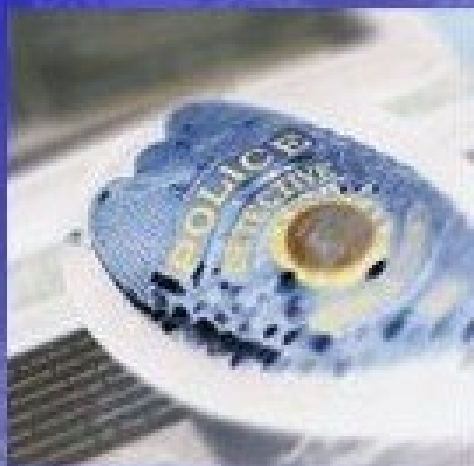


Soul Keeper



Jaye Patrick

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The one-two click of a cocking gun broke my concentration as I riffled through the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet. One more click... and I'd be hoping he didn't have his finger on the trigger.

"You live dangerously, Detective Saxon." He nudged the back of my skull with the barrel of what felt like a very large gun.

I kept crouching. "So do you, Fuentes. I have a warrant." I flicked up the folded paper with two rubber-encased fingers, heard the last click. "And you're jumpy. Why is that?"

He took the warrant and I slowly turned my head. Slicked black hair gleamed in the ambient streetlight two storeys below, a face in near shadow but enough to glance off sharp cheekbones, a glimmer of a gold tooth as he smiled. And a revolver the size of a small cannon. Fuentes had... size issues, but his finger was on the trigger guard, not the trigger itself.

"You're in my office, alone, at night. What say I merely shot an intruder before I knew you for a cop?"

"What say I'm not dumb enough to come here on my lonesome?" I rose, slowly, and lowered my hands.

Fuentes twitched an eyebrow, slid back out of my reach as if unsure of his steps. "Oh, you *are* just that dumb. Your arrogance is legion in the underworld. Gotta do it all yourself, and you no longer *have* a partner."

"I didn't say I had a partner, just that I wasn't here... alone."

His head dropped to the side to listen but the only sound was the occasional car passing by outside the three-storey building, the subtle creak of settling within the building and my breathing.

"There is no one here but you and me." He said and adjusted his grip on the gun as if unable to hold it for very long. Guns *are* heavy if you're not used to them.

"You keep on thinking that." I replied as grey fog seeped under the door, like smoke blooming under water. "Your days as a drug lord and information trader are over, Fuentes, so are you going to come quietly, or kicking and screaming like a girl?"

"Oh, you're very funny. Ha. Ha. I learned something interesting about..." He pursed his full lips. "what was his name? Oh, yes, Tilson. Drake Tilson." And he watched for my reaction.

His smile was vicious, twisted, as I felt the blood leave my face and fury surge through my veins. *Bastard.*

"Your... last partner, wasn't he? Killed on duty, I believe while you were... what? *Goofing* off?"

I stepped forward, ready to rip him a new one. He knew *nothing*.

"Uh, uh." He waved the gun in my face. "Hair trigger and all that."

"Tilson didn't listen to me. Wanted to be a glory hound and take..." I shook my head. What was the point? Luis Fuentes enjoyed the stories of those braver than he, especially when a cop killing was involved. It made him feel... involved, if only vicariously.

The fog coalesced behind him, a dark grey distorted column in the shadows. Silent.

"Nelson did him personally, you know." Fuentes said, eyes gleaming with malicious humour.

"Is that an eye witness statement?"

"I heard it from a friend of a friend, you know? Hearsay. Nothing you can use in court."

"You're an evil prick, Fuentes." I kept my hands loose, my body relaxed. My companion would provide a nice distraction once fully formed, and then I could kick Fuentes' sorry butt and drag him to jail. But oddly, the smoke wasn't forming, but boiling in grey silence.

"So I am." He agreed. "And you are a dead woman. But..." A smirk formed on his lips. "One last tidbit before you die. Something you've been gnawing on and won't let go. So I'll confirm it: Tilson *was* on the take."

"Liar." I said automatically, but I heard the truth behind his mocking words. Since Drake died, I'd wondered why he hadn't stayed put, guarding the front of the townhouse; I've tried to think of a reason he would go in on his own. If he was a wrong cop, he could have called Nelson to warn him. A throwaway phone would have done it. The nagging suspicion that the deal had gone down too fast for him to call kept me digging.

The one conclusion I couldn't face was that he'd gone in to warn Nelson personally, and that meant my partner of five years had set me up to be murdered.

Fuentes knew it all. His front was as a private investigator and he was in touch with the criminal side of life. Some cases he solved and handed in the perps; others were more valuable to him on the streets. Most of all, he had an unbeatable information network. Which was why I was here: Fuentes wrote everything down. Somewhere.

"Tsk, tsk, tsk." Fuentes shook his head in three jerky movements. What was wrong with him? "No wonder you don't trust anyone. Every one you meet betrays you. Ah, well. Your misery is now..."

His expression turned surprised. The gun lowered, dropped from his hand. "B... buh... itch."

Fuentes swayed then leaned forward, his eyes on mine and kept right on leaning. Then he smashed his face onto the wooden floor.

As I raised my shocked eyes from his body, solid grey struck out. Stars exploded into night.

* * *

Something was wrong. So *very* wrong.

My head pounded like a metronome and my face ached like I'd been hit with a brick.

I opened my eyes and groaned.

Cold fingers brushed my hot cheek.

"You have been gone too long." A whispery voice murmured. Fog, Fuentes... *fuck*.

I sat up and scrambled backwards away from the companions, glimpsed the dark hilt of a knife sticking out of Fuentes' back.

"Why?" I croaked and regretted saying anything at all. Lords of Darkness, getting belted hurt. "Why did you kill him?"

"We did not do this. We were distracted by a new soul."

I squinted up at the translucent form of Anna Bingle, 18th Century highwaywoman currently serving a five hundred year penance for murder. She'd been with me since I was a baby. Kneeling at my feet was another penitent: Edmund the Black, 12th Century monk who killed those who refused to worship him and who turned up when I was a rebellious teenager. He'd

spent some considerable energy on trying to corrupt me, but I believed Anna over him. And the new girl, Marta Guhrmann, 20th Century torturer during the Second World War, stood near the door. Every one a killer of innocents. I had no idea what I was supposed to do with them, but they couldn't leave either.

All were bound to me for as long as I lived. And when I did go, they'd be bound to some other poor schmuck. The worst of it was they were stuck in the outfits of their era. Edmund in a black robe with a tonsure, Anna in her tri-corned hat, boating cloak with white ruffle shirt, black breeches and long boots, Marta in an S.S. uniform. To a one, they appeared as if in the prime of life, not the age at which they'd died. I was surrounded by a bunch of eternal twenty-somethings.

That one of them could hold a physical object scared me down to the marrow.

"I hear a cat yowling." Edmund said and turned towards the grimy sash window.

"It's the police." A hint of panic in my voice.

"You *are* the shire's woman." He sneered.

"That doesn't mean certain questions won't be asked that I can't answer." I struggled to my feet, wavered as the world spun, then used the desk to steady myself.

Red and blue flashed through the window. I picked up the warrant, tucked it back into my leather coat and turned to my... companions.

"Now, we leave. I want to know how he got dead."

* * *

The ice pack is one of the world's great inventions: cool a drink or soothe a battered face. I currently had both. The dark amber of bourbon – with ice - in one hand and ice bundled in a tea towel pressed to the side of my face.

Relaxing classical music played on the stereo and the clink of ice on glass were the only sounds as I slumped on the three-seater modular couch in the colour of the sea during a storm.

My ghostly companions slouched against the wall, pouted with arms crossed, or paced the confines of the lounge room.

Their mood reflected mine: defensive, sullen, frustrated.

"Someone smacked me upside the head and I want to know who!"

"And we keep telling you," Edmund growled, "we do not *know*!"

"We cannot tell you what we did not see." Marta muttered from the wall.

"It is..." Anna stilled her pacing as an imperious knock sounded on my door.

"Jeez, Louise." I muttered and got up. "One of you betrayed me, so 'fess up. Only you guys can appear as smoke." I stared hard at Edmund, and then went to the door.

Sergeant Duke, with two uniforms, stood with his hands behind his back when I opened the door.

"What up, Pup?"

He grimaced at the nickname, but he was the newest member of Homicide. Tall, gangly and dark-skinned, he still wore impeccably tailored suits as if to distance himself from the muck of the streets. Why, I didn't know. I figured six months, a year tops and he'd be wearing jeans, shirt and runners like the rest of us; disposable clothes that could be tossed when bloodied once too often.

I knew why he was here and thought quickly to cover my tracks.

"May we come in, Kate?" He asked.

"When you tell me what this is about." I shifted the ice pack and a brief smile touched his lips.

"Run into a wall?"

"No a man-bag." I lied.

He blinked while the two uniforms snickered. "A *what*?"

I sighed with aggrieved patience. "I came around a corner down at the wharves and there's an old lady and a middle aged dude having a tug of war. Naturally, I thought the man was trying to steal the old lady's bag. Turns out it was *his* bag. I was about to arrest him when she clocked me with it. He took off after her and got it back. Turns out, he had some sample tiles for his new kitchen in it. A nice cheery sky blue, if you want to know."

Duke's eyes glimmered with humour; the uniforms had turned their backs, their shoulders hunched in and jerking.

"And if I hear about this down at the station, I'll know where it came from!" I called to the uniforms.

"Ah..." Duke manfully suppressed the laughter. "Did you arrest them?"

"For what? Conspiracy to commit home improvements?"

The uniforms lost it and bolted down the stairs. I could hear them laughing all the way.

Duke rubbed his eyes and took an unsteady breath. "So you were near Canal Street then."

"Yes."

"And you returned here?"

"Bruised, battered and pissed."

"You didn't serve the warrant on Fuentes?"

I reached into my pocket and pulled the folded paper out. "Not even close. As it is, he'll just laugh at me when I go down there tomorrow, but what can you do?" I pressed the ice closer to my burning cheek. "I'll kick his ass if he makes one snide remark, just one."

"Can you verify the assault?"

"No, I can't verify it! I could barely remember my own name." I lowered the ice pack.

"Damn." Duke muttered and paced away then back again.

"What is this about, Duke and where's your partner?"

His gaze was level when it met mine. I could hear the uniforms stomping their way back up the stairs.

"Fuentes is dead and Dave Elder is running the crime scene."

"Ah, shit." I shook my head. "You'd better come in and tell me about it. The uniforms can stay outside." I grinned nastily at them, though it shot pain through my face.

The ghosts moved away from the door where they'd been listening in.

"You lie well." Edmund smiled, showed his rotten teeth. Eight hundred years hadn't changed his attitude. "Maybe you will turn to my cause after all."

I ignored him and picked up my drink. Edmund wanted to be worshiped and I wasn't about to oblige him.

"Should you be drinking? You might have a concussion." Duke frowned.

"Then I'll sleep well, won't I." At his expression, I set the glass down on the coffee table with a sigh. "Fine. Tell me what you know."

Duke shrugged. "Not much. We got an anonymous call, went down to Fuentes' office and there he was, dead on the floor with a knife in the back. All I can say is the knife is black, as in hilt and blade."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Edmund jerk and drop his arms. He knew something. But he'd seen the blade sticking out of Fuentes. Why the reaction now?

"Anything else?"

"Nope. No sign of forced entry, no sign of an altercation, everything neat and tidy except him *la morte*."

"Huh." I lowered the pack. "So why come to me?"

"You were supposed to warrant him today."

"Mmmm. Didn't, though. One of his marks? Nelson cleaning up, maybe?"

Nelson. Oh, yeah.

"We'll check, but Dave figured someone'd better see if you had anything to do with it first, given your... feelings about him and Nelson."

"Nope."

"Okay. I'll let him know." Duke walked to the door. "Oh, and Captain McQueen wants to see you. Better not keep him waiting." He turned back and nodded. "Maybe you should get a doctor to check that out. It looks... colourful." With that, he left.

I went to get my lap top. I had a sneaking suspicion I was about to get in way over my head, but I needed a little research first. Then I'd sleep on it and have a little visit the resident scum of the earth. McQueen could wait.

"Edmund, I guess you have something to tell me."

* * *

James Nelson thought himself a British aristocrat and even though he'd been born in Boston; his family arrived from England some four generations back. And, like some aristocrats, he thought the law was for the peasants.

He had a juvenile record – sealed – and had spent his life skating around investigations. The police knew him to be a criminal; his family thought him persecuted. I knew him as scum.

Nelson never saw the inside of a jail. Evidence disappeared as did witnesses, and no one knew how; why was easy.

My problem was that I couldn't use Fuentes words against Nelson. I'd find myself arrested and probably convicted of his murder or live out my days in a nuthouse. Fuentes, murdered by a ghost.

Uh, huh, Detective, and these visions started... when?

If asked privately, most people would agree that ghosts exist; publicly they'd laugh it off – being sophisticated an' all.

But the truth is, spirits exist, but few of the living see them properly, even fewer can talk with them. Until a ghost appears to a large crowd and makes a speech, sceptics will continue to try to debunk the idea.

My theory? Ghosts are a reflection of the soul stranded, either by accident or design, on the other side of this reality. Their physical aspects may be gone, but the soul is never-ending energy and what we see is that soul 'embossed', like a mirror is flat, but we see three-dimensional images. So how the hell can a reflection hold a physical object?

"This is madness." Marta complained from the back seat of the unmarked police unit. I saw Edmund smile with glee in the rear view mirror. I didn't buy his reasons of innocence: that priests used minions to do the dirty work. Anna said she didn't know how and Marta, the 'youngest' stared in disbelief that she might be able to touch physical things at all. She hadn't been dead long enough to know everything about being dead and since the discussion, spent her time trying to touch stuff.

Edmund also informed us that the blade was black because of ‘tainted’ magic, which is what the modern world would call, obviously enough, black magic. The fallen priest refused to discuss it, holding the secret close as if it gave him leverage against me. More fool him.

So, I had three ghosts, no longer suspects in the murder of Fuentes, but who might be able to shed some light on the how: one who consistently skirted the truth, but probably could do it; one who didn’t know; and one who... I disregarded. Of course, my life depended on believing them.

My money was on Edmund and I watched him, much to his enjoyment, though I had to admit he’d had plenty of opportunity to harm me if he was guilty; and his punishment would be dire indeed, should he actively seek to harm me.

“Edmund, you’ve already told me that vengeful spirits have more power, more focus and more ability. I’m sure Fuentes has a history of knowing where the bodies are buried and any one of them could have done it – according to you.”

“Confronting Nelson will see you joined with us.” Marta complained. Her hand came through the passenger seat as she tried the ‘holding physical objects’ theory.

And yes, I have asked the question of why my ghosts can ‘sit’ in a car with me or walk the floors of my second-storey apartment. I suspect they’re hovering rather than having actual contact with objects. As for movement within a car, well, they *are* attached to me in some esoteric way. I guess where I go, they follow.

“No, I don’t think I’ll be joining you, *I* haven’t killed any innocents. Besides, there’s nothing wrong with having a conversation.”

I pulled up at the gate to the Nelson mansion. The ornate iron swung inward and I drove up the driveway to the Antebellum house.

A guard, so bulky his arms hung outwards, opened the front door for me. I pegged him as Nordic with his short haircut, cold blue eyes and towering height. A man mountain who could break me in half without trying.

As I stepped through, an alarm went off.

“Your guns, if you please.” The guy said and held out his plate-sized hand.

How about that? A metal detector built into the doorframe.

He had the other hand under his jacket, so I obliged by giving him all three guns – including the back up.

He made me walk through the door again and I gave him the I-am-harmless smile. From the look on his face, he didn't believe me, but ushered me through to the library.

Ah, the scent of leather-bound books - *many*, leather-bound books. Every wall had floor-to-ceiling bookcases.

James Nelson stood near the window, artfully posed with brandy glass and cigar, gazing into the rose garden. He's a gangly, basketball player type with long arms and legs. I knew from his record he'd played college ball, but got himself permanently banned for less than sportsman like behaviour, ie, he liked to bash the opposition if he could get away with it. Dark hair flopped casually over his brow as he turned towards me and bright gold eyes took my measure, dismissed me as unworthy of attention.

"Mr Nelson, thank you for seeing me." I said politely and held out my hand.

He merely lifted the cigar to his mouth and puffed. Nor did he invite me to sit, but watched what I did.

I dropped my hand, unconcerned by the breach of manners.

"I'm guessing you know about Fuentes." I said, and he dipped his head slightly.

"I'm also guessing you're not interested in the way he died."

Nothing.

"I did a little research, Mr Nelson, and it looks like your... business... is under attack. In the last year, you've lost seven members – *close* members – of staff."

"Accidents happen, Ms Saxon." He jerked a shoulder.

"They do," I agreed, "but these were murder; and I'm a detective, not a 'ms'."

The side of his mouth lifted at the reminder. "Then why haven't you solved them?"

"Not my cases and no-one else has connected them. Any theories?"

He studied the ash on his cigar. "A competitor."

I shook my head. The slight smile faded as he looked over my shoulder. The sudden drop in temperature told me my companions had finished looking around.

Nelson's tan faded a little as his eyes went from one of my companions to the next. Tension radiated from his body. But no fear. He'd seen ghosts before, and not just a glimpse like most people. Curious.

The crystal glass fell from his hand, bounced on the carpet and spilling the contents onto the, no doubt, antique rug.

His mouth dropped open in shock.

"We found an altar up in the attic." Marta burst out. "Edmund says it's..."

"*Shut. Up!*" James yelled, his face twisted with rage and tossed his Hoagie, or tried to. The length of rolled tobacco popped out of his hand like a quarterback fumble. He didn't notice or pretended not to.

It was unlike my ghosts to be intimidated and yet, when I turned, they were almost... huddled together. Even Edmund wore an expression of terror.

And if he was scared, I should be too.

I faced Nelson. His persona of urbanity returned, though his eyes burned with golden fire.

"I have nothing to say to the police. Should you wish to speak with me again, it will be through my lawyers. Good day, Detective."

"I'll be in touch, Mr Nelson." I said and allowed Man Mountain to escort me out. He handed my weapons over once outside.

I turned back as the guard closed the front door. The house now had an aura of... darkness, as if otherworldly things lurked in the shadows and watched for an opportunity to consume the living.

My companions disappeared the moment Man Mountain opened the front door. They were still with me, just unseen in the sunlight; should I step into the shade of a tree, I'd see them if they were in the shadow, too.

As I drove out the gate, I glanced in the mirror at my ghosts. All three were so close together, their forms intersected.

"What's the problem?" I asked. Edmund glared at me then turned away; no one else answered and we made the journey home in silence.

* * *

Sergeant Duke sat with his back resting on my front door. He rose when he saw me coming up the stairs.

"What up, Pup?" I asked as I unlocked the door.

"You went to see Mr Nelson."

I closed the door behind him. "Drink?"

Duke frowned. "It's a little early in the morning, don't you think?"

I rolled my eyes. "I meant coffee, tea or something equally refreshing."

"You look better than last night." He said and reached out to brush my bruised cheek.

Hell, no wonder Nelson was amused. Who would take you seriously if you look like the loser from a boxing match?

"It doesn't hurt. Much." I shrugged him off and went into the kitchen to start the coffee machine.

Duke followed. "The Captain wants to know what the hell you're doing."

"Investigating. I'm a detective; it's what I do."

"And as a detective, you would deduce that Captain McQueen doesn't like being kept in the dark about his officers' investigations."

My lower lip stuck out. McQueen was a pussy, a political pussy at that. He always wanted to know every step of an investigation even if there was nothing to tell. But we all had him sussed out: he was a details cop, which was great, but it allowed him to integrate other cops' work into his cases and claim as his own, which sucked.

"I ain't giving him nuttin'."

"He has a long memory, Kate, and he will make it his mission to get you fired."

I said nothing. McQueen was a sociopath. He couldn't develop any feelings towards his officers, not loyalty, not affection, nothing. He was cold,

demanding, and wanted results, but he wanted them *his* way. Any dissenters soon found themselves transferred.

Since Drake died, my esteemed Captain tried to shift me, but my results were just too good on *his* record. So, he wanted me to move voluntarily. Why did he want me out? Well, he thought me unstable, uncontrollable. If I did go postal, his neat, tidy and productive world would come crashing down.

"He hates me." I muttered.

"He hates everyone, so don't think you're so special."

I grinned as I poured coffee for us both. I handed him a mug and drank from my own.

"Yeah, that's true, but he gets all... bent out of shape whenever I'm near."

Duke's pale green eyes sharpened, and then he stepped back, tilted his head as he looked me over. "Maybe he's not as immune as you think he is." Heat surged into my face at his scrutiny.

I couldn't help it, I goggled at him and the warmth went cold. "*What?*"

Even Duke's eyes smiled. "Maybe, he *likes* you."

"Oh, we are so not going there. I don't need to be squicked out by those thoughts, thank you very much."

"Then prove it. We'll go down and see the Captain. He'll rant and rave in that cold, even voice of his, you'll be your usual calm, collected self, the two of you will reach a subconscious understanding of victory and you both continue with your jobs. How's that?"

"How do you know that's how it works?"

Duke smirked and put his mug down on the counter. "I'm a detective; it's what I do."

* * *

Captain Brian McQueen sat behind his desk studying reports. He looked like a middle-aged politician with his thin body draped in a pearl-grey suit that brought out the silver in his dark hair. But his blue eyes, when they looked up, were as dead and as predatory as a shark's.

When chatting to the brass, he was handsome, erudite, charming and manipulative; when briefing his unit, he was detached, indifferent and seemingly on the edge of violence.

My shoulders tightened automatically when he looked up at me and pointed to a hard wooden chair in front of his desk. Can't have the peons hanging about in a comfortable chair and chatting.

"Report." His mouth thinned with impatience.

"As per the ongoing investigation into the death of Sergeant Tilson, I re-interviewed Mr James Nelson. He was not forthcoming with any relevant information, sir."

"Sergeant Tilson's death is not your investigation, it's with Internal Affairs."

"I believe Drake's murder is connected to Fuentes." I said.

"Nor is the death of a drug lord a part of your case load."

McQueen sat snake-still, as if ready to strike.

"There have also been seven other similar deaths to Fuentes that I believe are connected."

His eyebrow twitched with interest. I knew a juicy serial killer would grab his attention. McQueen would think about the kudos he'd gain when the killer was caught, I could see it in his eyes. He leaned back in his chair.
"Continue."

"I did a little research on Mr Nelson's organisation. Seven members of his... staff... have been killed like Fuentes. It could be a rival organisation trying to muscle in or it could be someone's cleaning house. All of them were important to Mr Nelson, yet he tells me that 'accidents happen'."

"Retribution?"

"It could be."

"And the reason no one else has made the connection?" He twirled a pen through the fingers of his right hand.

"Fuentes was the only one in this jurisdiction. Whoever is doing this is making sure the victims are out of the county – or the country – so they can't be connected." And since my ghosts could only move about two hundred metres from me, they were in the clear.

McQueen nodded. "A serial killer."

"With connections to Nelson."

He narrowed his eyes and I quickly went on.

"Fuentes was Nelson's information man as well as distributor. Kill Fuentes and Nelson has to look elsewhere for connections. Fuentes had to have sources inside the department and people open to bribes. It's the only explanation for Nelson sliding on all the charges ever made against him. Only inside people could make evidence disappear and intimidate witnesses. Without Fuentes, Nelson won't know what we know."

McQueen leaned forward. "Are you suggesting a *cop* took Fuentes out?"

Well, *bugger*. That's not what I meant at all, but as a diversion to the truth - that we had a serial killer ghost - it had its merits. No way would McQueen go with the ghost theory, and I'd be giving him the reason he was looking for to can me.

I lifted a shoulder instead. "We won't know until we find Fuentes' information book. Find that and we find it all."

"Then I suggest you get out of here and *find* it, detective. And don't make me send an officer to retrieve you again."

I got out of there as fast as I could.

Duke gave me a subtle thumbs up as I passed his desk. "Asshole."

He snickered.

* * *

I returned to the scene of the crime.

Black fingerprint dust smeared every surface. I stared down at Fuentes' bloodstain. The only reason to kill Fuentes was stop him from revealing the location of the book. And to know that meant whoever killed the drug dealer *also* knew the contents of that book.

How else would they know whom to kill and where?

Did Fuentes have a companion but never knew it? Hate, vengeance, darkness of the soul all empowered a ghost. Fuentes was a pretty hateful guy. So was Nelson.

"Edmund, what was the altar you found at Nelson's?"

"Demonic." The monk replied.

"Demonic?" I turned to him. His arms were crossed and again, the other shades stood close to him, as if he were the only source of 'spiritual' comfort, which was funny considering his previous life.

"I thought demons were a Christian construct designed to turn the peasants away from paganism."

Edmund's lip curled with disdain. "Demonic as in the focal point of negativity. The darkness has always been a powerful source of so-called evil, destructive energy. The light is for positive, healing energy."

"So Nelson is drawing on dark energy to... what? Control his empire?"

"It's possible." Edmund said, but... the Nelson of old was charming, suave, absolutely sure he could not be held responsible for his actions. The Nelson I met this morning was passive, even calm until he saw my companions; then he lost it.

"And Nelson scared you because...?"

He sniffed. "I was *not* scared, I was..."

"Scared spitless, Edmund, and a man of the cloth – no matter his motives – does not quail when confronted with evil; he tries to *exorcise* it."

"...gathering my resources."

Ah, Edmund, as prideful as ever.

"Okay, Ed, how about you gather your other resources and search this building for the book?"

I saw his shoulders slump slightly in relief. Many 12th Century monks were not known for their courage. They joined the priesthood because the eldest brother inherited whatever estate and title there was, not for overwhelming piety.

The ghosts disappeared through the walls and I sat on the edge of Fuentes' desk to think.

Drake to Nelson to Fuentes. Drake, the inside man, funnelling information to Nelson via Fuentes or directly. Drake, taken out by Nelson to... and that

was the sticking point. Why did Nelson kill my partner if Drake was a part of his network? He had no motive. I was sure Nelson stuck the knife into Drake's chest, twisted it to make sure, but I had no *motive* for it.

Nelson had to be pissed that his information source was gone and I was pretty sure *he* didn't have the book – he hadn't the time to find it. It was here and it held all the answers.

The air grew cold and I hopped off the desk and turned, expecting one of my companions. Instead, thick fog boiled up through the wooden floor and the ceremonial knife Edmund told me about coalesced.

"Who are you?" I demanded. The fog continued to boil and fume in silence.

"Why do you want to kill me?" I backed away. "Show yourself!"

Malevolence oozed off the creature, the scent sharp and acrid. This was no ordinary ghost. Spectres walked around in human form because it gave them an individual identity. No ghost I knew of who could turn to smoke, could also hold that form for long. And it never. Ever. Gave off a smell.

The pillar roiled towards me and I moved backwards. Now I was scared. My mouth dried out, my heart pounded and I could feel my body want to shake and shudder. I had one fatal flaw: I couldn't move through solid objects and I bumped into the very solid door.

The creature hesitated, and then moved back to the filing cabinet.

Edmund walked through the wall and stood to my left. Marta and Anna stood to my right.

"Oh, dear." Anna murmured. "This is the brigand?"

The knife wavered in the thing's hand, lowered, the knife tip pointing down, then the smoke reversed course and sank through the floor, taking the knife with it. How did it *do that*?

My knees shook as I stared at the thin gaps between the boards. *How?* A solid thing can't become vapour. It can't... *can it?*

"We need to leave." My body gave a great shudder. "I don't want to be stabbed through the door." I'd seen the impossible and I feared it.

"That would be most unfortunate." Anna replied. "As we have found your book in the basement."

I turned to her confused. "The book? Oh! The *book*." *Normal; think normal thoughts, Sax.* "Let's go get it."

Fuentes hid the book behind the water heater and wrapped in plastic.

I took the package, but didn't open it. I wanted to be in a safe area before I read it. First, though, I took it to a photocopying place, ripped off the plastic covering and got an extra copy. Then I went to the post office and mailed the original to the precinct.

Then I went to a coffee shop, a nice public area. Just in case.

With a café mocha on the table, I opened the first page.

* * *

By sunset, I was done and I sat back, sick at heart and depressed.

Fuentes' network exceeded my expectations. Police, lawyers, politicians, all the way down to a florist were listed as informers or distributors for Nelson. Two police officers worked as assassins: Drake Tilson and another officer from a different precinct. My dead partner was a killer for hire and I had no idea. Fuentes confessing to 'learning' of it the night he was killed was simply to wind me up.

Fuentes listed dates, names, locations, costs, everything I needed to convict Nelson – and others - and send him away forever. And it wasn't enough. The man was worse than scum, he was the scum of the scum world. The book also listed who ordered what and not all the contracts for drugs or murder were Nelson's.

And if anyone knew I had this book, Fuentes was right: I was a dead woman.

I studied the other customers more closely. Any one of them could have followed me and since I hadn't been looking for a tail, would take me out as soon as I left.

The darkness was also that creature's ally. No wonder I felt surrounded, I actually *was* surrounded.

"How do you kill a ghost?" I wondered softly.

"You can't." Anna said. Marta shrugged and tried to pick up the empty coffee cup.

"Edmund?"

"Since I've been around for six hundred years, I have to agree with our fair highwaywoman and say 'you can't'."

"Great. So this... entity can continue killing until doomsday."

"Until a ghost is ready to move on, they remain where they died, or with a companion." Anna said softly.

"So why are you guys still here?"

Anna shifted uncomfortably and Edmund smirked. Marta continued trying to grab the cup.

"Because we have... unresolved issues." Anna admitted.

"And those are?"

"Something we don't discuss, but have to work out ourselves."

I put my head in my hands. A psychotic ghost, creature, *thing*, killing whomever it pleased and no way to destroy it, a book full of corruption and companions with unresolved issues. Could this day get any worse?

Well, sure. Duke leaned against my car.

"What now, Sergeant?"

His grin was very white in the darkness. "Now, you give me the book."

"What?"

"You heard me." He lifted his gun. His *silencer-fitted* gun.

"No way!"

"Yes way."

"But... you're not even in here!" I blurted out. I felt betrayed by him, and pretty stupid for not seeing it. Anytime something happened that involved Nelson, Duke appeared.

"I'm not? Well, that's disappointing. Give me the book."

"How did you know I found it?"

"What else would you be reading so intently, in a coffee shop, in the middle of the afternoon? You're not a screw up taking time off, so it had to be work related." He grinned, his white teeth gleaming. "Told you I was a detective."

Shit. He could take from my cold dead hand if he wanted to, so why was he waiting?

"I thought you were a straight cop, Duke, what happened?"

"I *am* a straight cop. Your partner, however, was one sick son of a bitch, but I thought he did good work, taking out the trash." His eyes narrowed. "That's not for public consumption by the way. *You*, on the other hand, are suspect by association and must have an eye kept on you. McQueen's orders."

McQueen? Spying on me? *Wait.* "You've lost me. You *knew* Drake was bad but didn't turn him in?"

"Sure. I think you and McQueen were the only ones who didn't know. The boss has a bee in his bonnet about your obsession with Drake and his murder. I *told* you he *likes* you and keeping watch served my purpose." He shook his head. "We arrest these assholes and before the paperwork's done, they're back on the street. Drake simply removed the recidivists to save the public purse. IA was looking very closely at him. And now they're looking at *you*." He casually shrugged. "How could you *not* know?"

I couldn't think. *Everyone* knew? What did that say about my unit? That they were as corrupt as those in the book?

"And me? He was going to kill me, wasn't he?"

Duke shook his head. "Oh, Kate. I don't know. But from what I've heard, Nelson wanted you out of the way, told Drake to bring you to him. Maybe Drake refused and it got him killed, who knows?"

"Nelson knows. And I'm going to carve that butt-wipe a new orifice."

"Give me the book, Kate and I'll take care of it."

Maybe he would, but by pointing a gun at me, I no longer trusted him; no longer trusted anyone in the unit.

I set the copy on the ground and stepped out of reach. Duke picked it up, kept his eyes, and gun, on me.

"Where's the original?"

"Somewhere else." I took another step back. "Call it my insurance."

"You know I'll find it." He said.

"Maybe. But until then, I've got an appointment with the head asshole of a criminal organisation." I turned and bolted, expected to feel hot metal slice into me. Nothing happened but I didn't look back. Duke proved himself unworthy and I'd hunt him down later.

For now, I had to catch a cab.

* * *

Nelson's house was in darkness. Just the way he liked it, I suppose.

"Couldn't we just wait until morning?" Edmund asked as I climbed over the gate.

"No, we couldn't." No alarm sounded and I wondered if I was expected. Nelson wasn't the kind of guy to forget to turn it on.

"But the darkness. It holds power." He whined and looked around as if the creature stalked nearby.

"Yes, I know that." The ground lights came on and still no one challenged me.

"Then why are you putting yourself in jeopardy this way?"

"I'd rather go after that thing than have it come after me. We both know it's here."

"That thing scares me." Marta muttered.

"You? One of the chief torturers for Himmler and the S.S.?" I stopped in my tracks.

"Ignore her." Edmund suggested. "She's new and fearful."

"Ah, but you were fearful when you saw Nelson. Why is that?"

Edmund folded his hands into his robes. "While it is true a ghost cannot be destroyed, a *host* can. If we lose you, we will be bound to another until our... issues are, as the fair Anna said, resolved."

I had to smile. Years of animosity from Edmund and now this. He *cared* what happened to me.

"Aw, you say the sweetest things."

Anna tried to grab my arm and failed. She clicked her tongue. "You do not understand. We may be given to one who cannot see or hear us."

"That happens?"

"Yes. I spent forty-nine years with one, and it was not a happy time for me." She said.

"I, too, have spent at least a century with people who did not believe." Edmund muttered. "It is not a soothing experience."

I looked at Marta. She gave me a small smile. "I am new; you are my first."

I continued up the driveway. "Regardless of your fears, it's my job to stop criminals; and there is none bigger than James Nelson."

As I climbed the stone stairs, I saw that the front door was open. The feeling that I was expected grew. I pulled out my automatic from my shoulder holster, gripped it lightly. Man mountain failed to appear as I stepped through the doorway, and the metal detector remained silent.

"Show me where the altar is." I whispered and the ghosts took the lead, gliding up the ornate wooden staircase as if on a scenic railway. I cautiously followed, holding the gun in both hands.

On the second-floor landing, my companions moved down the hallway and turned left out of my view. I lightly jogged to the corner and peeked. Another staircase. I followed it up.

All three stood at a white door, hands folded before them, heads bowed. Odd behaviour for three different personalities.

I listened for sounds of movement, but the house remained silent; no creaking, no pipes knocking, no snores of the sleeping. It was as if the building was abandoned.

I approached my ghosts, but they wouldn't look at me. Something was wrong, with the situation and with them. It was unlike Edmund or Anna to be so, so... *subdued*.

The doorknob turned silently under my hand. I waited, listened before pushing the door open. A scent came to me, one of perfume; masculine. Aftershave? It was both familiar and strange, as if mixed with... some herb.

I stood with my gun pointed at an angle; neither up nor down. The room was the size of a triple garage, decorated with black curtains draped down all four walls. Candelabra sat on low bookcases, boxes, side tables and coffee table. A dark and foreboding place that the candle light did not relieve.

James Nelson knelt before an altar, across the room from me, dressed in a black robe, but not like Edmund's. This was atypical of those who practiced black magic.

"Welcome." He said without turning. "I've been expecting you."

"Yeah, got that." I said and aimed the gun at his back. "Where's the mountain?"

"If you mean Roland, he has left my employ."

I raised my eyebrows. I thought Roland an excellent intimidation device. "You killed him?"

"No. He merely decided to pursue an alternative career: in wrestling."

"Huh." I grunted and thought about it. "He'll do well."

James mumbled some words, then rose, turned to face me.

I expected to see madness in his eyes, but his expression was one of sorrow, of regret.

"You've come to arrest me." He said and folded his hands in front of his body.

"I have and if you make one false move, that plan is moot."

"But I have done nothing wrong." Ah, here he was, the original James Nelson, all hard done by and innocent.

I snorted, clicked my tongue. "That is not what Fuentes' book says. And once those names and dates are verified, your goose is cooked."

His eyes flashed and I firmed the grip on my gun.

"You will not take me in."

"Yeah, I will."

"You won't."

"Yes, I will!"

"Won't!"

"Will!"

The dark grey fog coalesced behind him.

Fear rushed through me like an icy wind. "Your creation, I presume?" And I felt the presence of my companions as they finally joined me.

"In a way, yes, but more society's creation." James lifted a hand, touched the fog and it recoiled. "I bound this soul to me, but the anger, the rage is all his."

"But... he's not forming." I said with a frown. All ghosts had the form of their bodies, be they human, dogs, cats, whatever.

"I will not let him."

Edmund made a sound but I refused to look at him. My eyes were all for James. He was more powerful than I, or my ghosts, assumed.

"Go on, tell it all to me since I'm not leaving here alive." I said.

"Since none will *believe* you, I will. My... creation killed my men, at my request. I cannot abide shoddy workmanship. And this man was... happy to oblige me. Such anger, such a sense of injustice." He brushed his hand against the grey again and the boiling grew more furious.

"And Fuentes? You did him too."

"Yes. And here's the neat trick: he was already dead by the time you arrived."

"He spoke to me, held a gun on me." He was alive, I was sure, but Nelson smiled, slowly shook his head.

"You don't understand, do you. That was my creation's doing. He can inhabit bodies. I taught him how. You met him in the library. He likes the finer things in life, though we haven't – quite – got the hang of the blending. But enough for me to control him."

The different personality, the dropped cigar, the terror of my ghosts. A ghost in a human shell, privy to the twisted thoughts of the host, to feel physical pain, to be controlled. To be alive and yet not.

"But... why would you want to do that?"

"Ah. To see both sides of the fence, shall we say? To gain the secrets of the dead. My own, infallible information network. To speak with the murdered, the suicided and blackmail those responsible. Those who died of disease or any other cause and have enormous knowledge. Like... who *really* killed J.F.K., for example." Nelson winked at me. "You'll know who once I have control over you. But back to the point. I know where Bin Laden is – from all those dead terrorists. I can understand the security arrangements for a bank from dead C.E.O.s. Oh," he chuckled, "the list is endless on what I can do with the knowledge gained and no ghost, no living being can stop me."

"One foot in the grave; one foot in this reality." I murmured.

James murmured words. I thought them to be Latin and glanced at Edmund. He showed no recognition of the language.

The grey fog developed features, became all too shockingly familiar. "Drake?"

"The unfortunate Drake Tilson; your former partner."

"How did you... what did you..." Too many questions and not enough time.

"He came to me to plead for you life. I refused. He took it personally, so I... reciprocated. A small piece of flesh and blood, a little mojo," James waggled his fingers, "and voila, one ghost to command."

I narrowed my eyes. "You've done this before."

"That I have. I taught my young ghost here to inhabit, however temporarily, a fresh body. I imagine Fuentes' death looked very real, but Drake held his shell and I control Drake. I sent one of the others as the... well, not killer really, but to play the role of murderer. They did everything I wanted them to." He gave me a smile. "An excellent performance. One I shall enjoy using in the future."

And that explained my ghosts' distraction 'with a new soul'. It had been Fuentes. But I also knew something else. Nelson did not control Drake as well as he thought.

"The plan went awry though. I was meant to be convicted of Fuentes' death, but Drake pulled his punch and I got away. You sent him back, but he retreated and I found the book."

Nelson's eyelids lowered. "The book is of no importance. I'll simply send Drake to get it. You'll be dead and the investigation will stall."

Drake stepped around Nelson, mouthed 'I'm sorry' to me, but it didn't make a damned bit of difference, not any more.

"Kill her, Drake."

He started to walk forward, the black knife in his hand, and his features twisted with the effort to resist Nelson.

I fired off three shots, all of which Drake absorbed. *Uh, oh.*

"He makes a great shield, doesn't he?" Nelson smirked.

I heard the rattle of all three bullets drop to the wooden floor.

"Kill her." Nelson commanded again.

"His power is at its greatest this close to the altar." Edmund said. "This ghost cannot disobey."

I took a step backwards, heard Anna sigh and the faint hiss of her drawing her rapier. She was going to fight him ghost to ghost? Was that even possible?

"I hope you know what you're doing, Anna." I said and backed up away from Drake.

Anna stepped forward with the fine blade, thrust out at Drake. The tip went into his upper arm and out again.

A foolish attempt, I thought... or not.

Drake flinched away from her, gripped his upper arm.

One foot in reality, one in the other world.

"Get him out of my way, Anna."

Drake had no experience with swordplay, but he blocked and parried with the short dagger, earned himself nicks and cuts on his hands, knuckles and wrists; no blood though, ghosts don't bleed, but I could see fine black lines appear. He took a shot to the body, I saw the blade go right through him, but he didn't fall.

Anna harrumphed, and kept going.

He winced at every sting, but he wouldn't back down. Every time I shifted to get a shot at Nelson, Drake blocked my view. If I tried right, he moved with me. If I tried left, he forced Anna back, taking strikes as he did.

"Damn it!" I growled.

Nelson laughed with delight, and then I heard him repeat the summoning words in that alien language.

More grey fog bloomed behind Drake, one pillar, two, three, *four* and formed into suit-wearing men. Each held a ceremonial black blade – short sword, long sword, claymore? And another short sword.

How could Nelson control them all?

"Meet my new bodyguards." Nelson said and the four approached, grinning with anticipation.

We were in so much trouble, or I was, more to the point. All I had was my gun and Drake proved bullets were useless.

"Edmund." I heard Anna call, but my attention was on the four men spreading out.

"No, Anna, do not *make* me!" Edmund whined.

"Either you do this, or be given to someone else!"

I looked around the room, but could see nothing I could use to defend myself. I could hear Nelson laugh and that pissed me off.

The four men backed me away from my companions with jabs from their black-bladed weapons. One used his sword to poke at me and I raised my left arm to take the strike. Pain sang up my arm as he sliced through the leather of my jacket and cotton of my shirt. Blood bloomed and the men grinned at each other.

They were going to kill me slowly, slicing a piece off here and a piece off there.

I wrapped my hand around the bleeding and another swung out, cutting the sleeve of the jacket from shoulder to elbow. More blood bloomed.

"Ha!" I heard Anna say, but I couldn't spare her a glance.

I studied the translucent thugs and gave them a smile. All four frowned, paused in their advance.

I ducked and dove right through them and rolled away. If I could keep away from them... I got to my feet.

Nelson wasn't amused, and I lifted the gun and fired at him. He ducked, threw himself sideways and then the boys were blocking my aim again.

But I was also back with my own ghosts.

Marta moved around me and Drake flicked a glance at her, saw her for what she was – a newbie ghost – and ignored her.

She wasn't one to get involved, but what she did next staggered me.

She rolled her neck as if easing the bones there, and took a few steps towards Drake, with her hands out. *And pushed him!* Right onto Anna's blade.

Nelson gasped and clutched at his heart, the same place Anna stabbed Drake.

Drake held still, stared down at the blade impaling his chest. "Yes!" I heard his voice, distant and vague.

He turned and looked at me, raised an eyebrow, then fell to his knees.

Drake eased back, off Anna's blade and lifted his own dagger in a salute. "Well fought Wicked Lady." He said.

Anna accepted his comment with a nod and advanced on the other four with Edmund holding her dagger walking next to her.

The two thugs with swords were no match for her skill with the rapier and she pierced them as she had Drake.

Edmund and Marta cornered the other two. Marta shoved at them and Edmund jabbed.

"Stop fooling around." Anna said as wiped her blade on a fallen ghost. Maybe she was wiping off the ectoplasm or whatever, or maybe it was just habit.

"Edmund, you pussy, just kill them!" I ordered, but he couldn't do it. He kept jabbing. Marta took the dagger away from him and grinned at the two thugs.

"Let's play." She said and engaged both of them, at the same time. She beat them back, thrust at one when he turned the wrong way, then at the other. Both ghosts slid down the curtained wall to the floor.

It was disturbing to see the curtains not move with their slide. Both men stared up at the SS veteran in surprise. Their two cohorts came over to help them up.

My turn. But when I saw Nelson, he was pale, sweaty, unable to breathe properly, clutching at the centre of his chest.

He fell to his knees. *"No! You... bitch!"* He reached out toward Anna with one hand and then dropped face down onto the floor.

I went and checked for a pulse. Deader than roadkill.

When I turned back, all my ghosts were smiling. Marta was beside herself with smug.

Edmund stood with his hands folded before him, but wore an expression of pride as he looked at Marta.

"Edmund."

He smoothed his features. "Yes?"

Explanations could come later, though I suspected he told Marta how to hold a physical object. I'd be having words with them about responsibility.

"Never mind."

Drake came over to me, held out a hand. I reached for it, but our hands passed through each other's.

"Damn." He said and shrugged. I got to my feet. "Nelson killed me, carved off a piece and magicked my soul. I couldn't control anything as long as he had that piece. But it worked both ways, for he gave a piece of himself to me, too." He gave me a lopsided grin. "The soul lives within the heart. Kill that, kill the host. I couldn't tell you, but I think your good highwaywoman knew."

I turned to Anna. "Not I." She said, and glanced at Edmund.

The monk lifted his shoulders. "Eight hundred years should be long enough to find out all manner of information."

I snorted. "It was a hunch and you know it. Drake, inside Nelson's body must have given them both a fence to straddle, thus making Drake vulnerable." I looked down at Nelson's body. "Something he failed to consider."

"Where do you think he is now?" Marta asked.

"Probably explaining his evil ways to the Power that commands us all." Edmund said.

"Okay, we need to leave." I said.

"And him?" Drake asked indicating Nelson.

"Mr Mous will call."

His smile was so familiar, so comforting I felt an ache in my chest. Mr Anon E. Mous was a joke between us.

Then his smile faded. "I'm being called, Kate."

"I don't hear anything."

"No, it's not for you to hear." He glanced over his shoulder. "I'm guessing I have some explaining to do as well." He reached out to me, but his hands went through my upper arms. "I wish I had time to tell you, but... I don't." He started to fade. "Bye, Sax. Kick that asshole McQueen for me. And..." The rest of the sentence was lost as he vanished.

It was like losing him all over again. I listened for him, but he'd gone. I rubbed at my aching heart, willed the tears to subside and the lump in my throat to dissolve.

The four men had also vanished, to go to their great reward, I suppose, or their punishment.

I blew out a breath. "Let's go."

But what did I do now? I wondered as I walked through the house. My ghosts metaphorically patted themselves on the back over the victory and glided behind me.

My unit was corrupt, my boss was a spying asshole and one of my colleagues pulled a gun on me to assure my compliance.

I walked out into the night and into more problems. Cars, a half-dozen, were parked in front of the house. They'd driven through the gate and I wondered if it had been unlocked at the time I clambered over it. I had, after all, been expected.

Cops smoked, chatted and eyed the house. But as soon as I came out, they turned to me with interested expressions.

"Detective Saxon." A silver-haired man separated from a group of three plain-clothes officers.

"Yes, sir?" I didn't know who he was but he looked important.

"Captain Redgrave." *Yep, important.* "Internal Affairs." *Uh, oh.*

"Am I under arrest?" I asked on a weary sigh.

"Let's call it 'protective custody', shall we?" His eyes were an empty grey, as if the night leached all colour from them. Long, dark lashes framed those unusual eyes.

Oh, sure, lock me in a cage for my own safety.

"The book was most informative. Thank you for sending it."

I blinked at him. I hadn't sent it to him, I sent to me at the precinct. And it wouldn't arrive until tomorrow at the earliest.

Then I got a glimpse of one of the cops standing around. Duke. I snorted a laugh. He was a Rat. Duke gave me a one-fingered salute, but I wasn't ready to forgive him yet.

"Protective custody." I crossed my arms.

"Unless you want every cop in that book to hunt you down, detective."

"How do they know I know what's there. You know, Duke knows. Why come after me?"

"Cops over hear other cops talking; you know that. They *all* know because you've been looking for it for months. You've now found it and until the original turns up, you're a target. The copy won't stand up in court. Only your testimony will. The arrests have already started which is why we're here for you."

Ah. Right. I'd have to walk into the precinct tomorrow as if nothing had happened and pick up my mail – and half my precinct was dirty.

I glanced back at the house. "Um... to add to your 'to do' list. Nelson's up there. Dead."

"Dead." Captain Redgrave didn't look impressed.

"I think it was a heart attack, he just keeled over during questioning."

"Right."

"That's what happened." I said.

"Fine, we'll discuss it later." He waved a uniform over. "This officer will take you and your friends to a hotel. After," he flicked the ruined sleeve of my leather jacket, "you get fixed up at the hospital."

I gaped at him, ignored the last comment. "My... *friends*?" The officer chuckled.

His mouth turned up. "The monk, the nazi and the... hmmm..."

"Anna Bingle, highwaywoman." Anna introduced herself with a slight bow.

I looked at the officer. "You see them?" I asked and he nodded. I turned to Redgrave. "You, too?"

Redgrave shrugged. "I always have." He turned in a circle. "Mine are here somewhere. But." His silver eyes narrowed. "You and I are going to have a serious discussion about this tomorrow. Do I make myself clear, detective?"

"Yes, sir." Captain Redgrave would be the first person I'd ever discussed the ghosts with. It was going to be an interesting, if painfully personal conversation; for both of us. But it made me wonder how many in Redgrave's unit were like us. And did I want to know?

All three ghosts were chuckling as I was led to the back of Duke's car. I didn't ask what was so funny, I could see Redgrave's two companions: one wore the black hood of an executioner, the other was a suffragette and they were having what appeared to be an animated conversation. How on earth did a *suffragette* become a penitent?

I didn't speak, but it must sometimes have been hell to have those two arg... *damn it*, Nelson didn't tell me who killed J.F.K.!