right.”

“Well, I have an invitation with this location. The requested arrival time was for 8:30pm.” Miss Rolls’ hair was white blonde. Her eyes were the deepest blue I’ve ever seen; maybe violet even. She wore a snow white Grecian style gown. Before I could stop myself I spoke.

“What, were you coming as a goddess?” My words were hard, clipped. They carried with them a heavy amount of sarcasm. Damn. I had a natural dislike for women like her, my voice conveyed it.

The trio turned.

“Darcy?” They questioned as one. I grinned entertained; shook my head. So, they didn’t know her either, interesting.

“Afraid not; it would seem I’m another person brought here under false pretences.”

Amusement sang in my voice as I approached the couch near the fire where they were gathered.

“What did your letter say?” The teen voice held genuine curiosity.

“I didn’t get a letter, kid.”

“You didn’t?” Miss Royce inquired as the door behind us opened.

“No, I didn’t. It was a phone call.” I supplied. The sound of muffled footsteps caught my attention.

“What was the nature of the call?” the detective asked.

Turning, I found her eyeing me with suspicion. I hoped my blood stains weren’t showing in the fire light.

“A rare book.”

“You’re a book dealer?” Miss Royce’s voice dripped with disgust, disbelief. I ground my teeth together at her tone, trying to remain professional. After all Miss Rolls was not necessarily just like my battle axe of a grandmother.

“That’s right. I own Stormy Nights.” I said it with pride. Running the shop was my day job. It took time to build it from the ground up on my own but I loved it. I watched those blue eyes widen with surprise.

“It’s a lovely store.” Her voice was appreciative, hinting at her being impressed.

“Thanks.” I cooled my emotions. She was nothing like my grandmother who sneered at the shop. The old bat had the nerve to tell me I was wasting my time pursuing a career rather than a suitable husband.

I derailed that train of thought. Raising my temper among strangers was not something I wanted to do. I was grateful now that I’d squashed the impulse earlier to key her car. She didn’t deserve my hostility.

“Sorry for the attitude, it’s been a difficult evening.” I offered her my hand. “I’m Zoe Mirra.”

A rough night was putting it mildly but I didn’t want to dwell on earlier.

“Quite all right, Elsbeth Wiseman.” She took my hand, despite her delicate features I found she had a firm grip; more to her than the polish on the surface. I looked forward to the possibility of learning what.

“Miss Wiseman, can I see your invitation?” The cop interjected.

“Of course,” Elsbeth released my hand. Turning she picked up a gold handbag resting in the nearest armchair. Out of it she drew an envelope which she handed it to the officer.

“Same address,” the woman’s voice was brimming with frustration.

“I take it the tip was important,” I stated.

“Yeah, for a case about to go cold on me,” she grumbled.

“Any idea what other reason we might be here?” I asked.

The detective sighed then spoke. “I haven’t got a clue. We’re all from different walks of life, no similar appearances, no shared social status.”

“Yeah, I know. I guess the thing we should be looking for is something we share in common, or at least that’s how it works in mystery novels,” I joked.

She beamed at me with approval. “Good thinking, Zoe, I’m Corin Jacobs.”

“So, where do we start?” the teen asked.

“Zoe, my Mommy sent me to tell you she has a change of clothes for you if you’d like.”

I turned startled by the interruption and was faced with a youthful grin. There was something familiar about her smile and unbidden a pair of lake blue eyes came to mind, guilt pierced me. A blonde brow lifted in question. Rather than respond I told her I would like that change of clothes, then turned to leave. Corin grabbed my arm to stop me.

“Do you know Darcy, personally?”

“No,” I answered.

“Then why would she have a change of clothes for you on hand?” Corin questioned.

“I guess she knows me.”

“Doesn’t that bother you?”

“Gift horse, Corin, I’m not going to look it in the mouth.” I shook off her grasp, turned once more to follow Natasha.

She opened a door on the opposite side of the hall to reveal a bathroom.

I was informed my clothes were on the chair in front of the vanity. I gave my thanks then stepped into the room closing the door behind me. I drew a calming breath as guilt tried to creep in again. I’d done the right thing I reasoned as those lake blue eyes invaded my thoughts, pleading in silence. I turned from them, walked to the vanity. Sitting on the chair I found a simple green dress. At the sight I shook my head. Apparently Darcy wanted me off my game

tonight. I shrugged, indifferent. Anything was better than the blood stained jeans. Those might draw unwanted questions from Corin.

I changed clothes then fixed my hair before putting the trench coat back on. I folded my clothes, before opening the door. Natasha was waiting. I told her she shouldn't have; I knew the way back to the room.

"Mommy asked me to get your stuff to be washed."

"Okay, that was ..." I groped for the right phrasing. As words such as weird, creepy, and odd sprang to mind. "Nice of her." I settled on as I grabbed my things. I handed them over then asked if she knew how much longer her Mommy would be.

"She didn't say."

Good, maybe by the time she joined us we'll have figured out why we're really here, I reasoned. I moved back down the hall and re-entered the lounge.

"You look... Wow." the teen giggled embarrassed realizing she'd spoken the thought out loud. "Not that you didn't look nice before." She offered in a rush worried about offending me. She blushed in a show of nerves and then offered me her hand. "I'm Jewel."

"Thanks." I replied with a grin and I shook her hand.

"Some how, that doesn't strike me as your normal attire." Corin commented.

"It's not, but it's better than being soaked."

"Indeed, I'm glad I missed the rain," Elsbeth stated. I nodded my understanding. She'd have been no better off in that dress if it were wet than if she were naked. I considered it a blessing that I'd changed my mind about wearing a white t-shirt this morning. Deciding we'd been distracted long enough, I spoke.

“So, do we want to try and sort out what this is about?” Before the others could reply another voice spoke.

“Good evening, ladies, forgive me for my tardiness, please. I was seeing to some other matters.”

I turned. The woman who entered was as exotic as her accent. Her hair was like a fine red wine. Her green eyes glowed with humor as she joined us.

Elsbeth studied her with skepticism. “Are you Darcy?”

“Yes, I am your hostess for the evening.” She smirked.

“What is this all about, Ma’am? You brought us here under false pretense.” Corin accused.

“Yes, it’s true. Forgive the deception. Please let me assure you, detective, the tip I promised is genuine. As for the reason it is because you all share something in common.”

My curiosity piqued. “What is it?”

“You’re all in the midst of doing something chronically stupid.”

“Stupid?” Jewel pouted offended by the insult.

“Yes, sweetie, I’m afraid so.”

“That would be?” Corin questioned in irritation.

“Each of you believes that you are in love with a vampire. I brought you here tonight to convince you all to leave your respective paramours.”

At this pronouncement I burst into hysterical laughter. Darcy looked at me with a withering glare of disapproval.

“This is not a laughing matter, Zoe, and you know it.”

Oh, it was funny, ironic even, given where I’d been. What I was doing when she called. Still I pulled myself together. I wasn’t ready to let her or the others in on the joke yet.

Corin looked at her in disbelief. “So, are you saying you gathered us here for some kind of weird intervention?”

“Yes.”

At Darcy’s declaration the room exploded with raised voices.