



ELIZA: COMING OUT OF THE DARK

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PROLOGUE

CAN'T I TAKE AWAY ALL THIS PAIN?
I TRY TO EVERY NIGHT, ALL IN VAIN
FREAK ON A LEASH - KORN

I dreamed of him again last night. It doesn't seem to matter how long it's been since I lost him I still reach out in the middle of the night and expect to find him right there beside me. It's not like we were even together for that long. I mean, we only had a little more than a year before....

See, I still have trouble talking about it. Hell, I've never really talked about it at all since it happened. If I'd lost an arm or a leg I'm sure I would have gotten over it a long time ago. But for real now? It's been almost twenty years since the night my life shattered into a billion pieces. You'd think I'd be able to pick them up and start over again by now, wouldn't you? But I can't.

Sometimes it's like I can feel him right beside me. I turn to look for him, but he's not there. He's never there. He's not anywhere, but he's everywhere I turn. Does that make sense? When I wake up in the middle of the night sometimes I think I'll go crazy missing him.

I spend my days working out and researching things that go bump in the night here in Salem, Massachusetts. At night I hunt and the darkness and pain help to keep me grounded. For real now, I'm scared. Scared of what I am, what I've turned into. It's hard to live in a fantasy world when the reality of death stares you in the face every night, isn't it?

Don't get me wrong, I hate what I do. It's just that I don't really have a choice, do I? As Linda would say, I've made my bed and now I have to lay in it and never mind the bloodstains and the tears.

The thing is, I'm never really alone in that bed. He's right there beside me, haunting me like a ghost. I just have to face the fact that I'm living with the memory of a man that I should have forgotten about a long time ago, about the time I took his ring off my hand and started wearing it on a chain around my neck. Maybe if I'd done that, I would have found the peace I've been looking for all these years. Maybe then I'd have the little house with the white picket fence I've always wanted, the garage, the kids and a dog to fetch my slippers.

Sometimes I feel like the whole world is moving but I'm stuck somewhere in the past. It's like I just keep sinking a little deeper into the mire everyday and nobody bothers to notice.

Am I losing it? Sometimes I can tell myself that if I just push the memories deep enough in my mind I'll be able to look at another man and not think about the one I lost. Some nights I even believe it. Tonight is definitely not one of those nights.

Tonight I lie on a mattress in a crappy little room and wait for the sun to rise. Tonight I look across the room at an ancient poster of Janice Joplin and remember the feel of my lover's hands, the taste of his lips. Tonight I think about blood and death and survival.

That's what it's really been about for me all these years, survival. If I can survive long enough, maybe our daughter can live to have the life we lost the chance at. It's too late for me now, I've already sold my soul, but it may not be too late for her.

Will I ever stop reaching for him?

WOUNDED HEARTS

LIKE A SAD HALLUCINATION

WHEN I OPENED UP MY EYES

CAROLINE - CONCRETE BLONDE

There is no sound more bittersweet than 'Amazing Grace' played on the bagpipes. The song always makes me think of Baltimore and the man I loved there. Why had Kendall chosen to play that particular sound at the opening of his nightclub?

I stared off into the crowd and tried to ignore the tingle at the base of my spine telling me that there were too many vampires too close to me. I knew they were there, hell Kendall was a vamp, not to mention the thirty or so others in the room. I tried not to think back to when I would sooner slay a vamp than stand in the same room with one, but the music took me there.

I guess part of my problem was that I'd seen someone the night before who had reminded me so much of my lover that for a moment I'd thought it was him. I'd almost chased the car down to see, but then I reminded myself that I was supposed to be out hunting changelings, not chasing down ghosts from my past.

The final notes of the song faded away into the dark corners of the room and I was surprised to find tears on my face. I turned away from the crowd and wiped them away, pissed at myself. Did I really want to share my pain with fifty damn vamps?

Wait a minute, fifty?

I looked around the room, my hand already reaching for one of the stakes at my back. There were at least fifty vamps in the room, maybe more. I was born with the ability to feel vampires around me, but now there were so many of them I couldn't really tell who was human and who wasn't.

I backed away from the ring in the center of the room toward the entrance and Ford Radek. Somebody else could protect the prince, I'd protect the vamp that more or less signed my paycheck. If Ford were destroyed, Corrine would be in danger and there was no way I'd ever let that happen. Besides, I owed him for letting me come to Salem after I'd killed the Tremere Regent in Burlington a few months ago.

Suddenly a tall vamp in a suit called out near the center ring. I didn't listen to what he said, I was more concerned with identifying exactly who was Kindred and which ones weren't supposed to be there.

Halfway to Ford's table I felt a vamp behind me and a hand fell on my shoulder. I turned, barely stopping myself from lashing out with the stake in my hand. It was Radek himself, and he looked very worried.

"Follow me," he said quietly.

Without a word, I did. We moved slowly through the crowd to the center ring and stood silently waiting for an opportunity to do something. It was easier for me to tell who was friend and who was foe there because I knew who usually hung out with the prince.

At a signal from Ford, I attacked the nearest bad guy, and I wasn't the only one. The room rang out with gunshots and the sound of fighting. Since coming to Salem I hadn't had much of a chance to kill Kindred, mostly because the prince was Tremere and she frowned on indiscriminate killing of other clans. Tonight more than made up for it.

After a quarter of a century of fighting and killing vamps, it's kind of instinctual for me now. In a battle like this I'm like a fighting machine, spinning and kicking and striking out with

whatever I can get my hands on. When I'm fighting, it's like the whole world goes away and I'm only left with one thing: knowing I'm gonna win and they're gonna lose. I like the way that feels.

At one point I was midway through an attack with a stake when I pulled back before just short of the target's chest. Sarah Hamilton, the prince's grandchilde, looked back at me with startled eyes, but when I didn't stake her, she nodded and moved away. I threw my last stake at the back of the vamp that went after her and he fell to the ground, frozen.

It's not like what the stories say, staking a vampire doesn't destroy it, but it does put it out of action. Stake a Kindred through the heart and it can't move so much as a muscle. It's pretty handy if you think about it, peg a vamp and set it out to see the sunrise, then sit back for the fire show. Even better if it's awake when you stake it, then it gets to watch the sun come up and feel every painful moment as it burns alive.

Large hands grabbed me from behind, but I spun quickly and backhanded the fiend across the face. I kicked him in the stomach and he fell back a little, but when I reached for a stake to pin him with, I came up empty.

"Dushku!" I heard from my left, and turned just in time to catch a stake that Micky George had tossed to me. Micky was the prince's childe, and Sarah's sire.

I spun and plunged the stake into the vamp's heart before he could block the blow. He fell to my feet and I knew he wouldn't get up again unless someone pulled the wood from his heart. I bent to cut off its head with the large knife I always carried. When I was done, I wiped the blade on the remains of its clothing.

A part of my mind was disappointed that the fight had ended so quickly with so few Kindred dead. That's what the vamps call themselves, Kindred. It's ironic really; I've never seen a bigger bunch of back-stabbers in all my life. I hated that I had to deal with them, but the advantages far outweighed the consequences of disobedience.

Yeah, I said disobedience. Ford had a blood contract that he and I had signed which made me agree to spy for them within the Society of Leopold. That's just a fancy name for the Inquisition, they kill anything preternatural they can get their hands on. The Tremere used me to get intel about the Society's movements and information. They paid good for it, not that I ever saw any of the money.

I'd always hated vamps, hated every second of working for them, but every once in a while I got to dust a few of them, and that almost made it worth it. The real reason I stuck to the contract was working elsewhere in the city.

The main room of the club was pretty much ruined by the bad guys. They were Sabbat, the black hats of Kindred society. They'd attacked Guilty Pleasures as part of their effort to kill the prince and take over the city, but lucky for us we'd been able to fend them off. As much as I hated vamps I had to admit that Elvira, the prince, was good at protecting humans from her kind. The Sabbat don't protect people, they swallow them whole.

I had gotten a job at the club to scout it out for the Society. 'Oh what a tangled web' and all that jazz. I had to pick and choose what I told my superiors, but better me working here than some poor slob that really believed vamps are agents of the devil himself. I just knew they were evil, and I'd been killing them for a long time.

Clean up began and I found myself carrying bodies, human and otherwise, to a pile near the stairs. Vamp bodies usually break down pretty quickly, and a few other guys were pulling out mops to clean that mess up.

"Excuse me," I heard a deep voice say behind me.

I turned from my study of the ruined room, a little startled that the dark haired man had approached me without notice. Not many beings could do that, but then again maybe I'd been distracted by the feel of so many vamps in one room. "Yeah?"

The man wore a priest's outfit complete with a large cross that hung low on his chest. I didn't recognize him, but something about him seemed kinda familiar. I knew in that first instant he was a werewolf, and I had to wonder if I'd killed one of his pack mates since I'd come to Salem. I didn't like hunting werewolves, but it was part of my job at the Society. Sometimes it really is kill or be killed, no matter what you want to believe.

"I'm sorry to intrude," he said politely with a heavy Irish brogue that seemed familiar. "I am Brother Stephen Brennan, and I believe you know my uncle, Cormac Brennan."

At the very mention of Mac's name, the room spun around me. For an instant, I was thrown back into the past to a happy time in my life. Mac had talked with that same accent, but not as heavy as the one the werewolf used. Mac had come to Baltimore from Ireland, looking for a new life. He'd found me, then death had found him.

"I knew him," I replied, forcing myself to focus on the present. I held the grief that burned in my chest close to my heart. It had been almost twenty years since the vamps of Baltimore had come for Mac and me, nearly that long since I had resigned myself to his death.

"I believe he would be interested in seeing you again," he told me softly.

"That would be kinda hard," I stated softly, hiding the pain that his words caused me. "You know he's been dead for years."

"I believe you are mistaken," he told me. "I spoke with him only last night."

I shook my head, wondering if this priest was a figment of my tormented imagination. Had I spent too many years longing for my late fiancé? "Mac Brennan is dead," I told him flatly. "He's been dead for a long time."

The priest gave me a strange look. "I spoke with him," he repeated firmly. "He is not dead."

"That's impossible," I said stubbornly. Hell, I'd watched him die and not been able to stop it.

"Excuse me," one of the Tremere servants I recognized as Sam said to Stephen, "Elvira says you are needed downstairs, they're back. The fastest way down is probably through the pit."

The priest turned to me. "Will you be around?"

I didn't answer, I was still stunned by the memories of my dead lover and Stephen's insistence that he was still alive. I had to be imagining the priest, you know? Either that or he was insane. Mac couldn't possibly be alive, he couldn't. He would have met me on the mountain almost twenty years ago if he'd lived through the attack.

When I didn't say anything, Brother Stephen smiled a strange smile. "Wait here."

"Right here?" I raised an eyebrow at him and pointed toward the floor. "I don't plan on going anywhere, I am working," I reminded him wryly. "But I won't be right here."

Still smiling oddly he turned to follow the guard and I went back to cleaning up.

A little while later, I knelt carefully to pick up large pieces of glass from the floor and lay them on a tray. The room was a disaster, and I knew it would take a few days to get it back into shape before the owner could reopen the place. The black hats had definitely put a damper on his grand opening when they'd attacked.

As I worked, I felt the shift of Kindred in and around the room. I wasn't too worried about them being close by, but I tried to keep tabs on the number of them in the room. I didn't expect the Sabbath to come back, but then again you never know.

I had just finished cleaning up the glass within reach of me when I heard someone call my name. I glanced up and saw that the monk had returned.

"Brother Stephen," I said as I lifted the tray and rose to my feet. "Did you—"

My voice broke suddenly when I saw the man who stood next to the priest. My body lost all feeling and I dropped the tray and its burden to the floor, not even feeling the small slivers of glass that dug into my skin. Was I dreaming? Hallucinating?

"Eliza," the man said in greeting, his voice bringing long buried feelings to the surface of my mind.

He was tall and very handsome in a form-fitting tuxedo, the shirt and vest of which looked hastily buttoned over his muscular chest. His dark hair and handsome face were familiar to me, as familiar as my own. I'd missed that face every day for years with a longing that even now was hard for me to put aside.

I felt my lips move around his name but I couldn't make a sound. Standing before me was Mac Brennan, the man I'd once agreed to marry, the man I'd thought dead for so many years, and he looked exactly the same as he had the last time I'd seen him. Or he would have if it weren't for the cold expression on his once beloved face.

Abruptly I realized why he looked so much the same; he was dead, or rather, he was a vampire. There were so many Kindred in the room that at first I hadn't noticed the vamp vibes coming off of him. This wasn't a dream, it was a freaking nightmare. I staggered back and fell into one of the chairs behind me. I could only stare at him in amazement, remembering Dougal Galloway's teeth in his throat.

The vamp that had once been the man I loved glanced at the werewolf beside him. "Has Stephen told you of my current condition?"

"No," I whispered, then cleared my throat and said louder, "but I can guess."

He nodded, watching me closely. "As a side condition I have amnesia."

"That explains why you didn't meet me in West Virginia." I doubt anything else short of death would have kept him away, even if he had been embraced. We'd made a pact to meet there if anything happened to separate us, and I knew he would have held to it at all costs if he could have. Still, somehow I almost envied the peace he must have felt the last twenty years not knowing what we'd lost.

"On the mountain top," he added.

Suspicion rose inside me but I tried to keep my face blank. "Didn't you just say that you had amnesia?"

"I have had a few dreams of you. My memory has started returning somewhat," he explained calmly. "It has been jogged in the past few days."

Stephen stepped back to give us privacy as I asked, "So you didn't remember me at all?" That hurt a lot more than I expected it to; I'd like to think there was no way I'd forget him, no matter what happened. I'd sure tried hard enough, hadn't I?

"Not who or what you were to me," he told me, stepping a little closer.

I'd have pulled a stake on him if I'd had one. I normally didn't let vamps get close to me, too many of them had tried to bite me. Unfortunately, I'd used all my stakes in the big fight.

"I was recently involved in a ritual which took me to an alternate dimension, and caused the memory jogging. I met the alternate Eliza," he said quietly. "The Eliza of the other world."

It appears that their reality was not much different than ours. Cormac and Eliza were married. She is a hunter."

He stood there looking at me expectantly, as if he thought I should admit to him that I was a hunter. For all that I had loved him years ago, he was a damned vamp now, one of the things I hated most in this world. How had that happened? I'd seen him die, hadn't I?

"She is," I murmured, nodding that I understood. I really had been a hunter, a long time ago. Now I was a Kindred mole just pretending to be a hunter. Funny how much things change. "And what are you in that other world?"

"He was a mage."

Of course, some things didn't change. "So you're saying that you never died," I stated calmly, even though my heart was pounding. "They got married as planned, had the two point five kids, white picket fence...?"

"No children," he said sadly, "no white picket fence, but married, yes."

I looked away from him to hide the bitterness of my thoughts while I slid from the chair to pick up the tray I'd dropped and the glass that once again littered the floor. I could feel the tiny cuts on my ankles but I didn't let them bother me. That minor pain was nothing compared to seeing Mac and knowing what he'd turned into. Cormac now, I corrected myself. He wasn't the Mac I'd loved anymore. He hadn't been Mac for a long time.

As I reached for the first large piece of glass, I realized that Cormac had also bent down and was helping me. Vamps don't help ghouls, and that's what most of them thought I was. I watched him for a moment, still unable to really believe that he was here and, in some ways, alive. The irony of the situation nearly overwhelmed me; when he was human we'd hunted the undead together, now he was one of the monsters.

I wondered if I really had seen him the night before in a car full of vamps. At the time I'd thought it was a figment of my imagination, but now I wasn't so sure. After a moment I gave myself a mental shake and went back to cleaning up my mess.

Within minutes we had the glass piled back on the tray. I stood with the tray in my hands and sat it down on a nearby table. I tucked my hair behind my ear and looked out over the room, unsure what to say to what had once been the man I'd loved.

"Why did you never come looking for me?" he asked. I thought I saw pain in his eyes, pain that matched the agony in my soul as I remembered the awful night I learned he was dead.

"I thought you were dead," I told him painfully. "They came in the night and...." I couldn't go on, even after all this time the hurt was too fresh. Most of the time I did my best not to live in the 'might have been,' but it was hard not to think about it with him standing in front of me.

"They?"

"They."

"They who?" he prompted. I could tell by the tone of his voice that my evasions were irritating him.

"The vamps in Baltimore," I said flatly. I couldn't bring myself to tell him exactly what happened, the pain still cut too deep. "Kate got me out, but she told me you were dead. We were supposed to meet in West Virginia if we were ever separated like that but you never showed."

"What were we doing in Baltimore?" He seemed genuinely interested, and I couldn't help but wonder why. He didn't remember the past and maybe that was for the best. He was a vamp, you know? We could never have what we'd lost, ever.

"Things we apparently weren't supposed to be doing." What good would it do either of us for me to tell him about it now? Why bring all that pain up again?

"Could you be any more vague?"

I tried not to smile; his impatience was exactly as I remembered. Then my humor faded. He was very different; damn, he was a monster now. "We were trying to get info on them and they didn't like it. They wanted us out of the city's Kindred politics, and they got it. They got us out of it."

"What do you know of Dougal Galloway?"

I closed my eyes briefly, pushing aside a vision of the Kindred feeding from my lover. "He... was involved. What to you know of him?"

"He is my sire," Cormac told me slowly. "Or, was my sire."

"He's dead?"

"He is now."

I wanted to say something about the justice of his sire's death, but decided against it. Who knew what twisting Dougal had done to Cormac's mind and attitude? Still, I was happy he'd been destroyed; it saved me from doing a bit of hunting to find and kill him myself.

"Who was Dougal to us?" Cormac asked.

"The Enemy." My voice was cold, harsh even.

"What was I?"

For the first time I thought about what a lack of identity would have been like for him. Living for years not knowing what he had been, who he had loved, what he had lost. Maybe it wouldn't have been such a good thing.

I sighed. "You were a mage," I told him, my voice and face devoid of expression. "We were trying to work with others of your kind to get the vamps out of Baltimore. We didn't get very far."

"What others?"

To pacify him, I gave him the names of a few people who had been killed in the raid. He fell silent for a few minutes then shifted so he could see where Stephen stood talking to three of the local werewolves.

"That is my nephew," he told me.

I nodded. "Brother Stephen." Now I remembered Mac telling me about his brother's son, a Metis werewolf that he had been very close to when he'd lived in Ireland.

"Yes," he murmured, "Brother Stephen-Seeks-the-Truth."

Once again he watched me for a reaction. Did he wonder if I knew what Stephen was? Like I couldn't read it as if it were tattooed on his forehead? I just smiled coolly and said nothing.

"Would you like to, ah..."

Whatever he'd been about to say was interrupted by Elvira, the Kindred prince of Salem.

"Let's go, people," she said loudly. "The pack is at Mother Abigail's down on Park Street."

My mind froze. "Mother Abigail's?" I repeated in a breathless voice that bordered on hysteria. Corrine was at Mother Abigail's, she volunteered there on Friday nights. Corrine was my sole reason for living, the only motivation I had to work for the Kindred.

My mind went numb and my only thought was for my daughter's safety. "Corrine is there," I told Cormac urgently. "We can't let anything happen to her."

"Who is Corrine?" he asked, his voice level.

This was something I hadn't had time to think about. Should I tell him about our child? If I did, maybe he would help me protect her. "She's my daughter, Cormac," I told him simply. "Our daughter."

He looked stunned.

"We have to go, now," I said urgently.

We had turned for the exit when Elvira's voice rang out again.

"Just one thing," she said firmly, "I want Roger Campbell, Akari, and Michael Moorecock's body alive. I don't care how, just do it and kill the rest of the pack. Bring me their ghouls in chains. And bring me the teeth of the Brujah," she added as an afterthought.

I didn't know what the hell she was talking about and I didn't care. As long as my daughter was safe she could do whatever she wanted with the Sabbat pack. If Corrine died, I would kill every vamp I could before they took me down.

THE ITEM

IF YOU WANNA FIND HELL WITH ME
I CAN SHOW YOU WHAT ITS LIKE
'TILL YOU'RE BLEEDING
MOTHER - DANZIG

We were among the first to make it to the parking lot, followed by Brother Stephen and his three werewolf friends. I started for the van I'd been driving, but Cormac laid a cold hand on my arm. He let me go before I had a chance to pull away from his touch.

"I think I have a faster way to get there," he told me. He took a set of keys from his pocket and headed for a dark Buick parked nearby.

We climbed in quickly and I found myself wedged in the front seat between Cormac and Stephen. The muscles in my shoulders began to ache from the stress of being with the vamp who'd once been my lover and worrying about Corrine's safety.

"We will save our daughter," Cormac assured me, noticing my tenseness.

I glanced at his face in the passing streetlights. "Ah, one thing you should know," I warned him softly. "She doesn't know who her parent's are. She was adopted."

He shot me a strange look. "We adopted her?"

"No," I replied sadly. "I gave her up for adoption." I rubbed a hand across my eyes, remembering what it had been like those first few years in Bar Harbor. "I had no choice."

When I looked up, we had stopped just down the block from Mother Abigail's. The street was quickly crowded with vehicles; I think half the vamps in Salem were there for the occasion.

An older man, or rather vamp, was standing near the back of a pickup truck handing out stakes. I grabbed a couple from him and looked toward Mother Abigail's, but we were too far away to see in any of the windows.

The old vamp stood in the truck bed and held up a rough sketch of the floor plan of Mother Abigail's. He quietly instructed everyone in the strategy that would be used to enter the home. Everyone was assigned an opening, and told to wait for the signal before attacking. As one, the crowd surged toward the house.

Cormac, Stephen, the werewolves and I ended up at the back of the house, near what was the dining room. A glance through the sliding glass door showed Corrine pinned to the wall by a tall black Kindred who had to be the Akari Elvira wanted alive. As we watched, he tried to get close enough to bite her, but she was fighting him off.

The blood drained from my face and I grabbed a nearby tree trunk to stop myself from going in. I knew if I let myself frenzy I'd forget about the plan and kill the vamp. My contract wouldn't save my life if I did, the prince would see me dead for disobeying her. Who would protect Corrine then?

At a softly spoken word from Cormac, two of the werewolves climbed to a second story window and waited silently. Cormac and Stephen stepped forward and I followed close behind them.

"If you think I'm letting you go in there without me you are out of your mind," I hissed at him as Akari viciously pulled Corrine's head back and bit her throat.

"I did not think to stop you," Cormac assured me as he raised his gun to aim at the monster.

A moment later the signal came and Cormac fired. The glass shattered and Akari's leg exploded in a shower of flame and he fell backward, still clutching my daughter, still feeding from her. Cormac fired again and she was free, sliding down the wall and kicking the vampire away from her.

Almost absently, I threw a knife at the ghoul who had been intent on raping one of the other girls on the dining room table. It embedded six inches in his back as I dashed in through the broken window to Corrine's side, brushing past Cormac to reach her.

The girl was barely maintaining her control, but she was dealing. I was proud of her restraint and hugged her fiercely; not many humans could survive an attack like that and not freak out totally.

I helped her to her feet and together we wrapped Cormac's trench coat around the naked girl on the table and got her outside.

"What the hell was that, Eliza?" Corrine asked in a hushed whisper.

"A bad guy, luv," I told her, trying to steady the other girl and get her away from the house.

"I know that," she hissed. "He bit me. Was he some kind of vampire?"

I glanced at her neck, but it didn't seem to be bleeding too badly. Somehow I'd have to make sure she forgot what she'd seen here tonight. "Vampires aren't real, Corrine," I said softly, ignoring the burning itch at the base of my spine that told me I was surrounded by them. "He was just some psycho looking for a cheap thrill."

She shivered. "He was crazy."

One of the Tremere ghouls came over to us and took the stunned girl off our hands. I turned to my daughter and pulled her into my arms.

"Are you all right?" I asked urgently.

"I'm fine, Eliza," she assured me, holding on tight. "Do you know who that was that shot him?"

"Yeah," I admitted. What could I tell her about him? She thought her birth father was dead. "He's an old friend. Look, I need to go back in and see if I can help."

"What can you do?" she asked, surprised.

Of course she had no idea what I do every night. How do you tell your child that you kill supernatural creatures professionally? Let me tell you how; you don't. I didn't want her to know anything about what lived in the darkness just out of sight. I figured it kept her safer that way. As it turns out, I was wrong, but we'll get to that part soon enough.

"There are other girls inside," I reminded her. "I've got to see if I can get them out." I also found myself thinking that I had to watch Mac's back and I had to shake the thought off. He was a fucking vamp, he could take care of his own damned back.

"Isn't there someone else who can go?" she begged.

I hugged her tight for a moment, then pulled away and looked into her eyes. "Corrine, I have to see if I can help. You stay here with this woman and I'll be back in a few minutes, I promise. Okay?"

When she nodded, I breathed a sigh of relief. I didn't really want to bend her mind to make her let me go back inside, but I would have if it had come down to it.

"Stay here," I repeated. "Stay safe." I let her go and walked back to the house without looking back.

I stepped through the shattered door to see Cormac standing over the Kindred who had attacked our daughter. I gasped when I saw blood flowing from the weakened vampire's eyes,

mouth and wounds rising in the air toward Cormac's mouth. When the blood stopped flowing, Akari was unconscious.

Visions of the vamp's teeth in Corrine's throat flashed through my mind. I pulled a wooden stake from the small of my back and strode quickly to his side. I had learned a long time ago the best method to stake a vamp through the heart, and I did it now without thought or hesitation. It's like riding a bike, you know? Once you learn how, you never forget. I really wanted to take the bastard's head off but I knew it would only cause problems for all of us and I wouldn't risk Corrine.

I shook my morbid thoughts away and stood, looking toward the living room and Cormac. I watched while he and his friends took care of the last of the Sabbat pack. I don't know what bothered me more; watching him feed from Akari, or seeing him stake and kill the enemy vamps without thought or hesitation. You'd think he'd care more about his own kind, wouldn't you?

I thought most of the other vamps in the room were Tremere, and I recognized Brenda Thompson among them. I'd dealt with Brenda recently; in fact I'd used her as my contact to get intel to the prince more than a few times when I couldn't find Kate. She seemed nice for a blood-sucking fiend, but I still couldn't stand her. A vamp is a vamp, you know?

Brenda was searching for a her puppy's—ah, ghou's sister, and when the whole group went to look for her, I went to talk to Gillian Hollroyd, a friend of mine and Corrine's, although Corrine had no idea that the woman was a mage.

"Are you okay?" I asked her. There was blood on her chest, but I thought that most of her wounds looked self-inflicted. Some witches used blood to focus their power, and I guess Gillian was one of them.

"I'm fine," she told me, running a hand across the scratches. When she lowered her hand, the injuries were gone. "Can you help me get these girls outside?"

Two of the young residents of the house were sitting stunned on the couch. We walked them past several staked vampires and out into the back yard. Corrine saw us and came over quickly to make sure everyone was all right. She was holding a handkerchief to her throat, but it looked like the bleeding had stopped.

"This sounds kind of strange," Corrine said softly to me, "but do I know the guy that saved me? Something tells me I should know who he is. Don't you have a picture of him?"

She must have seen it a long time ago when I'd lived in Bar Harbor. She knew where the apartment I kept was, the one I kept secret from St. Stephens, but she'd never been inside. I tried to keep traffic to it at a minimum so I didn't have to explain to the Society that I needed my own private space.

"Yeah," I admitted softly. "I knew him a long time ago."

"It couldn't be that long ago," she replied with a smile. "You don't look a day over eighteen."

I shook my head. "I'm a lot older than I look," I told her. "The women in my family age well." For instance, Kate was over a hundred years old and she still looked in her mid twenties. Personally, my forty-eighth birthday was only a few days away.

Gillian smiled at my words and I suspected that she was also much older than she looked, but for a much different reason.

"Gillian, could you look after Corrine for a moment for me?" I asked. "I need to talk to someone." She agreed.

I knew that the vamps would be manipulating memories and I wanted to talk to one of them before they got to my daughter. I quickly found Zora Yale, a woman Kate had told me was some kind of Tremere bigwig.

"I know that your people will be changing memories in these people's minds," I began slowly, glancing over my shoulder at Corrine.

"Yes," she replied coolly.

I took a quick breath and hoped I was doing the right thing. "It's important that Corrine Wright be allowed to remember Cormac Brennan rescuing her."

The vamp looked at me in surprise. "I'd heard the item was here. Is she all right?" she demanded.

"She's been bitten," I told her gravely, "but she'll be fine. I'd like her to forget the bite but remember Cormac."

"I see." She was too polite to ask why. Since she was Ford's grandchilde and had called Corrine the 'item', I figured she knew all about me.

"This won't affect the contract," I told her softly. "Make it happen." If she didn't, I was fully within my rights to demand Ford's life and I didn't think she wanted that.

Zora nodded. "I will take care of her myself," she assured me. "She will remember that Cormac shot and killed the man who was trying to force himself on her."

"My thanks," I told her respectfully, although it almost killed me to do it. I hated dealing with those monsters. Things had been much easier when I was killing them on sight. I walked slowly back toward Corrine and Gillian.

"We have to talk to one of the detectives before they will allow us to leave," Gillian said meaningfully when I rejoined them.

I nodded. "I just spoke with Detective Yale," I replied. "Make sure that she is the one you talk to, Corrine, she seemed very nice."

Corrine agreed, then said, "I know you are helping here but when you're done, could you come by my apartment?" she asked sheepishly. "I hate to ask but I'm a little spooked and I just want someone to check on me."

"Of course," I said with a smile. I didn't want to leave her in the middle of all these vamps, but I caught sight of Ford Radek nearby and knew that she'd be the safest person there. I hugged her again, then asked Gillian to see Corrine home after they had talked to the 'detective.' She agreed.

I excused myself and went back toward the house, where I could still hear sporadic gunfire. Down the street I saw flashing lights from police cruisers, and wondered just how much of the cops the vamps of Salem controlled.

In the study, I spent several minutes talking quietly with Elvira. It was our first face to face meeting, although we had talked several times on the phone.

"I was not surprised to see you here," she said guardedly.

"I wasn't interfering, madam," I told her. "The 'item' volunteers here, and when I heard that there was trouble, Mr. Brennan offered to bring me with him."

"Would that be Cormac or his nephew?"

"Cormac, madam."

She studied me closely for several minutes then nodded to herself. "I met Cormac many years ago when he came through town with his sire, Dougal Galloway."

I couldn't stop myself from stiffening at the name and I knew she saw my telltale movements. "I knew him a long time ago, in fact I thought he was dead until I saw him this evening."

"He is dead," she reminded me. "He is Tremere. Surely you know what that entails."

"I am aware of your clan's loyalties, madam," I said softly. I knew it wasn't a good idea to disrespect to the prince, but what I really wanted to do was slap her for reminding me that the Mac I'd loved didn't really exist anymore.

"And how is the 'item'?" she asked offhandedly.

She didn't fool me, we both knew that I could have her sire destroyed for what had happened here tonight. "She will be fine," I assured her. "She won't remember most of the evening." I'd hated doing that to Corrine, but it was for the best.

Elvira seemed relieved, though she tried to hide it. "Then we can expect no further repercussions from this incident?"

I shook my head. "Not unless there is further damage done from this."

Luckily, at that moment Cormac entered the room with Stephen and a few others, which drew Elvira's attention away from me. I walked to the back of the room and watched Elvira deal with the remainder of the Sabbat pack. She killed Akari herself, something I was more than happy to see. She ordered the leader of the pack taken into custody for questioning. I thought that was a mistake, but since she didn't ask my opinion, I didn't offer it.

When Elvira dismissed everyone, Cormac joined me and asked how Corrine was doing.

"She'll be all right," I assured him. "I sent her home with a friend. I told her I'd stop by after we finished up here."

He began to say something, then stopped abruptly and looked away.

I shook my head at my carelessness. I knew he wasn't Mac anymore, but still I should have known that he'd want a chance to talk to Corrine. "You could come with me if you'd like," I offered before I thought about taking a vamp to see my daughter. Still, if Zora had done as she had promised, I knew that Corrine would welcome seeing her rescuer.

Cormac tried not to look too enthusiastic about coming with me, but it was wicked obvious in his eyes. Stephen and one of his friends offered to drop us off back at Guilty Pleasures for my van, and we agreed.

I wasn't concerned about the contract; I knew that Ford would count on me to choose what violated it and what didn't. I'd make sure that they weren't worried about Cormac's presence in Corrine's life, but if he hurt her, I'd destroy him myself.

EXPLANATIONS AND EVASIONS

WHO ARE YOU TO JUDGE ME?

JUST LET ME BE AND LET ME BREATHE

FIST OF RAGE - KID ROCK

After getting into the crappy van the Society had assigned to me, I drove toward Corrine's apartment. I dreaded being alone with Cormac because I knew he'd ask me about the life he'd forgotten. I wasn't sure I was ready to walk down memory lane with him just yet.

"I noticed that you spoke with the prince," he commented. He always had noticed things I didn't want him to.

"Yeah."

"It is unusual for one," he paused, searching for the right words, "not of the blood to know the prince so well."

Not that I knew her, really. "Is it?"

"Are you of the blood, Eliza?" he asked pointedly.

I shot him a look that by all rights should have set him on fire where he sat. What he was really asking was if I was a ghoul. I was happy enough to be mistaken for a puppy when it suited my purposes, but I didn't like the thought of really being one. I'd grown up seeing what a vamp's blood did to someone's mind and I sure as hell didn't want that happening to me.

"I will never be 'of the blood' Cormac," I all but growled, "and if you remembered me at all, you would know that."

"As I said earlier, the alternate Eliza is a hunter," he said thoughtfully, his eyes never leaving my face. When I didn't answer, he added, "With as close as this reality is to that one, I find it hard to believe you are not, nor ever were involved in those type of activities."

I closed my eyes for a moment wondering why it was so important for him to know this. "What do you want me to do?" I demanded harshly. "Admit to being a hunter?"

"Yes," he replied in the same tone. "Are you a freelance hunter or do you work for one of the groups?"

Hell, he was Tremere. All he had to do was ask any vamp in town and he'd find out anyway. "I live at St. Stephen's," I reluctantly admitted.

He seemed familiar enough with it. "It is good to see that the Tremere have another mole," he said softly.

I glanced at him, remembering the female vamp I'd almost staked tonight, the prince's grandchilde. She'd been a hunter once, before her embrace. Hell, I was even staying in her old room at St. Stephen's. Is that what they call 'dramatic irony'?

"What brought you to do work for the Kindred?" he asked me.

"I have an... agreement with the Tremere in the city," I admitted.

"Only the Tremere?"

I knew he was looking at me, but I just kept staring out the windshield. "Let's just say a few Tremere."

"Which ones?" He hadn't changed a bit. He still wanted to know everything about everything, no matter who was hurt by it.

I thought about lying to him, but I just couldn't do it. I had loved him once, no matter what he now was. I owed him the truth, or at least some of it. "My mother."

"She is in the city?"

"I think so," I told him. "I'm not sure. I haven't seen her in a while."

"What is your mother's name?" Again with the questions.

"I'm not sure what she goes by, but I know her as Kate."

"Your mother was embraced after your birth?" he asked.

For real now, that was enough truth for one night. "That's generally the way it happens," I reminded him as I pulled into the parking lot of Corrine's apartment building. Vamps don't have babies, not normally, anyway.

"And your mother was embraced *after* your birth?"

"It would be hard for her to have me after her embrace," I said carefully. I knew better than to tell him the truth, but I still didn't want to lie to him.

"I have heard rumors of day-walkers having children," he said softly.

Mac had once known the truth about my mother, but unless he was lying about his memory, Cormac had long forgotten. Actually I was surprised he'd heard of vamps having babies, it was pretty rare.

"Higher generation Kindred," I finally agreed. I'm damned for the blood Kate gave me at birth and I know it, I've always known it. I can't make any excuses for what I am, but I certainly don't go around admitting it to just any vamp that asks, not even Cormac Brennan. Hell, it had taken me over a year to tell Mac, way back when.

"Is that the case?" He was coming too close to the truth and I knew I had to put him off of the topic or put Corrine in danger. If the Tremere knew what I really was, I'd be studied like a rat in a cage and Corrine would be left unprotected. I couldn't, wouldn't let that happen.

"How do I know I can trust you?" I demanded harshly. "I'm sure you spent a lot of time with Dougal, and I can't forget that he was the one who took you away from me. How do I know he didn't recreate you in his image? How do I know you won't hurt Corrine? Or me? When you were human you never killed so easily." Tears filled my eyes and my voice fell to a whisper, but I didn't break his gaze. "Maybe it would be best if we pretend we'd never seen each other tonight."

"If I hadn't killed so easily," Cormac shot back softly, "our daughter would now be Akari's child. I did what I had to do in order to protect her. Give me an opportunity to prove that I am not so different from what you remember."

I studied his face for a long time, searching for the man who had once loved me. Somewhere in the lines of his face I thought I saw him, the Mac Brennan I'd once trusted with my life and more.

I dropped my eyes and looked away. A part of me still trusted him despite my rational mind's insistence that I kill him where he sat. Regardless of how I felt toward him personally, and the offense the prince would be sure to take if I destroyed him, I knew that Corrine would never understand if I killed her father. But I wasn't sure I would forgive myself if I didn't; at one time we had each had sworn to put the other down if we were embraced.

Finally I motioned toward the building and got out of the van to walk toward the door. I'd have to save the decision for another time, when just seeing him didn't make my heart swell with feelings I'd never really forgotten.

We spent about a half-hour with Corrine. She hugged us both when we came in, happy to see us and grateful for our help at Mother Abigail's. We sat down and Cormac stayed mostly quiet, listening to our conversation and looking around her apartment.

Corrine talked about the intruders as if they'd been human, and was sad about the girls who had died. She told us she didn't intend on missing any school because of the incident; she felt it was important to get on with her life.

I glanced around the room, seeing things as if for the first time. Many of her college books were lying on a low table in front of the couch. Most of them had to do with psychology, her major. She liked Celtic things, but nothing pointed to magic or the occult. Not for the first time I wondered if she had inherited her father's mage powers, or any of my own abilities.

When I noticed that Corrine was getting tired, I suggested that we leave so that she could get some sleep. She walked us to the door and gave me another hug before turning to Cormac.

After hugging him, she asked about the priest who had followed Cormac and I into the house.

"That is my nephew," he told her.

"You must have a much older brother or sister," she commented.

"Yes," he said. "I do."

"Look, if you ever come back into town again, I'd like you to stop by," she told him. "I owe you, I'd like to try and repay the debt somehow if I could."

"I will do that, Corrine," he said quietly.

I gave our daughter one last hug and told her to lock the door behind us. We went down to the van and got inside but we sat for a long time in awkward silence before he broke it.

"It seems I have much to remember," Cormac murmured.

I closed my eyes and turned away. "Some times it's better to forget," I told him softly. Not that I'd been able to, I'd spent years living in the past. You'd think by now I'd know better.

"And just how long did it take you to forget me, Eliza?" he surprised me by asking.

How dare he? I shot him an angry look. "It took me a long time to get over losing you," I told him fiercely. "We were supposed to get married. I waited for you but you never came. I thought you were dead." I'd never forgotten him, not even for a moment.

I took a slow breath to calm down before I made myself explain. "Kate found me on the mountain in West Virginia where I was waiting for you. She took me to Maine and left me with a couple she trusted. I had Corrine, and the couple adopted her." I deliberately glossed over the messy details, I didn't want to admit how hard his death had been on me.

"Why did you never look for me?" he asked in a voice that made my stomach clench in sympathy. "Why didn't you ever hunt down Dougal if you thought he killed me?" The last was more of an accusation.

How could I explain my life to him when he didn't even remember who I was? "You don't know what it was like for me," I told him softly, almost pleadingly. I didn't want pity from a vampire, but I had to make him understand. "I had no money, no resources, and I was alone and pregnant. I couldn't even get to Portland, let alone Baltimore. For years I did my best for our daughter's sake to keep the vamps out of Bar Harbor. I only stopped hunting when Kate and I came to terms."

He surprised me again with his next question. "Do you still have your engagement ring?"

I put my hand over where the ring fell on its chain beneath my shirt and closed my eyes for a moment. Was I ready to share this part of our past with him? Would I ever be?

"May I see it?" His voice was low and soft, almost as if he were afraid I'd say no. I very nearly did.

I told myself that he had a right to know about what had happened in Baltimore, and that I was the only one who could tell him about it. I pulled the chain out of my shirt and took it off, the first time I had done so in nearly fifteen years.

Cormac took it carefully, and sat looking down at the ring for a moment. Then he closed his eyes and fell into some kind of meditative state.

I took the opportunity to compare his features with what I remembered from the past. It was hard for me to see him exactly as he had been when Dougal had drained him in our apartment. While I knew I looked roughly the same age as I'd been nineteen years ago, I had undergone a few physical changes, scars and such that made me different than the girl I had been. I could see no such changes in Cormac.

"Fuck," he whispered softly.

I broke from my study of his mouth. "What?"

He didn't reply, but kept looking down at the ring as if he'd lost his best friend. With dismay, I saw a blood tear fall from his eye and streak down his cheek.

"What is it?" I demanded softly, laying a hand on his arm. It was the first time I had touched him, and it made my heart race remembering how things used to be with us.

"Are you familiar with psychometry?" he asked.

"Visions from touching an object?"

"Yes," he replied, placing his hand over mine. I could see anger on his face although he tried to hide it. "I have that ability. I saw the rings that I bought for us. Dougal had the wedding rings that matched this one."

I knew telling me that must have hurt him. How close had he been to the bastard that had killed him? Did knowing he'd once hated his sire destroy whatever good times he'd shared with Dougal? He gave me back the ring and I pulled away from his cold hand to put the necklace back on.

"I have in mind hunting for Dougal," he surprised me by saying.

"I thought you said he was dead," I answered slowly. Mac had never lied to me, but Cormac seemed to contradict himself more often than not.

"He is, as far as I know," he replied, "but I would like to find his belongings. Dougal told me once that he had taken my memory because of something horrible in my past that I didn't want to remember."

I couldn't help but sigh at that; I was probably the 'something horrible' that Dougal had been talking about.

"He also told me that he could give me back my memory if I decided I wanted it some day," Cormac continued. "He kept a spell book that I believe might hold the key to returning my memory."

"Why are you so interested in your past after all this time?" I asked. He'd been happy in his existence until now, why put himself through the heartbreak I'd been living with for years?

"It wasn't until recently that my past came looking for me," he reminded me.

"I didn't come looking," I muttered resentfully under my breath. I wasn't sure I was glad to see him after all those years; Cormac's return to my life brought back a lot of pain and confusion I could just as well have done without.

"But Stephen did," he answered. "He is the key to what my life was like in younger years, but you can help me with what happened as an adult."

I turned away from his probing eyes and started the van. We drove silently to the Tremere Chantry, each lost in our own thoughts. When I parked in the drive, he didn't get out right away. We sat quietly, neither of us willing to put an end to our reunion.

Long minutes later we both jumped at an unexpected tapping on the window. It was one of the house ghouls. "Is everything okay, sir?" he asked.

"Yes," Cormac replied. "I'll be coming in shortly." He watched the man walk back to his post at the steps before he turned back to me. "I would like you to accompany me in looking for Dougal."

I thought about that for a long time before I answered. What he asked was hard if not impossible. He'd said it himself; I was the Tremere mole at St. Stephen's. As much as I liked to pretend I answered to no one, that wasn't the reality. The truth was that I couldn't just leave St. Stephen's without permission from the clan.

Then came the hard question; did I want to go with him? I'd spent the last nineteen years trying to get on with my life. Hell, I knew I could never have a normal life, but I wanted one, craved it the way some people crave money or drugs. What I really wanted was a little house in the suburbs complete with the white picket fence, the two point five kids, a station wagon and a dog.

On the other hand, deep down I knew it was too late for me. It was too late the moment Kate conceived me nearly fifty years ago. I was born into a world of darkness and nothing I do will ever change who or what I am. My only option is to live my life the best I can and try to have as few regrets as possible. And I knew I would regret not helping Cormac find himself again.

At last, I looked at him. "I would have to get in touch with Kate."

"I thought you didn't know if she was in town?" he asked suspiciously.

"I don't," I replied, "at least I didn't see her tonight, but I do know how to contact her. They've got me set up in a good place, I'm not sure if they'll let me leave."

"Call me if you have any problems," he said quietly, then gave me his cell phone number. He also gave me another number for a girl he called Nina. I tried not to be curious about her; Cormac hadn't been my lover in almost twenty years. He was a big boy, and I had no right to think that he'd have remained faithful to someone he couldn't even remember. It didn't matter to me that I'd never looked at another man twice.

I pulled out a card that had only a seven-digit number printed on it. "If you need to reach me, leave a message on this answering machine."

"I will be in touch, Eliza," he said firmly.

I watched him get out and waited until he had climbed the steps and turned to look at me before I put the van into gear. I drove around town for a while to try and clear my head.

Knowing that Mac had been embraced the night I'd thought he'd died was almost too much for me to deal with. I needed time to adjust to the idea, but I wasn't sure if there was enough time in the world for me to get used to it.

We'd been happy in Baltimore, Mac and I. He'd asked me to marry him and of course I'd said yes. We had moved in together a week before the vamps had raided our apartment. If they'd waited just a few more days, we would have been in Ireland visiting Mac's family and they would have missed us. We would have been happy, raised Corrine together. Life would have been good, I just know it would have.

A long time later I found myself back at the apartment near the industrial district of Salem. I carefully climbed the rickety stairs and let myself inside. I must have been zoning because when I closed the door of the apartment, Kate surprised me.

"I could have been anyone, Eliza," she said low and dangerously. "What were you thinking?"

I looked at her for a moment, a hot reply on my lips that somehow never made it out. I leaned back against the door and slid downward until I was sitting on the floor, my knees clutched to my chest. Between the attack at Mother Abigail's and Cormac's return, I'd had quite enough surprises tonight to last a lifetime.

Before I could blink, Kate was kneeling beside me. "What is it?" she demanded softly without touching me.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I hissed.

"Tell you about what?" She pretended ignorance, but I saw right through her.

"Mac." His name echoed in the air around us.

After a long moment, she looked away and sat down on the floor beside me. "What would you have done if you had known that he was Kindred?" she asked me softly.

"I would have hunted him down and destroyed him," I said without blinking.

"Do you think he would have gone quietly to that death?" she continued. "Or that Dougal would have allowed you to destroy him?"

"It wouldn't have been easy," I admitted grudgingly.

"For that matter, you would have had every Tremere in Baltimore after you," she told me. "Do you think you could have survived it?"

"I might have," I said defensively. "I've beaten more than one vamp at a time."

"Nearly a dozen Tremere?" she asked. "At their own chantry? Even Johnson wasn't stupid enough to try that."

Glenn Johnson, Mac's best friend and the leader of the hunters in Baltimore. I hadn't spoken to him since shortly after the raids. He'd wanted me to go back to Baltimore, said he'd taken care of the vamps there, but I couldn't bring myself to go back to the city I'd lost Mac in.

I shot a glance at Kate's face, knowing she was right. "I would have died," I admitted.

"And Corrine with you," she reminded me. "Sometimes not knowing is better. I knew that Dougal erased his memory, just as I knew some day he would remember you and come looking."

"He didn't come looking," I told her bitterly. "He doesn't remember me, or us, or anything." I bit back a sob. "He's a vamp."

Kate put her hand on my leg and I couldn't stop myself from shrinking away. "So am I," she reminded me, withdrawing her hand. "Not all Kindred are evil. You should know that by now."

I didn't agree but it was easier to let her think I did, so I nodded reluctantly. "It's just a shock, seeing him exactly as I remember him. We were so happy, Kate. Why didn't I know he was still alive? I loved him so much!"

She reached out as if to smooth my hair back from my face, but pulled away just short of touching me. I couldn't stand to have a vamp touch me anymore and Kate knew that. "He's not, Eliza. He's dead. There was no way you could have known. What happened was for the best," she whispered softly. "You learned to stand on your own, and you have a beautiful, healthy daughter. You didn't need him."

"You have no idea what I need, Kate," I said harshly.

"I've always known what's best for you, dear," she told me.

I laughed wryly remembering Linda, the woman who'd beat me for years before Kate put a stop to it. How had I forgotten just what I was talking to? "Get out, Kate."

"Eliza, love—"

Her use of Mac's endearment for me snapped the hold I had on my temper. "Get out before I stake you, Kate," I told her in a hard voice. "I'm not in the mood for this tonight."

She stood and backed away, looking uneasy as I rose to my feet.

"Cormac wants me to go with him to find Dougal's things," I told her before I let her leave, trying to keep my voice calm. "I need permission to go."

"I can't give you that," she said quickly.

If she could, would she? Somehow I seriously doubted it. "Who can?"

"The prince."

"Have her call me," I said softly, moving into the living room. I didn't want to talk to another vamp tonight, but I'd do what I had to. "Goodbye, Kate."

I felt her moving away from me and heard the door close behind her. I sat in the dark apartment next to the phone and waited. It finally rang near dawn.

"Hello?"

"Eliza." The prince's voice was calm and cool, as always. I knew she didn't like to talk to me, but then again I didn't much like talking to her either.

"Thanks for calling, madam," I replied.

"What was so important that you couldn't pass it along through your contact?" she asked.

"I have a request to make, madam," I told her, "on a personal matter."

"A personal matter," she murmured. "Does it involve the item you are so fond of?"

Corrine was the only thing I ever asked anything for, and I had rarely done that. "No, madam," I replied. "This is about something else."

"I wasn't aware your contract allowed any other personal matters," she stated simply.

I would have been pissed if I hadn't known she was right. For ten years I had lived for the Tremere clan. "It's something I thought over with a long time ago," I told her respectfully. "I wouldn't ask this now, but I feel I have to."

"Would this have anything to do with Cormac?" she asked me. "I understand you spent a good deal of time with him this evening."

It figures that she knew about that. "Yes, madam. As I said earlier, I knew Cormac a long time ago."

"Your contract does not leave room for private... affairs, my dear," she reminded me coolly. "I don't think it would suit our purposes for you to rekindle an old flame."

"That's not—" I began, but she spoke over my words.

"I don't care what you want to call it, girl," she said harshly. "I feel it best that you remain here, for now."

"As you wish, madam," I forced myself to say through clenched teeth. Cormac wouldn't be happy to hear that I couldn't go with him, but I had no choice. As much as I hated it, I was bound by the contract to obey her.

"That's a good girl," she drawled smugly.

I hid a sigh, knowing that this was the life I had chosen to save my child. "One more thing, madam," I added. "Cormac Brennan will be spending time with the 'item.' This will not affect the contract."

"I see," she said thoughtfully. I really hoped she didn't see, but I didn't want Cormac killed for endangering Elvira's sire, Ford's life guaranteed the blood contract I'd signed.

When I hung up the phone a few minutes later, I looked out the bedroom window and remembered how the contract had completely changed my life. Kate had convinced me that signing my life over to the Tremere was the only way I could save my daughter's life, and after Corrine was almost killed, I had to believe her.

I watched the sun come up through the cracked glass and waited until I knew my daughter would be awake before I showed up on her doorstep. She smiled when she let me into the apartment.

"You look like you haven't slept all night," she chastised me. "What have you been doing?"

"I've been busy," I told her. "I'm going home when I leave here and crashing. How are you doing?"

She tucked her hair behind her ear and motioned for me to sit on the couch. "I just got up a little while ago," she replied as she sat down beside me. "I was having this really weird dream."

"Oh?" I asked, hoping it wasn't about last night. "Want to tell me about it?"

She looked like she wasn't sure she wanted to tell me, but she did. "This goddess Rhiannon said that I could do whatever I want in my dreams," she said softly. "I brought dad into it."

"Gene?"

"Well, yeah." She seemed a little confused I'd asked that. Hell, she had no idea about Cormac, she'd been told her birth father was dead.

"What do you mean you 'brought' him?" I asked.

She shrugged. "I just visualized that he was there and he was. It was really weird."

Sounded like it. "What did Rhiannon say?"

"That I had the power to do whatever I wanted," she told me. "That I could send dad back when I wanted and I thought about it and he disappeared. Then I said I wanted to wake up and I did." She seemed uncomfortable about the dream, almost as if she didn't want to believe it was true.

I looked away so that she wouldn't see the tears that filled my eyes. Did this mean she was a mage like Mac? Had she Awakened?

"Have you ever had a dream like that, Eliza?" she asked me.

I blinked away my tears and smiled sadly at her. What I was made it impossible for me to Awaken, just another reason I know I'm damned for Kate's blood in my veins.

"Never," I told her honestly, "but I know that other people have, you're not alone."

We talked about her dreams for a little while, and most of them sounded like things I'd heard Mac and our friends in Baltimore talking about. I was glad that she'd inherited his traits and not mine; his were a lot less likely to get her locked in a little room somewhere.

"Have you talked to that guy again?"

I knew exactly who she was talking about. "A little," I reluctantly replied. "I gave him a ride back to where he was staying."

"You used to know him?"

Damn, she was as bad as Cormac when it came to butting her nose in where it didn't belong. "I used to."

"Does he live in Salem?" she asked. "Are you planning on seeing him again?"

I studied her face carefully, wondering exactly where she was trying to go with this line of questioning. "I'm sure I'll talk to him some time, why?"

"Well, I'd like to see him again," she said softly. "He seemed really nice, I like him. Do you?"

"Yeah," I murmured sadly. Once upon a time I'd more than liked him, I'd loved him.

"You really look tired, Eliza," she told me abruptly. "You should go home and go to bed."

I nodded and stood up. "I'll try."

"You need to do more than try," she said firmly as she walked me to the door, "you've been up all night."

"Take care of yourself," I warned her. She meant more to me than anything else in the world.

She smiled at my familiar words. "I will."

ARRANGEMENTS

WHY DO YOU HAVE TO BE SO UNKIND?

WHY DO I HAVE TO BE SO INCLINED TO LOSE MY MIND?

NOTHING BUT YOU - KIM FERRON

I drove back to St. Stephen's in a daze of exhaustion. I slipped up the back stairway avoiding everyone, and went right to my room. I wanted to be alone, but I was expected to live at the church, so I'd decided to go there instead of back to my apartment so I could at least keep up appearances.

Sleep was a long time in coming, and when it finally did it was filled with dreams of the night Mac died. I relived every moment, and woke up around noon gasping for air. I knew I couldn't face dreaming like that again, so I went upstairs to the gym and found one of the others to work out with for a while.

Afterward Aislynn, one of the other hunters at St. Stephen's, asked me to go with her to the docks to pick up supplies from one of the ships that had come in. I spent the rest of the day on Society business and the only reason I realized the sun had gone down was because I felt a Kindred pass us in one of the cars on Main Street. I made my excuses and ended up at my apartment about a half-hour later with my dinner in hand. As I walked in the door, I heard the outgoing message on the answering machine stop.

"Eliza, I realize that anonymity has its virtues, but could you get a better answering machine tape?" Cormac's voice rang out through the nearly empty apartment.

I thought about ignoring the call to give myself time to compose my thoughts before I talked to with him again. It was really hard to think of him as a vamp, especially when he wasn't around for me to feel the vamp vibes he gave off.

"I had another dream about us," he continued. "I would appreciate you calling me back as soon as possible."

I picked up the phone. "Cormac?"

"When I said to call me back right away," he murmured, "I did not mean this quickly."

"I just came in and heard you on the answering machine," I told him defensively. I knew I should have let the machine pick it up. "What's up?"

"Your mother, Kate," he said softly.

"What about her?" Had he seen her? What had she said to him?

"What did she look like the last time you saw her?" he interjected.

"About five four," I told him, "dark hair, kind of shoulder length. She has a waifish type look. Why?"

"When did you last see her?" he asked.

"Last night, why?" He still wasn't answering my question and it was beginning to irritate me.

"I believe I saw your mother last night as well," he admitted.

"Really?" How had he recognized her? She looked a lot different now than she had twenty years ago.

"I believe I know her by another name," he commented.

"She has lots of those," I said wryly. When I was a child she had changed identities every time we moved, which was every couple of years.

"I will be flying out at the end of this evening," he told me.

"Oh." I couldn't think of anything else to say. He'd been gone for over nineteen years and only back in my life less than twenty-four hours, but I knew I'd miss him.

"I plan on returning as soon as possible," he added, "hopefully to pick you up and continue my quest."

I sighed and closed my eyes. "Well, we might have a problem with that," I told him.

"And that is?"

"I am unable to get an agreement for me to leave town."

"From?"

"The powers that be," I told him dryly.

"The Inquisition or Elvira?"

What did he think? "Elvira."

"What is her reason for not letting you go?"

"Gee," I said biting, "I'm their only source of information from the Inquisition in town and it took them two years to get me in after the last girl disappeared. That sounds like reason enough for me." Just because I didn't agree with her, didn't mean I couldn't see her reasoning.

"Perhaps I will speak with her," he said thoughtfully.

"Well I hope it helps," I said softly.

"I hope so too."

Silence burned down the wire, a silence I didn't know how to break. What did we really have to talk about, anyway?

"How is Corrine?" he asked.

That was one thing. "She's fine."

"You've spoken with her since we...?"

"Yes," I told him. "I saw her this morning. She's doing well." I didn't mention her dream or the book I planned to give to her that had once been Mac's. Cormac would have no use for it.

"That is good to hear." He sounded genuinely relieved.

"As much as I hate to admit it," I told him, "sometimes the mind tricks your kind plays can be beneficial." I couldn't stop the bitterness I felt from coming through in my voice.

"Yes well, they are not as foolproof as we would like them to be," he replied. "How well do you know Gillian?"

"Gillian Hollroyd?" How did he know her? "She's a friend. I don't know her well, but I know her. She drove Corrine home last night."

"Yes," he said softly. "Did you speak with Gillian about Corrine's particular... spooky-boo?"

"No, I spoke with Zora. Why do you ask?"

"Gillian knows that Corrine was given a different memory than the other girls," he stated bluntly.

"I see." That could prove dangerous in the long run.

"She knows that they were asked to give her a different memory."

"Well," I drawled, "I didn't think anyone would mind."

"If you wish to keep her separate from our unique lives, or lack thereof," he told me, "Something needs to be done about this. Gillian is not keeping the information too much a secret."

He was right, something had to be done and I had to be the one to do it. "I'll have to speak with her," I said quietly.

"Last evening I was visiting another friend of mine in town who called Gillian for some information," he explained. "Gillian pretty much told her everything except your name and my name."

He had friends in Salem? "I will definitely have to speak with her," I replied. "I've gone through too much in the last few years to jeopardize Corrine this late in the game."

"I feel the same."

That pissed me off. How in hell could he have any concept about how I felt? It wasn't like he'd spent the last ten years of his life sacrificing everything he believed in to protect her. "You feel the same."

"That is what I said," he replied calmly.

"Yeah." As if.

"Why is that so funny?"

I shook my head. "I don't want to argue, there's no need for it," I told him.

"I'm not arguing," he said. "I merely said that I agree with you that Corrine must be protected."

"You're right, she must be." And I would do everything in my power to make sure that happened, even if I had to kill this vamp from my past to do it.

"But however good that protection is," he asked, "should she also not be given a choice?"

"A choice for what?"

"Eliza, have you ever known me to be anything other than blunt?"

I chuckled despite the headache I felt coming on. "There was never a tactful bone in your body." It would be so easy to fall back into the relationship I'd once had with him, but I knew I couldn't do that. He was a vamp, and that changed everything.

"Then take no offense at this," he told me, "but you are a half-breed hunter. I was a mage, am a vampire. There are things in this world—"

"That she must be protected from at all costs," I said firmly, taking offense at his description of me despite the fact that it was true.

"The best protection is knowledge," he said. "If she knows what we are, what we were, then she can be given the choice to decide from there if she wishes to get involved or be made to forget."

I couldn't believe what he was suggesting. "Are you saying that we should just go to her and tell her everything?"

"No, not everything," he corrected. "You know her better than I, obviously."

"So what exactly is it that you want to tell her?" I asked, my tone wary.

"I believe she at least deserves the knowledge of us," he told me. "Not necessarily that we are her parents, but that you are something more than just her friend, and that I am and was something more than just your...."

I knew he was waiting for me to finish his statement, but what could I say? "Ghost from the past?"

"For lack of a better term."

I closed my eyes and leaned back against the wall. "There's all kinds of terms," I said sadly. Terms like late-fiancé, love of my life, father of my child, undead ex-lover.

"Do you resent the situation, Eliza?" he asked me softly.

Damn straight, I did. What right did he to come back from the dead, well, dead? I couldn't tell him that, so I said, "Well, its all rather sudden, isn't it? You've been dead for over nineteen years."

"As far as I knew, you had too." His voice was hard as if I'd offended him, but it wasn't like he even remembered me to begin with.

"It's a little hard to adjust to." Hell, it would have been for anyone, you know?

"You're not even going to make an effort?" His voice had gotten harder.

"I *am* making an effort," I told him, trying to keep the anger from my voice.

"To adjust to me being in your life," he reproached me, "not to me being gone."

"Even after all these years, you still know what buttons to push, don't you?" How could he be so much the same when he didn't even remember who he was?

"I pride myself on it," he said smugly.

"You always did," I told him sadly.

"As I said," he repeated, "knowledge is the best protection. And I've found that the best way to obtain knowledge is to be straightforward."

"Sometimes it's best to be blissfully ignorant," I bit out. I wish I'd been ignorant as a child growing up, maybe I'd never have learned about what made me different from everyone else. "Don't you think that I would have liked it a lot better growing up not knowing who my mother was?"

"Then you would not be who you are," he replied.

Duh, that was the point. "Exactly."

"You would have never met me."

"There is that," I admitted reluctantly. The only time in my life that I'd ever really been happy was with Mac in Baltimore.

"You would have never known Corrine."

"Yeah, but who's to say that I wouldn't have had that house with the white picket fence and the two car garage and the fucking dog?" I asked resentfully.

"Who's to say you wouldn't have died with two puncture wounds in your neck in some back alley?" he shot back.

Been there, done that. "I've lived through it before."

"Who's to say some crazed hunter would not have staked you or beheaded you or worse for what you've been believed to be?" he asked.

I didn't like him reminding me just how much of a freak I was. "Ok, lets not go down the fairy tale road, shall we?" I warned him. "Things happened the way that they've happened, and we've just got to deal."

"And how are you dealing?"

"Well, you know me," I said wryly. "I'm a survivor. I'll deal."

"No, Eliza, I don't know you," he replied angrily. Then his voice softened. "But I would like to, if you would let me."

"What do you expect from me?" I demanded.

"An equal opportunity," he replied calmly.

"Well I used to be an equal opportunity slayer," I told him dryly. At one time I'd killed every vamp I could find.

Apparently my words amused him. "If you ever feel the need to slay me, at least call me." I heard him take a breath, then he said, "Give me the opportunity to get to know you and give

yourself the opportunity to get to know me again. I think you'll find I am not so much different from the man you knew and loved."

"Yeah," I murmured, "other than not having a body temperature."

"That is just a physical state," he told me.

"A physical state that we each once swore we would end if it happened to the other," I told him bitterly.

"Do you honor my memory by ending my existence?" he asked, surprised.

"That's what you once asked me to do," I told him softly. "It's what I once asked of you."

"Well, baby," he said, his voice full of irritation, "things change."

"A lot has changed," I agreed. "You're obviously not the same man that I knew."

"Aren't I?"

"No, you're not," I snapped at him, then the sadness that always filled my soul crept into my voice. "And I'm certainly not the girl that watched you die."

"The more things change, the more they stay the same, Eliza," he said simply. "Will you not give me the opportunity to find out how much of the man you loved still remains within me?"

Could I? What was the worst that could happen? I could lose my heart all over again, and be left exactly where I was when he'd died. Still.... "Well, all things considered," I said slowly, "I suppose I owe you that."

"You suppose?" He was angry again, and I didn't understand why.

I let my own anger at the situation rise. "What do you want me to do," I demanded, "kiss your feet and—"

"Don't do me any favors," he told me harshly before hanging up on me.

I stared at the handset in amazement. Don't do *him* any favors? You know, it wasn't like I asked him to come back into my life. I hadn't gone looking for this old flame to burn down my entire world. It had taken me years to build walls around the emotions I'd once felt for Mac; I refused to let this Cormac tear them down in one fell swoop. How could I live with myself if I did? I had to remind myself that he'd changed, that the Mac I once knew no longer existed. Dougal had torn his life from him and with it my life as well.

I sat the phone down carefully on its cradle, knowing that if I didn't get a handle on myself I would break it and a few more things as well. I turned and leaned against the wall. The sobs that shook my body took me totally by surprise. I sank to the floor and wrapped my arms around my knees.

I don't know how long I lost myself to my grief, but eventually I realized that the phone was ringing. Reluctantly I picked it up and waited, struggling to control my breathing and hide my tears.

It was Kate. "Dear, what's wrong?" she asked. To her credit, she actually sounded like she cared. When I didn't answer, she added, "Is it Cormac again?"

I didn't have a lie ready, so I told her the truth. "He called me."

"What did he want?"

"I wish I knew," I whispered. "I wish to God I knew." I closed my eyes and felt tears seep from between the lids again.

"You're not handling this well, dear, are you?" Trust my mother to state the obvious.

I laughed hoarsely. "Not really. He's not the man he used to be."

"He's Kindred," she said gently.

"Don't you think I know that," I replied bitterly. I could feel it every time he was close to me like an itch at the base of my spine. He felt like every other vamp I'd ever been close to, even Kate.

"Would you prefer he left you alone?"

"I don't know, Kate," I told her. "I think I owe him the opportunity to learn about his past. I can't imagine what it's been like for him not remembering anything."

"You don't owe him anything," she replied in a cold voice. "He doesn't even remember you."

"Maybe he'll remember and maybe he won't, but we loved each other once." I sighed deeply. "He's going to talk to the prince about letting me go with him. Do you think she'll relent?"

"Unfortunately, I do," Kate sighed.

"Great," I said, laughing again until my breath caught on a sob. I didn't know how to feel about spending time with the new and improved Cormac. I did know the potential for a major heartbreak was there.

"Just calm down," Kate soothed.

"Who'll look after Corrine while I'm gone?" I asked. The thought of my daughter helped me regain control of myself.

"We'll take care of it."

"The clan," I muttered resentfully. "I'm sure you will." The Tremere knew that if anything happened to Corrine, they would never be able to hold me to the contract. The reminder of their hold over me pissed me off.

Why was I spilling my guts to Kate anyway? She'd just use everything I said against me.

"I'll call you later," she said softly.

"I'm going back to St. Stephens," I replied coldly. "Don't bother." I hung up before she could say anything else.

I got up and went into the kitchen where I had left my dinner when I'd heard Cormac's voice on the answering machine. I'd been hungry when I stopped to buy the food, but now even the smell nauseated me. I threw the bags into the garbage without looking at it.

In the bathroom I ran cold water and splashed it over my face. I found that I couldn't even look myself in the eye, but that didn't come as a surprise to me. There had been a lot of times in my life during the last ten years when I couldn't face my own conscience. I turned away and went back to the living room intending to lose myself in working out. I was interrupted when the phone rang yet again.

I hesitated before answering, then remembered Cormac's sarcastic remark about the answering machine's message. Reluctantly, I picked up the phone.

"Hello." I didn't trust my voice not to betray my emotions, so I told myself to keep my words to a minimum.

It was Cormac. "Eliza, I have spoken with the prince. She has given you her blessing to leave the city."

Yay. "When?"

"As soon as I'm prepared," he told me. "She has given you two weeks."

Just what I wanted, two weeks with my undead ex-lover. "All right."

"She asks only that we keep her apprised of our status."

I was surprised at her generosity, but then from what I had seen I had to admit that Elvira was a fair but stern ruler of the blood-sucking fiends in Salem. "Fine."

He paused for a moment, then asked, "Is something wrong?"

I closed my eyes. "No," I replied. What could possibly be wrong? Except, of course, everything.

"Funny," he drawled, "your mother seems to think so."

"My mother?" What did she have to do with this?

"Your mother," he repeated. "Kate, Prudence, whatever she's calling herself."

Oh. "You've spoken with her."

"Yes," he told me, "just now."

I knew Kate pretty good and if he'd just talked to her, he must have gotten an earful. Kate had never liked Mac, she'd always believed he would break my heart. I guess in the end she'd been right.

"She seems rather against you accompanying me," he added when I didn't reply.

"Is she?" That didn't surprise me.

"Quite."

I smiled sadly. "She always did want to have a say in what I was doing."

"Are you going to let her control you?" How in hell could he have no memory of his past and say exactly the same thing now that he'd said to me twenty years ago?

"Have I ever let that woman control me?" I asked harshly.

"I don't know," he replied in the same tone, "or rather I don't remember. Have you?"

"No." In fact, back when I'd had free will I'd always done the opposite of what she'd wanted me to do.

"I didn't think so."

Awkward silence filled the line. What did we have to say to each other, after all? He didn't remember me, and I remembered him all too well.

"So then I can count on you when I return?" he asked several moments later.

"When—" my voice broke and I had to clear my throat before I could continue. "When will you return?"

"I will be leaving this evening," he reminded me. "Elvira has given me a name, and I have the number to the chantry in Berlin. I believe that would be our best start. As such I need only to wrap up my personal business and find fare back."

I tried to ignore the pain in my heart at the news he was leaving. "Aren't all vamps rolling in dough?" I asked sarcastically.

"No," he said simply. "Some of us live by the ink on our fingers."

I thought of the bounty money I'd gotten over the years and the hundreds of thousands of dollars the Tremere had given Corrine. "Or the blood on our hands."

"That too," he agreed.

"So when did you say you'd be returning?" I asked. "I need to make my excuses."

"Well, how quickly can you be ready?"

"I can be ready in the time it would take for you to fly to California and return," I assured him. "When do you need me ready?"

"Let us say three days," he suggested. "I will call before I return."

"I'll be ready."

"Thank you."

I leaned my head against the wall as the full impact of the next two weeks hit me. How could I feel still this way about him? That it was Mac didn't change things, he was still a vamp. It was ironic that he was now one of the monsters that had taken my lover from me in the first place.

He sighed heavily. "What is wrong, Eliza?" His voice was soft, sounding a lot like he had been human.

Like I was going to share with this fiend. "Nothing," I told him firmly.

"Where are you?" he asked.

"I'm here."

"And here is?"

"In Salem." I glanced around the room I was in and saw the worn carpeting, the lack of furniture, the stained walls. Normally I didn't care what the place looked like, but the thought of him seeing my apartment made me feel ashamed of it.

"No shit," he barked.

"It's not polite to growl," I told him coolly.

"Where are you?" he demanded.

"In the apartment I keep." I wouldn't exactly call it home.

He sighed again, apparently getting the message that I didn't want to see him tonight. "I am planning on going to see Corrine before I leave the city," he told me. "I will be doing it shortly, that way I can conduct my other business later."

"She'll like that," I said softly.

"I hope so."

Again I didn't know what to say to him. I wanted to tell him about Corrine, about her first steps, her first day of school, her high school graduation. "She—" How could I describe her life to him? In the end, I didn't even try. "She's a good kid," was all I said.

He let that sink in for a few minutes, then asked, "Have you given any more thought to what we discussed earlier?"

I figured he was talking about us getting to know each other again, and that was something I'd tried very hard not to think about. "I discussed it with Kate."

"I did not ask if you discussed it with your mother," he said harshly. "I asked if you had given it any more thought."

Even with his lack of memory he still didn't like Kate. I wondered if his hatred of her was instinctive. "A little," I said finally.

"And?"

"What do you want from me?" I demanded. I thought I'd been very tolerant of him and his amnesia, considering what he was. Why was he pushing me? Did he want me to put a stake through his heart?

"What do you want from me?" he shot back.

"Is that even relevant?" I'd never get what I wanted now that he was a vamp and I was bound by my contract.

"If we are to spend the next two weeks together," he explained, "I prefer to have all the playing cards on the table."

He had a point. "Well, I asked first," I said defensively.

"I want your assistance, your understanding, your help," he told me, "and a chance for me to get to know you again and for you to get to know me again." When I didn't reply, he prompted, "I've answered your question."

"What I want from you I can never have." I whispered before I could stop myself. Even if he weren't a vamp, I had obligations that didn't leave much room for a lover in my life.

"And that is?"

I shook my head not caring that he couldn't see it. "It's irrelevant. What I want—"

"No it's not, Eliza," he insisted.

I took a slow deep breath to calm down a little before I continued. "I will make the effort for us to get to know each other," I said firmly, "but don't expect me to act as if the last nineteen years haven't happened. A lot has changed."

"As I said, baby," he replied coolly, "things change. I do not expect you to act as if the last nineteen have not happened, but things have changed. I am not the same person you knew, and I may never be. But I am who I am. It is up to you to decide what you wish to make of that."

"Well, I believe we'll have two weeks to find out, won't we?" I said wryly. At one time I would have been thrilled to have Mac back in my life regardless of what he was. Now I wasn't so sure.

"Yes," he agreed. "Oh, Brenda gave me a message for you."

"Oh, really?"

"She needs to speak with you about travel arrangements," he told me.

"Lovely," I murmured.

"Is there a problem?"

"Well," I said slowly, "I've had a few dealings with her in the last few weeks, I'm afraid she doesn't like me very much."

"Brenda does not like me either," he admitted. "Welcome to the family."

"Yeah." His words cut me to the bone. If we hadn't been attacked that night, the three of us would have been a real family all these years. "I'll call her," I told him in a low voice.

"Thank you," he replied. "I will call again when I have landed in LA."

"Yes," I said, my heart jumping at the knowledge that I'd hear from him soon. "I'll change my answering machine."

"Thank you."

He seemed honestly grateful for my help; it made me feel guilty about not wanting to go with him. "I'll be ready for you," I told him.

"I hope so." He hung up the phone without waiting for my reply. It reminded of how little he'd changed.

I don't know how long I had stared at the phone when I shook myself and reached for it again. I called Brenda, but she immediately asked me to wait a minute. I could hear muffled conversation in the background while I waited impatiently for her to return.

"Welcome to Thompson Travel, how can I help you?" she said dryly when she came back to the phone.

"Thompson Travel?" I asked in surprise. "What, you got a sideline going on?"

"Well no," she told me, "but apparently you do. I need some information for travel arrangements from you. I was just speaking to Cormac Brennan and apparently you will be travelling to Europe with him?"

"Why should I not be surprised that you're involved?" She seemed to have her fingers in everything.

"You'll be surprised at the amount of information somebody needs when they're footing the bill," she murmured.

After a moment of stunned silence, I asked, "How did you get roped into that?"

"Let's just say that the knowledge he may come up with may be beneficial to my sister," she said softly, "so it is important to me that he gets there. I need to know your passport number."

"Passport number?" Passports have numbers? I'd never even seen one to know. "I don't have a passport," I admitted.

"Oh great," she mumbled. "I'll need you to be available for a photo, then. Be at Caine Security in the morning and we'll get that taken care of."

"That's not a problem, I can do that," I said. "I'll call them in the morning for the time and I'll make it, somehow." I didn't know how I would get away from St. Stephen's, but I would find a way.

"If you need a car, I'll send one," she told me.

"No, that's not the problem." I didn't explain.

"Perhaps Rafe can help you if it comes down to that," she suggested.

"Your boy-toy?" Her ghoul. Like I wanted his help.

"What does that have to do with anything?" she asked.

"I'll find my own ride, thank you." I stayed as far away from the Kindred ghouls as I possibly could. I had learned from Linda just how very cruel ghouls could be.

"So you will be there in the morning and they will take care of things," she confirmed.

"Fine," I replied.

When she said goodbye I hung the phone up and with one last glance around the nearly bare apartment I left, locking the door behind me. I drove back to St. Stephen's not really paying attention to my surroundings. When I got there, Gerome was waiting.

"Want to head down to The Coven?" he asked. It was a coffee shop that all of us at St. Stephen's frequented because it was pretty much clear of vamps and werewolves.

"I'm not really in the mood, Gerome," I told him. "I need to talk to Charity, anyway."

"I'll wait," he replied as I walked past him.

I knocked on Charity's office door, and at her call I went in. Charity was in her mid-forties, and it amused me that I was older than she was but looked much younger. It hit me suddenly that I wouldn't be of use to the Tremere for much longer, sooner or later someone was bound to notice that I wasn't getting any older.

"What can I do for you, Eliza?" Charity asked me. Charity was her name, but not her nature. She was a hard, cold woman, and she hated all preternatural creatures to an extreme.

"I need to take a couple of weeks off," I told her. "I have a family emergency that just came up and I can't get out of it."

"I wasn't aware you had family, dear," she murmured, watching my face intently.

My expression didn't change. "It's a cousin I thought was dead, Charity," I said calmly. "He needs... tending to. It's a personal matter."

"I see." She opened her planner and looked down at it through her reading glasses. "And when did you plan on leaving?"

"I'm not sure," I admitted. "I'm waiting for additional information, but I should have it by the middle of next week."

"Personal matters of this sort are not usually condoned by the Society, Eliza," she reminded me.

I hid a sigh of relief that she'd assumed I would be hunting my embraced cousin. "I have always done my best for the Society, Charity," I reminded her. "I bring in information that leads to kills, and I am always among the first to draw blood. Would you deny me the right to bring this matter to an end?"

She gave me a small smile. "It is because of your skill that I worry about your return, dear."

"I can promise you that I will return," I told her. My contract with the Tremere demanded it.

"You can promise all you like, Eliza," she said. "That does not mean you will return."

I smiled grimly. "I will return," I repeated. I haven't milked the Tremere out of enough money yet to set Corrine up for life. Plus if I died, her safety was no longer guaranteed.

She studied the certainty on my face for several minutes before nodding. "You will have two weeks starting sundown on Tuesday," she finally replied. "However, there are a few things I'd like you to do for me before you go."

I listened in alarm as she detailed numerous projects she wanted me to check into or finish before Tuesday night. When she was done, I gave a mental shrug and told myself that at least I'd be too busy to dwell on Cormac being back in my life.

When I rejoined Gerome, I agreed to go to The Coven with him only because one of the 'projects' she wanted me to check on worked there. We went out to his car and he drove toward the coffee shop. A few blocks away from St. Stephens, I was shocked to see Cormac walking down the sidewalk.

Gerome didn't seem to notice him, but I sure did. I stared at him in disbelief as we drove by, and he just kept walking as if oblivious to us. He had the old Mac's audacity, I had to give him that. No other vamp I knew had the balls to walk down the same street St. Stephen's was on. I shook my head and turned my attention to the hunt.

I was so busy the next two days that I almost missed my standing Sunday night dinner with Corrine. I had to run to my apartment to get Mac's book for her, but because I was running late, I didn't stop to check my messages. I pulled the van into the parking lot of her building a few minutes after seven, more than half an hour late.

"I was worried that you weren't going to make it," she told me when she greeted me at the door. "I called your apartment, but obviously you weren't there."

"I came as soon as I could," I replied, taking off my jacket and laying it on top of the bag I'd brought in with me. "I got tied up."

We sat down to dinner and chatted through it. Corrine asked me about Cormac, but I wasn't sure what to tell her. In the end, I said only that we'd known each other a long time ago. She didn't press me for information, I think she was used to my evasive answers to her questions about my past.

The food was very good, Corrine is an excellent cook, quite unlike myself. I didn't eat much of it only because I couldn't seem to find my appetite. When I thought about it, I realized that I hadn't eaten all day. I tried to make the effort to eat, but couldn't force much of it down. Corrine watched me play with my food, but surprisingly didn't say a word.

Later, I retrieved the bag and asked her to sit on the couch with me. "Luv," I began carefully, "do you remember what we talked about the other day?"

"My dreams?" she asked.

"Yes." I smiled and took the large book out of the bag. I sat it on the low table in front of us and touched the leather cover reverently. "This is a very old book," I told her. "It belonged to a close friend of mine. I'd like you to have it, luv. It may help you understand your dreams better."

She pulled the book closer to her carefully opened the cover. "The True Power Within," she read. "This must be very old, the pages are handwritten!"

"It is." Mac's family had passed this book down through the generations to each Awakening mage. I felt it was fitting that Corrine have it now.

"Whose was it, Eliza?" she asked, her eyes still on the book.

"Just a friend. He used to study it at night. He always burned a yellow candle when he read it," I continued with a sad smile, pulling a tall thick yellow candle from the bag. "He said that yellow was a color of power and memory, and it helped him to concentrate." I could barely stop my voice from shaking and I cleared my throat. "I think he would be happy that I've given it to you."

She gave me a quick hug and went to find a match to light the candle. I stared at the book while she was gone, remembering the nights when Mac had studied the volume, the nights we'd spent wrapped in each other's arms.

"Eliza?"

Corrine's voice cut through my memories and I looked up at her.

"Are you all right?" she asked softly.

"Yeah," I said, shaking my head to clear it. "Look, I've got to go. I have a few things I have to do tonight."

"You seem kind of down," she commented. "Are you sure there's no problem?"

I smiled and patted her hand. "I'm fine, luv. I just have a few things on my mind tonight." I stood. "Enjoy the book, I think it will help you. If it doesn't, let me know, I might know someone else who can answer your questions."

"Do you have to go so soon?" she asked. It was barely eight-thirty, and usually I stayed until almost ten.

"Yeah," I told her. "I have some things to do for St. Stephen's tonight. I'm going out of town for a couple of weeks, and I have to finish some projects before I go."

"Where are you going?"

"A friend asked me to return something to him," I said evasively. "I'll be missing our dinners, luv, but I'll call you, promise."

"Send me a post card?" she asked with a smile. I had gone out of town many times before; my erratic absences were another thing she was used to.

A few minutes later we hugged and said our good nights. Soon I was back on assignment, hunting and killing supernatural creatures so that I could help my undead ex-lover find his memory. Something felt very wrong about even thinking that way, so I tried to put Cormac out of my mind and concentrated on my work.

Monday I spent in Gloucester checking into rumors of women who flew around the town at night. One of the other girls went with me, and we spent the entire day as well as most of the night following that particular wild goose chase.

I called Kate from a pay phone to check in while Aislynn was in the restroom. To say that she was very upset that I hadn't called earlier was putting it mildly. She warned me that I had to stay in touch, something I already knew. She didn't like that I was going to leave town with Cormac for two weeks, but I ignored her tirade and hung up on her.

Aislynn and I returned to St. Stephen's around three that morning and fell into bed and an exhausted sleep that didn't last nearly long enough. I woke at the crack of dawn wondering if Cormac had returned to Salem. I managed to eat half a piece of toast before leaving the church.

Tuesday afternoon found me with Gerome at one of the local bookstores. We were sitting in the café sipping coffee when a tall muscular man walked in. I could tell right away he was a werewolf, but it took Gerome several minutes before he realized the fact.

We followed the guy when he left, walking east on the main strip. The wolf boy turned in to one of the parks, and Gerome insisted that the two of us could take him. I hate hunting Garou, but didn't really have a choice if I wanted to keep my cover at St. Stephen's.

Ten minutes later I was wishing I'd insisted on calling for back up. We managed to take care of the situation, but just barely. Fortunately for me, I'd learned a long time ago how to fight Garou. Unfortunately for Gerome, he was unconscious at the end and didn't get to see the show.

Another unfortunate result of the battle with the werewolf was that he'd caught me with his claws. The blow had snapped the necklace I always wore, the one with my engagement ring on it. It took me a long time to find the ring and by the time I did I was tired and sore.

As the sun set, I pulled into the parking lot behind St. Stephen's and left Gerome in the back of his car. He wasn't hurt too badly, just enough to keep him unconscious for another hour or so. It was just as well; I probably would have decked him if he'd woken up. I got into the van and left without going inside, my bag was already in the back. I drove to the apartment to sew myself up and take a shower.

STAKES AND AGONY

TELL ME WHAT YOU'VE COME FOR
MOVING LIKE A HUNTER THROUGH MY BACK DOOR
LEAVING THE PERFUME OF ALL YOU ADORE
TO DIE NAMELESS ON MY FLOOR
WILD - POE

I climbed the rickety stairs to my apartment carefully. I locked the door behind me and ripped off my ruined shirt, flinging it onto the counter near the sink. Grabbing a kitchen towel that was so worn that it was nearly a rag I pressed it against the wound on my shoulder. It wasn't bleeding very much anymore, but I wanted to stop it before I tried sewing the cut up.

Feeling that I needed some music to match my black mood, I paused at the radio on my way into the bathroom to put on something with depressing lyrics. I pulled the alcohol, needle and thread from the nearly empty medicine cabinet above the sink and cleaned out the wound. Gritting my teeth, I pulled the edges of the wound together and started to sew. I left the water running so that I could wash the blood away from the gash as I went.

After only two stitches, I sensed a change in the apartment. I cocked my head to listen and reached for the knife at my hip. Not turning off the faucet, I stepped behind the door and waited for some sign of the intruder's identity. The tingling at the base of my spine told me that it was a vamp, but the only stake in the room was on the other side of the open door. All I had was a silver knife; I had to be very careful if I wanted to live through the next few minutes.

A few minutes later the radio fell silent. I heard a footstep, and tried to slow my breathing. The intruder approached the door and pushed slowly open. I lifted my leg and kicked the door hard. It slammed against the vamp and drove him back into the bedroom.

Before I could go for the stake, I heard Cormac call my name.

"Son of a bitch," I murmured angrily, but all of the tension ran out of me. Cormac may be a blood-sucking fiend, but I didn't think he was there to kill me. I stepped back to the sink and sat the knife down on its edge. I turned the water off and wiped my sweaty hands on a clean corner of the blood soaked towel lying there.

"Are you all right?" Cormac asked from the bedroom.

"What do you care?" I asked harshly, pissed that he'd found my apartment and invaded the one place I'd thought safe from intrusion. "I'm a half-breed hunter, remember? I'm just your ticket to getting your memory back, and don't think I don't know that."

I heard him step toward the door of the bathroom. "May I help you?"

"Can you sew?" I barked harshly. My body was prepped with adrenaline for a fight, and I was having a difficult time calming down from the scare he'd given me.

"Yes." His voice was still calm and it irritated the hell out of me.

I didn't know if I could handle him touching me with his cold Kindred hands. "I've got it."

The door behind me swung open and I could see him behind me in the mirror. I glanced at my reflection and had to stop myself from wincing. My hair was pulled back carelessly at the nape of my neck, and there were dark circles under my eyes. I looked like I hadn't been eating or sleeping, probably because I wasn't doing much of either one. I was too pissed at the time to be worried about being half-naked in front of him.

I turned to look at him. "What do you want?" I demanded.

"To help you," he replied.

I didn't like the sincerity I saw in his eyes. Did he really care what happened to me? Monsters don't care about half-breeds or hunters and he'd said it himself, I was both.

I turned back to the sink and picked up the needle and thread that still hung from my skin. I pulled the sides of the wound together but when I tried to insert the needle in my flesh, I found that my hand was shaking too badly for me to continue. I dropped the needle and put my hands on both sides of the sink, bowing my head in an effort to control myself. If the bastard had hit me with a knife instead of his claws, I could have healed it, but this kind of wound had to heal the hard way.

"May I try?" Cormac asked.

I stiffened and looked at him in the mirror. He was standing right behind me. "I guess," I said reluctantly, knowing that the wound had to be taken care of soon but not sure if I'd be able to do it myself. Picking the needle back up, I turned around and handed it to him. He took it in silence and proceeded to gently and carefully stitch the wound closed.

The needle burned where it pierced my skin, feeling a lot like fangs sinking into my flesh. The coldness of his fingers reminded me of the dungeon in Burlington and it took every ounce of will I had to stand still until he was finished and had snipped the loose thread. By the time he was done I had thirteen stitches in my shoulder.

I grabbed the bloody towel and wiped futilely at the blood on my chest as I walked past him into the bedroom. Somehow I hoped the towel would wipe away the memory of his hands on me too, but it didn't. I went to the closet and took out a clean, worn towel, then returned to the bathroom. Cormac shadowed my steps.

"Did you know the Garou?" he asked as I rinsed out the bloody kitchen towel.

"No," I said, impressed by the calmness of my voice, "he just interrupted my date." I didn't ask how he knew a werewolf had caused my wound; Tremere are famous for their blood magic, and he'd certainly touched my blood while he was sewing me up.

I didn't expect him to chuckle at my comment, but he did. "So a strange werewolf just attacked you?"

I glanced at him in the mirror. "I wouldn't put it that way."

"What way would you put it?"

"Gerome did start it," I admitted as I began cleaning the blood from my upper body.

Cormac stood to one side and watched me. "And Gerome is?"

"He works at St. Stephen's."

"A hunter," he said softly.

"Isn't that what I said?" I tried to be careful around the wound, but no matter how careful I was, it hurt.

"The werewolf," Cormac asked, "how did Gerome start this?"

I winced. "I believe when you walk up to someone and say 'You fucking dog, die,' it tends to piss most Garou off," I told him wryly.

"And how many pieces is Gerome in now?" he asked with a small smile.

"Oh, he's fine," I said, although he wouldn't be when I got my hands on him again. Taunting a Garou was one of the two most stupid things I could think of. Being alone and half-naked with my undead ex-lover was the other. I threw the bloody towel in the sink and reached for the clean one.

"Not for long," Cormac murmured.

I stopped and turned to him, giving him a warning look. "Gerome is fine," I told him firmly, "and will continue to be fine. You will not in any way jeopardize my standing at St. Stephen's." I turned back to the sink and carefully dried my skin. "The Garou is not fine, but he kinda wrecked my shirt, I had to do something," I added quietly. I didn't mention the broken necklace or the fact that it had taken me nearly an hour to find the ring.

"What happened to the Garou?"

"You didn't ask how many pieces he was in," I told him seriously.

I turned and went back into the bedroom, noticing for the first time how my apartment must look to him. The mattress that was my bed lay on the floor by the wall, covered only by a sheet and an old blanket. The pillow didn't entirely hide the large knife I kept beneath it. A loaded crossbow sat propped against the wall within easy reach of the mattress.

The only other items in the room were my radio and the torn poster of Janice Joplin that Kate had somehow salvaged from the ruins of our apartment in Baltimore. I shrugged off the shame I was surprised to feel at my surroundings; what did it matter to him how I lived? I was just a half-breed hunter, wasn't I?

I stopped abruptly on my way to the closet when Cormac took out his jacket and held it out to me. The gesture touched me, but I refused to let myself warm to him. I told myself that he was a monster, that he was only being nice to me to get his memory back.

"I was just going to grab a shirt," I told him.

"Very well," he said as I reached for a gray tee shirt in the closet. "So how many pieces is the Garou in?"

"Three or four, I think," I replied with a shrug. It had taken that much just to kill him.

"Was he one of the city's Garou?" he asked as I pulled the shirt carefully over my head.

I was irritated at his questions, until I remembered that he knew some of Salem's Garou. "No," I assured him. "I'd never seen him before. If he were one of the city's, I wouldn't have hacked him to pieces. Of course, he wouldn't have gotten me, either."

"What tribe?"

"I didn't ask," I replied coolly as I finally got the shirt pulled down. I looked at him. "What do you want?"

"I was checking on you," he told me.

I was surprised. "Checking on me?"

"Some of us are concerned as to your well being," he added.

I had noticed that the straps holding his weapons in his figure-eight holster were undone. "Why would that be?"

"Have you checked your answering machine lately?"

Vaguely I remembered seeing the message light blinking earlier, but I hadn't stopped to listen to them. "Well, I was in a hurry when I came in," I reminded him. "I thought that taking care of a bleeding wound was a little more important."

"For the last five days, Eliza?" He was irritated with me, but I'd been that with him since I'd felt the vamp in my apartment.

"I haven't been here," I said abruptly. I walked into the living room and over to the rusted TV tray that held my phone and answering machine. I forced myself not to look around at the room's other furnishings: the low table that I'd been sharpening stakes at a few days ago, the taped beanbag chair that was the only other piece of furniture in the room, or the padded pole I used to work out on.

The machine showed that I had thirteen messages. The first one was from Cormac.

"I will be leaving town tonight," his voice rang out in the bare room. "I will call you when I arrive in Los Angeles. Have fun at dinner tomorrow night." How had he known about that?

"I was just checking in on you to make sure everything's okay, dear," Kate's message told me. "Give me a call."

"Hi. I just wanted to make sure that you'd be at dinner tonight, I haven't heard from you. Give me a call." Corrine's voice made me smile.

Another message from Cormac. "I am in Los Angeles and hope to be returning to Salem in three or four nights. Did you enjoy your dinner?"

There were two messages in succession from Kate, more or less ordering me to call her. I ignored them.

"Eliza," Corrine's voice pleaded jokingly. "Please give me a call, I want to make sure you're eating." I winced at that one; I knew I should have made more of an effort to eat on Sunday.

"I have just spoken with your mother," Cormac said on his third message. "Please call me as soon as possible."

"Eliza, it's very important that you call me. I know you're angry with me, but it's about Cormac. Call me right away." Kate sounded very upset, she must have called right after Cormac.

The tenth message was another from Corrine. "Eliza, is there something wrong? Please call me."

When I heard Cormac's voice on the eleventh message, I glanced at him. "I'm at Corrine's and I need to talk to you. Call me."

The last two messages were from Kate, alternately ordering and begging me to call her. When the messages were done playing, I hit the erase button.

"Have you talked to Kate in the last few nights?" Cormac asked softly.

"Why?" I retorted.

"Have you?" His took on a harder tone, but I didn't heed the warning.

"Why do you want to know?"

"Yes or no, please," he said firmly, his eyes hard.

I looked away. "I talked to her last night very briefly."

"And?"

"And what?" I asked hotly. "You want a verbatim on the conversation?"

"It would be nice," he told me.

"You're not getting it, sorry," I replied. I turned and walked across the room toward the low table and away from him.

"I suppose I was the main subject," he commented.

"Do you think the world revolves around you?" I scoffed.

"No, but it seems Prudence's world does," he said carefully, watching me for my reaction.

I turned to look at him, confused; if he didn't remember me, how did he know that name? "Prudence's world?"

"Yes," he replied. "That is the name your mother is using."

"Oh, is she using that one?" I pretended unconcern, but in reality I was surprised. What was she doing using my middle name?

"Yes. She has been for at least the past two years," he continued. I could tell from his stance that he even talking about Kate bothered him. "I know this, because I've met her since I was embraced."

I refused to meet his gaze and almost unconsciously bent to pick up one of the stakes that littered the table's surface. I sat down in the beanbag only because I wasn't sure I could keep my feet. Kate hadn't told me that she'd seen him, only that she'd known he was Kindred.

"Your mother knew I was embraced," he told me.

"I know that," I said softly, turning the stake slowly in my hands. A part of me wanted to attack Cormac, to kill him as we'd promised each other so long ago. But for whatever reason, I couldn't bring myself to do it, and I hated myself for that weakness.

"And she told you when?"

"Friday night."

"I believe your mother also knew what was to happen to me," he added.

My eyes shot to his face and my hands stilled on the stake. "Why do you say that?" If Kate had known what they had planned to do to us and not stopped them I would cut her head from her body and never lose a minute of sleep over it.

"In my dream which I saw your mother," he said slowly. "I saw us and the first time I met your mother."

I remembered the morning very clearly. "Could you stop calling her that?"

"Who," he asked, "your mother?"

I closed my eyes. "Please," I whispered. I hated to beg, but I hated hearing Kate called my mother even more.

"Do you remember the conversation when she came to you in the café?" he asked me. "The one I interrupted?"

"In Baltimore," I clarified, remembering. "A few weeks before you died."

"What was she begging you for that you would not listen to?" he inquired.

"What she always begs me for," I told him in a hard voice. "Time. Courtesy she calls it. As if. I still don't know how she tracked me down." I couldn't stop my hands from twirling the stake I held. "Why, what did you see in your dream?"

"I saw that day," he told me. "Why were you afraid for me?"

Abruptly I threw the stake across the room where it embedded in the wall a foot from his head. I hated that this monster remembered our life together. I'd wanted to throw the stake at him, to strike at his heart, but my hand had ignored my will. I comforted myself by knowing that if he really remembered the day he was talking about, he'd know why I'd been afraid.

"Does it matter?" I demanded angrily, standing in a single fluid movement. "That was a long time ago."

"You knew something was going to happen to me," he accused.

"No," I told him, angry and hurt that he would even think that. "I did not know something was going to happen to you." Didn't he know how much I'd loved him? How much it had killed me to watch him die? But then again I guess there was no way he could have known.

"Why were you afraid for me?"

To my relief, it was clear that he didn't remember the entire events of that day, and I wasn't about to fill him in. "Because I didn't want something to happen to you and every time she's around there's trouble."

"And this time when you told me to meet you at your apartment, two weeks later I was abducted," he said coldly. "She knew where I would be."

I shook my head. "We had moved into a new apartment a week before that night," I told him. The apartment we had been attacked in, that he'd died in.

"Prudence has known nearly my every move since she met me two years ago," he growled. "She's watching me now, who is to say she wasn't watching me then? As I'm sure you've gleaned from her, she has no good thoughts toward me. She wishes me dead now, who is to say she did not wish me dead then?"

I crossed my arms and looked at him calmly, almost amused at his words. "Are you trying to make me hate her?" I asked in an even voice.

"She never approved of our relationship, Eliza," he reminded me.

"Cause if you're trying for that," I continued, my voice growing hard as granite, "you're years too late."

"I'm trying to open your eyes," he replied coolly.

"I know exactly what that woman is," I bit out.

"Then why do you put up with her?"

I could see that he really didn't understand. I sighed heavily and turned away from the accusation in his gaze. "I don't have a choice," I told him in a tired voice. "It's part of the agreement."

"And that agreement is?"

His question lit the fire of my anger yet again. "None of your damn business," I shot back. "What do you want?"

I watched something in his eyes die. "Nothing," he said simply. Without another word, he turned and walked toward the now empty doorway of the apartment. The door was lying on top of the broken table on the floor.

"You want to pick up the door on the way out?" I yelled after him, unwilling to admit the pain I felt at the look on his face. He didn't reply, just continued out of the apartment and down the steps.

I stalked to the bedroom and turned the music back on before I allowed myself to think about what had just happened. Why hadn't I staked him? Why hadn't I fulfilled the vow we'd made to each other twenty years ago?

Despite myself, I walked to the window and looked down into the parking lot. Cormac stood next to a dark sedan talking on a cell phone and looking up at me. I moved away quickly only to pace the room restlessly.

I knew I should go after him, kill him for the monster he was. But even more compelling than that was the need I felt to call him back, to beg him for another chance. I didn't understand how I could feel that way toward him when he was a vamp now. Yes, I had loved him once, but didn't that love now require that I put him out of his misery? Or did I simply want to make things easier for myself by getting him out of my life before I found out how much I still loved him?

That last thought made me stop and think. As much as I hated to admit it, it was wicked obvious that I still cared for him. I guess it didn't matter that he was a monster, I could see enough of the Mac I'd loved in him to stop me from killing him.

I went back to the window and stood staring down at him, thinking about what my life had been like since I had watched him die. Suddenly I remembered some of the things that Kate

had returned to me on our trip to Richmond, the drum and the shirt that had once been Mac's. When I saw Cormac put away his phone, I turned the radio off and opened the window.

"Before you go running off into the sunrise," I called down to him, "I've got a couple of things up here of yours if you want them."

"Like?" he replied coldly.

"Things Kate pulled out of the apartment," I replied. "Either you want them or you don't."

"What are they?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Just a couple things, a drum, a shirt." He was already making me regret the offer. "Look, do you want them or not?"

When he started walking slowly toward the steps, I closed the window and went to the closet, quickly pulling out the box and taking it to the table in the living room. I sat it down and took the lid off and tossed it carelessly on the table. I lifted out the small pile of construction paper pictures that Corrine had given me over the years and sat it beside the box, along with the small bowl of rose petals I had saved from Corrine's childhood.

I turned away from the memories these things washed over me and walked to the window, where I watched him in the reflection as he entered the apartment and went over to the box. He looked down at it for a moment, then picked up the shirt and flung it over his shoulder. Carefully, he picked up the broken drum.

"Are these mine as well?" he asked, his voice cold and hard.

I turned and looked at the other things I'd put on the table. "No," I said softly. "Those are from Corrine. You can look at them if you want," I offered past the lump in my throat.

He ignored the offer. "Is this all?"

"Well, there was a book," I told him, "but I gave it to Corrine."

"Yes, I know," he said, his voice finally softening. "She is a mage."

I nodded. "I suspected."

He turned and walked toward the kitchen, leaving me there, aching and alone.

"You might be interested in looking at the photo album as well," I called after him, "before you walk."

"Why?"

"Pictures of Corrine," I said simply. I knew she affected him deeply and hoped that he would stay for his daughter, if nothing else.

"The memories I have are painful enough," he told me. "Goodbye, Eliza."

I couldn't watch him walk out of my life like that; it was almost more horrible than watching him die. I turned toward the wall and leaned against it, covering my mouth with my hand to try and stop the sob that shook me. I didn't want him to hear me; I didn't want him to stay only out of pity. I wished I could kill him, but I knew deep down that I would never be able to.

"Why do you hide your feelings?" I heard him ask from the doorway.

I straightened and slammed my fist against the window frame. It rocked from the impact and I used the pain I felt to control my tears. "It's never done me any good to express myself," I told him in a wavering voice. It was the best I could manage. "The one person I could talk to...." I didn't have to say that he was lost to me.

"I'm sorry you feel that way," he replied softly.

When he didn't say anything more, I turned my head but refused to look directly at the doorway. I didn't want to know if he'd left. I felt a tear burn a course down my cheek but

didn't care if he saw it. "I'm sorry," I whispered softly, torn between hoping he would hear me and praying to a God I'd never believed in that he would not.

"For what?" he asked.

I wanted to say, 'For hurting you.' I tried to say, 'Because I can't kill you like I know I should.' Instead, I whispered, "It's just really hard for me having you come back like this."

"Would you prefer I left?" I couldn't tell what he was thinking, I'd never been able to read his voice. Only by looking at his face could I read him, and I didn't want to turn and watch him walk out on me.

I closed my eyes at the thought of never seeing him again. "I don't know," I admitted painfully.

"I'm flying out tomorrow night," he reminded me. "I'll be at the chantry. You have my cell phone number, Corrine has my number, and Brenda knows how to get a hold of me."

"Of course, Prudence knows where you are," I said bitterly.

"Unfortunately, yes," he replied.

I spun to look at him but he was already turning to leave. My heart broke when he walked out of the apartment, and I had to bite my lips together to stop myself from calling him back. I stared after him for what seemed like a long time before I ran into the bedroom to stand at the window looking over the parking lot. I pressed a hand to the glass when I saw him opening the car door.

He looked up at the window just before he got into the car and saw me gazing down at him. He raised two fingers to his lips and I couldn't stop the pain that ripped through me at the once familiar gesture. He got into the car and drove away, never looking back.

HALF TRUTHS

THERE'S THINGS I'VE DONE I CAN'T ERASE
EVERY NIGHT WE FALL FROM GRACE
KEEP THE FAITH - BON JOVI

I fought my tears and turned the radio back on, quietly this time. I went back to the living room and attacked the post in the corner like it was a living thing. I ignored the pulling in my wounded shoulder, that pain was nothing to what I felt in my heart. I don't know how long I'd been at it when I heard a voice from the doorway of the apartment.

"Eliza?"

I turned and looked at her in surprise. "Corrine?" I walked to the door of the kitchen. "What are you doing here?" I looked at the mess Cormac had left, and bent to pick up the door.

"What happened here?" she demanded. "What happened to you? You have blood all over your pants."

"I cut myself," I told her absently. I felt two of the stitches in my shoulder pull free as I lifted the door and set it against the wall. "It's fine," I lied through clenched teeth.

"Cormac said that you were attacked," she said anxiously.

"You talked to Cormac?" I asked as I moved to the sink and the remains of the shirt I'd left there.

"Yeah, just before I came over," she replied. "What happened?"

"It's nothing, really," I muttered. "I was mugged."

"Did you call the police?" she asked matter-of-factly.

"No, no," I said quickly. "There's no need for that."

"Cormac said no, too," she replied. "Why? You should call them."

As if the police would do anything but arrest me for murder. "I-I really don't want to get involved with that," I told her.

"You're not in trouble with the police or anything, are you?" she demanded. "You never seem to want to be involved with them."

"No," I assured her without turning to meet her eyes, "it's just there are things I can handle on my own, and this is one of them."

She stepped into the room finally, avoiding the remains of the table. "Are you okay? How bad are you hurt?"

"Oh, it's nothing, really." I knew that the wound was bleeding again, but hoped I could get her to leave without seeing the blood soaking through my shirt.

"Let me see," she pleaded. "I want to make sure you're all right."

"I told you, I'm fine," I repeated firmly.

She grabbed my injured shoulder and turned me to look at her. At my unwilling gasp, she let go, but her hand came away sticky with my blood. She was horrified.

"Oh, my God," she exclaimed, "you're bleeding."

I looked down at the blood as if I hadn't known it was there. Corrine pulled my collar down to reveal the less than professional stitching Cormac and I had done.

"Eliza," she breathed in surprise.

I stepped away from her well-meaning hands. "It's all right," I told her. "I'll take care of it."

"Come on," she ordered, taking my hand and pulling me toward the door, "I'm taking you to the hospital."

I pulled away easily and shook my head. "No, I don't think so," I said calmly.

"I'm taking you to the hospital," she insisted.

"No, you're not," I repeated sternly. I took a breath to calm myself then said in a softer tone, "It's okay. I had this sewn up once; I'll just go do it again. It's not a big deal."

"What do you mean, not a big deal?" she asked, affronted by my words. "You're not some back woods country doctor, there's a hospital two minutes away."

"It's not a big deal, I can sew it myself," I told her, adding in an undertone, "it's not like I haven't done it before."

"What do you mean you've done it before?" She was nearly hysterical in her concern for me and while I was glad to know that she cared, I didn't have the patience for it.

"Yeah, well, I'll take care of it," I told her again. I strode quickly through the apartment to the bathroom, never once thinking about the rooms I walked through. The apartment was familiar and safe to me, or at least it had been until Cormac had invaded it. It had been years since I'd stopped noticing the dives I lived in. They'd always been like this, cheap and simple.

Corrine followed me into the bathroom and took the entire room in at a glance. I pulled the shirt over my head and rinsed the blood out; there was no use ruining another shirt tonight. I hung it on the nearby towel rack and picked up the bottle of alcohol. I gritted my teeth and poured it over the bleeding wound, then over the needle and thread that still sat on the edge of the sink.

I forgot about Corrine until she lightly touched a scar on my back where a vampire had tried to impale me years ago.

"What happened?" she asked in a voice full of horrified wonder. "Where did all these scars come from?"

I glanced at her stunned face in the mirror and tried to downplay the marks on my body. "Here and there," I told her lightly. "They just happened, I'm a little clumsy."

"Doing what?"

"I don't know," I told her as I snipped away the stitches I had pulled. "I get into fights sometimes, and sometimes I get mugged."

"What do you mean you get in fights?" she demanded. "And do you get mugged every day?"

"No." I pushed the needle into my skin and hissed softly at the pain.

"How many times have you done this?" she asked softly.

"Sewn myself up?" I asked as I tied off the first stitch. "A couple."

"Oh, my God," she whispered.

"Well, shit happens," I told her in a hard voice I'd never used with her before. I knew that the last five minutes had shattered nearly every illusion she'd ever had about me and I was angry that she had to learn about my real life this way. But she was nineteen now, an adult. She had to learn sometime that life wasn't all sunshine and roses, didn't she? I finished the last stitch while Corrine stared at me in amazement.

"I've been hurt before," I told her gently, ashamed at my outburst. "I've been in a few fights, a car accident or two. I don't have insurance and I don't have a lot of money, so I just take care of it myself."

"Why haven't you come to me?" she asked, her eyes pleading for an explanation she could understand. "You know I would do anything for you."

"Corrine, you know better," I told her, touching her cheek softly. "I won't take money from you." It was all right for her to live from the blood money the Tremere paid me, they owed her that for taking her father from her, but I didn't want any part of it.

"No, you know better," she exclaimed. "How can you live in this place? Look at it!"

I looked around the bathroom, at the stained toilet and the broken tile. "It's fine," I replied. "You know, I stay most of the time at St. Stephen's anyway, so it's not a big deal."

"Then why keep this place?"

"There's not a lot of privacy at St. Stephen's," I explained. "I need somewhere to go to be by myself, and this is all I need."

"This is all you need?" she looked at the leaking sink and the torn shower curtain. "This place is a dump. You know you can come to my place if you need space. If you need time alone, I can find somewhere else to go."

"Corrine, you know I couldn't do that," I protested. "I couldn't impose on you; you spend enough time with me. I know you have friends, and a life."

"It doesn't matter, Eliza," she replied softly. I wanted to die when I saw the tears in her eyes. "You mean more to me than any friend I have. You know what's happened to me from the beginning. You've known me longer than anyone."

I looked away, unable to bear seeing the pain I was causing her. I tried to blink my own tears away, but they welled up and Corrine saw them. She put a hand on my uninjured shoulder and turned me back to her.

"What happened tonight?" she asked. "Not the mugging, what happened with Cormac?"

The tears spilled down my cheeks and I tried to move away from her to hide them, but she wouldn't let me.

"You can't avoid this with me," she whispered. "I probably know you better than anyone. There's something going on here. Why can't you just open up for once?"

"That's not the way it works, Corrine," I told her roughly. "That's—it's just not the way it works."

"What is going on with you and Cormac?" she asked me. "I know there's something there, I know you knew each other a long time ago. I've seen the picture." She was talking about the picture on the table of the two of us.

I sniffled and wiped at my eyes. "Um, yeah. We were pretty close a long time ago," I started to explain, then I stopped. I didn't want to reveal more to her than Cormac had. "I don't know what he's told you about himself."

"He hasn't told me anything," she said. "He just said that he was in an accident and lost his memory."

I nodded. "Yeah, he was in an accident." He slipped and fell on a pair of fangs. I brushed the bitter thought away along with my tears and continued. "I thought he was dead, and ah, and it turns out he's not and, it's just—I just don't know how to feel about him being back."

"He's the one, isn't he?" she whispered, watching my face. "He's the one you told me about in New York."

I closed my eyes and looked down, remembering how I'd tried to explain to my daughter about love. "Yeah," I admitted. "But everything's different now."

"What's so different about it?" she demanded not unkindly. "Why can't you be together? Don't you still love him? Have things changed so much that you don't care for him anymore?"

"I don't know," I whispered. "Things certainly have changed."

"I think he still cares about you," she told me.

"I don't know," I repeated, looking away. "He doesn't exactly act like he does."

"Have you thought for a moment that he might be on edge?" she asked me. "It can't be easy for him to find out about someone in his past that he doesn't remember. How easy can it be for him to know that he should remember you, that there was some kind of a relationship there, but he can't remember it or you? Don't you think it's bothering him as much as it's bothering you?"

I looked up at her, tears falling from my eyes. I hadn't thought about it that way. I mean, I knew it was hard for him not knowing who or what he'd been before his embrace. I just hadn't thought about what he might have felt about not remembering me.

Corrine pulled me closer until my head was resting on her shoulder. I fought against the sobs that threatened to overtake me and stood stiff in her arms.

"Let these walls drop that you've built around yourself," she told me. "Don't you think I've seen this in you? Seen how you've pushed away everyone but me? I don't know what makes me so special."

I made a strangled noise against her jacket at what she'd said. I stood with her and let her comfort me, finally letting the tears work their healing magic in my heart.

"At least try with him, Eliza," she whispered against my hair. "It would make me so happy to know that you were happy for once. And get out of this dive," she added humorously, trying to cheer me up.

"You don't understand," I sniffled. "He wants me to help him get his memory back, but if he remembers me.... I'm not like I was."

"So?" she asked. "People change all the time. Look at mom and dad. They've been married for how many years? Don't you think that they've changed from the time they met till now?"

"Not like this," I said sadly.

"Is any change so drastic that it's beyond conceiving something good can come out of it?" she insisted. "It's like he's coming back from the dead. He's here, Eliza."

"But he's not the same," I told her, "and neither am I. Who's to say we won't hate each other?"

"Who's to say you can't at least try?" she shot back. "Give him a chance."

I shook my head and pulled away from her. "You sound like he does," I murmured as I walked into the bedroom for my third shirt of the night. As I pulled it painfully over my head, I heard Corrine moving around the room. "What are you doing here?" I asked her.

"I wanted to make sure you were okay," she said softly. "I left a message, but you didn't call me back."

"Yeah, I didn't check my messages for a few days. I was at St. Stephen's and didn't get the chance to stop in here." I watched her look around the room and steeled myself for her next question. It wasn't long in coming.

"Do you mind if I ask you something? What's up with all the weapons? Crossbows? Knives?" she asked, her voice rising as she spoke. "Stakes? Are those stakes in the living room?"

I tried to stall for time to think. "I whittle sometimes," I lied. "To pass the time."

"You whittle sticks to sharp points?" she asked, unbelieving.

"Yeah. It relieves stress," I told her. I strode quickly to the living room and threw the stakes in the now empty box. I added the knife to the box and tossed in the photo album for good measure.

"What is this?" Corrine asked.

"Nothing," I told her firmly, then threw the drawings into the box as well.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm picking up."

"You've just sewn yourself up and you look like death warmed over," she said angrily, "but you're concerned about a few things on a table in a nearly vacant apartment?"

"Chill out," I told her. "Everything is okay, let me just put this box over here and have a seat." I took the box to the nearest corner and set it down.

"Why don't you want me to see? Why don't you want me to be a part of your life?" she asked in a quiet voice.

I looked at her. "You are a part of my life."

"No, you are a part of *my* life," she replied. "I am not a part of yours. Do you realize that this is the first time I've fully been inside of your apartment?"

I shook my head. "Gee, I wonder why," I said dryly. "I knew how you would react."

"Why do you do this to yourself?" she demanded. "Why do you live in this crappy place? I know that you work, what do you do with all your money? You certainly don't spend it on clothes, or really cool furniture. It's not CD's or stereo equipment; it's not a car because you drive the biggest piece of shit I have ever seen in my life. What do you spend it on?"

I didn't know what to say so I lied. "I gamble."

"Bullshit!" she exclaimed. "Why are you fucking lying to me?"

"Sit down," I said softly. I wasn't looking forward to explaining things to her, but I knew that Cormac was right; Corrine did have the right to know some things about my life.

"I don't want to sit down!" she told me.

"Please."

"Where do you want me to sit?" she raged. "On this beanbag? It's probably full of cash, isn't it?" she kicked it hard and as it skidded across the floor beans fell out of a poorly taped seam. She stalked to it and sat down, crossing her arms and looking across the room at me.

She started to say something, then looked past my shoulder. "Why is there a fucking piece of wood sticking out of your wall?"

I turned to see the stake I had thrown earlier still stuck nearly four inches in the wall. I reached up, pulled it out easily, and tossed it across the room where it landed quite neatly in the box. When I looked back at Corrine, she was staring at me in amazement. I leaned back against the wall, knowing that the time for truths was finally here.

"A little clumsy," she said, her voice full of anger and outrage, "Something's going on here and I'm not leaving until you tell me what it is."

"There's a lot going on, Corrine," I told her as I slid down the wall to sit on the floor.

"And I want to know it all," she told me. "You can't put me off any longer. You've tried for years, and I'm not going to let it fucking happen any more."

"Watch your mouth, Corrine." I couldn't stop myself, it just came out.

"What do you think you are, my mother?" she asked sarcastically.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath to get past the pain her words caused me. I refused to tell her that much of the truth in a dingy apartment with my blood on her hands. "No, Corrine," I whispered.

"What? What did I say?" She was confused at my reaction to her words, but I couldn't explain.

I shook my head and tried to smile. "I know I haven't told you everything about me, Corrine," I began, "and I'm sorry. There was just no way I could tell you and expect you to believe me, let alone understand. And I still can't tell you everything, I won't. There are things you're better off not knowing. Things you're safer not knowing. You must never tell anyone but Cormac what I'm going to tell you, and you must never admit to anyone but him that I have told you any of it."

"What are you talking about?" she asked me. She had finally calmed enough to see the seriousness on my face.

I wiped the last of my tears away and just looked at her for a minute. Until tonight she had lived in a safe little world surrounded by people who were exactly what she expected them to be. I didn't like shattering her illusions, but I tried my best to do it as gently as possible.

"I know this is going to be hard to believe," I told her, "but there is more to this life than you could ever imagine. There are people in this world that have certain... abilities that most people don't. Mental abilities that can do strange things, or physical abilities that give them strength, or speed."

"Like the time you saved me from that car when I was little," she whispered hesitantly. "You were so fast and you came out of nowhere. I thought for sure I was going to die."

"Yes," I admitted. "Things like that, and a lot more, too. Once you realize that there are gifted people like that in the world, it follows naturally that not all of these people are good people. They use their powers to manipulate and hurt others."

"You wouldn't do that," she said firmly.

"No, Corrine," I agreed, "I wouldn't. But there are others out there that would and they have to be stopped. There are also normal people in the world that believe everyone who has special powers is evil. The fight between those two types of people, the gifted ones and their hunters, is an old war."

"Like the Spanish Inquisition?"

"Exactly," I told her. "That is it exactly."

"Which one are you?" she asked, but I think she knew.

"I have certain unique traits, Corrine," I confessed. "Not like those that you are just learning about, but traits that make me very different from everyone else. I'm one of a kind because my mother had certain powers that normally make it impossible to have children. There are not very many like me around, and no one can find out what I am."

"Is that why you look so young?"

"That's why, yes."

"Is Cormac like you?" she asked. "He doesn't look any older than that picture." She pointed at the frame on the table. The picture had been taken a month before Mac died.

"Not like me, luv," I told her. "He used to be like you, but after the... accident his powers changed. He became like my mother."

"Was the book you gave me his? He said he'd read it before."

I closed my eyes. "Yes, Corrine. It was his."

She frowned. "Why did you give it to me?"

"He can't use it anymore," I said simply. "And I knew he would want you to have it."

She thought about that for a moment. "So you fight the hunters?"

"I wish it were that simple," I said softly, looking away from her. "I work for the hunters, finding the people who use their power for evil. But I help the good ones when I can, and pass along information to them when I get it to help them."

"You're a double agent," she murmured in awe. "Isn't that dangerous?"

"Yes," I told her. "It most certainly can be."

"Shouldn't they pay you a lot of money for doing that?" she asked, outraged on my behalf.

"No, it's mostly on a voluntary basis," I replied honestly enough. The Society really didn't pay very well. "St. Stephen's pays my room and board, and gives me just enough money to pay for this apartment."

"Well, it should be more," she argued. "Or the others should pay you for helping them."

I wasn't about to tell her they did, and very well at that. The 'others' had paid for her apartment, her car, her college, even the clothes she was wearing. She'd only insist I stop giving the money to her, and wonder why I was giving it to her in the first place.

"Is that what you were arguing with Cormac about tonight?" she asked. "Did he find out what you do now and want you to stop?"

"No, luv, that's not it." I sighed. There was no way for me to explain short of telling her everything about Cormac, and I wasn't going to do that. Still, I had to be as honest as possible. "We fought because I'm not sure how I feel about him."

"So why don't you let him in?" she asked bluntly. "Find out if you can be happy with him again. Look, maybe you just need to get away together, maybe on a weekend somewhere."

"Yeah," I muttered dryly, "fly to Europe for two weeks."

"That sounds good," she said seriously. "I was thinking more like a weekend in the country, but okay. Why, did he ask you to go?"

I shrugged. "More or less."

"So are you?"

"I don't know. I don't know if he still wants me to."

"Why wouldn't he?" she asked. "What did you say to him?"

"We argued a little," I replied softly. "All we seem to do is argue."

"Then don't."

"It's a little easier said than done with Mac," I told her. "He knows just what buttons to push."

"So don't let him push them," she told me, leaning forward. "If it meant anything to you, you would go for it."

"Yeah," I said slowly. "Easier said than done. Maybe this is just one thing I was never meant to have. It never seems to work out."

"What," she replied, "is he a creature of Satan or something? How bad could he possibly be? How much could he have possibly changed?"

I couldn't stop the dry laughter that bubbled from my throat. "You have no idea."

"Why don't you tell me?" It was so simple for her, she was still so innocent. I wanted to keep her that way as long as possible.

"No," I said firmly. "He's just—he's just spent the last few years living a completely different life, different values, and so have I. If he knew me now he would hate me for what I am."

"What are you doing that's so bad except living in this shit hole?" she asked in outrage. It was nice to know she still thought that I could do no wrong.

"I don't live here," I reminded her. "I just come here to be alone. I live at St. Stephen's."

"So what, is he a killer or something?" she asked.

"I don't think so," I said honestly. At least, he didn't seem to be any more of a killer than I was. "I guess I don't know him that well. I mean it has been a long time."

"So why can't you take the time to get to know him?" she demanded. "Maybe you'll like him even more than you did before."

I shivered as I remembered the feel of his cold hands on my skin when he'd stitched me up. Oh yeah, that would be easy to get used to. Not.

"I guess it's possible," I conceded to stop her questioning.

"So you'll go away with him then?"

"I don't know if he still wants me to," I reminded her.

"Just show up and go," she suggested with a smile.

I looked back at her for a minute, then nodded. "Well, I guess that's an option."

"Don't you think it's worth it?" she asked. "And you know, you could dress a little better, maybe I should take you shopping tomorrow."

I barely stopped myself from rolling my eyes. "There's nothing wrong with my clothes," I told her, ignoring the actual state my clothing was in.

"Yeah," she said sarcastically, "just holes in the knees, holes in the shoes, not to mention that by the looks of your body, half your clothes should be bloodstained or ripped."

"It's not that bad," I replied defensively. Actually, sometimes it was much worse.

"Oh, right," she told me. "You saw your back like I did."

"It's not that bad," I repeated. "Other people have worse." Nosferatu, for instance could be horribly scarred.

"You'll be at my house in the morning to go shopping," she insisted. "If you're going to Europe, it's very romantic and you have to be dressed for it."

"You know I don't want to take your money," I said, knowing she would not give up until I relented.

"It's not like I'm on a tight budget or anything," she stated bluntly. "Let me do something for you for once instead of me giving you money and you buying me something with it. Don't think I haven't noticed, I have."

I blushed and looked away, my eyes falling on the knife that sat on the table. Corrine would never know just how much money I could have had if I'd wanted it, if I'd been a different type of person. But blood money hadn't tempted me before and it never bothered me to live in the places I do.

"Won't you let me do something nice for you?" she pleaded. "You've always been there for me, always seen me through everything."

"You've always been there for me too, Corrine," I told her, "and that's important for me."

"Through what?" she asked. "Apparently not for anything that counts."

"You've let me be a part of your life," I told her quite honestly. "That's all I've needed."

"Let me be a part of your life now," she said softly.

I studied her face for a moment, seeing how important this was to her. "All right, all right. Shopping tomorrow." I leaned back against wall and took a deep breath.

"Good, good," she said happily. "And you know, we might as well finish putting what little you have in this box and take it all back to my place. There's no way you can stay here, you don't even have a door."

I sighed and shook my head. "I'll fix the door."

"You can't fix that door," she told me. "It's broken."

"Corrine, you don't understand, I can't—"

"It's broken," she insisted. "Look, then you don't have to worry, you'll be at my house all ready to go shopping in the morning. And you're leaving tomorrow anyway, so it's not like it's a big deal."

I shook my head, knowing this was one battle I couldn't win. I really didn't want to be by myself with memories of Mac overflowing my mind. "Ok, but I can't just leave here. I have the answering machine here and there are certain people who know only this number. Like Cormac."

"Leave his number on your machine," she suggested. "You'll be with him, and if it's an emergency they can get a hold of you."

She got up and began gathering the few things left in the apartment. I grabbed an empty box from the closet and tried to collect my weapons before she found them, but I knew she saw most of them. I did as she suggested and changed the message on my machine. I knew that Kate would be pissed, but there was no help for it.

In less than ten minutes I was driving the van to St. Stephen's. I made Corrine wait down the block while I parked the van and put the keys under the mat. I jogged down the street and got into the car with my daughter.

We spent half the night talking about things I never thought I would talk to her about. I told her how I'd met Mac, omitting only some of the details like the vampires and the werewolves. We talked a little about my mother, although I didn't tell her exactly what Kate was. Around two o'clock we went to bed, Corrine insisting that I take her bed because I was wounded.

OLD FRIENDS

PEOPLE DON'T KNOW ABOUT THE THINGS I SAY OR DO
THEY DON'T UNDERSTAND ABOUT THE SHIT THAT I'VE BEEN THROUGH
ONLY GOD KNOWS WHY - KID ROCK

Corrine woke me early with a large breakfast that I couldn't very eat much of. By nine we were on the road, headed for some major shopping. On the way to our first store I made Corrine pull up to a pay phone.

I crossed my fingers and called the only number I had for Glenn Johnson. An operator came on telling me the number had been disconnected and I pressed the necessary buttons on the phone to get past the message. I was relieved when Glenn answered the phone himself.

"It's me," I said softly.

"Eliza," he breathed, stunned at hearing my voice. "It's been forever."

"I need help," I told him.

There was a long pause. "I heard you turned against us, Eliza."

"You should know better, Glenn," I replied in a hard voice. "I'm a spy, nothing more. I still help where ever and whenever I can."

"And whose spy are you?" he asked.

"I can't tell you that." If he found out that I worked for the vamps, I knew there was no way in hell he would ever help me.

He sighed. "What is it you need?"

"Mac didn't die in the raid," I told him.

"What?" He sounded shocked.

"Dougal embraced him." I was surprised by the lack of emotion in my voice.

"How did you find this out?"

"He walked up to me in a bar," I said flatly. "He has amnesia, he doesn't remember any of us. Look, he thinks that a vamp named Kate Hepburn or Prudence Gentry may have had something to do with the raids." Our apartment hadn't been the only one invaded that night.

"Kate is the vamp who came to town a few weeks before the raid, isn't she? But Prudence Gentry?" he asked, confused at the name. "Isn't that—?"

"Yeah, my name," I replied wryly. Elizabeth Prudence Gentry was the name I grew up with, my real name as far as I knew. Glen was one of the few people I'd ever told that; Mac had been the other. "Kate and Prudence are one and the same. She hates Cormac, wants him dead. He thinks she wanted the same thing nineteen years ago."

"I hadn't heard of her being involved in the raid," he murmured. "I still know people in Baltimore, I'll see what I can learn." He paused, then asked, "What are you going to do if she was involved?"

"She doesn't have to have been involved," I told him, my voice like steel. "If she so much as knew about the attack before it happened, her head is mine."

"You've changed, Eliza," he whispered. "What happened to you?"

"Too much to explain, Glenn," I replied sadly. "Too much to ever go back."

"I remember when I first saw you in Baltimore," he said after a little hesitation. "You were hard as a kitten, all teeth and claw when anyone tried to get too close to you. Mac Brennan overshadowed everyone else for you. Is it still the same?"

"He's a vampire," I coldly reminded him, and myself.

"That doesn't answer my question, Eliza," he replied softly. "Do the lights still dim when he walks into the room?"

I had once told Glenn that when Mac entered the room it was like all of the lights dimmed and Mac was the only thing I could see. "There are lights?" I asked dryly.

"Take care, Eliza," he warned me. "Remember that he's a monster now. You don't want to lose your life because a vamp was once the man you loved."

"I know," I whispered. "I wanted to destroy him, but...."

"I understand," he told me gently. "Those pesky lights."

I chuckled, a low sad sound even to my ears. "I'll call you back in two hours," I said. "I need anything you can give me and I only have twelve hours."

"Of course, Eliza. I'll see what I can do," he promised.

"Thanks." I hung up and went back to Corrine's car.

She kept up a steady stream of chatter while we were shopping. She wouldn't take me to the discount stores, and insisted on picking out everything we bought. She was so pleased that I was finally letting her buy things for me, I didn't have the heart to refuse.

It seemed like Corrine made me try on everything. She refused to even look at the type of clothing I was used to wearing, instead buying things that were 'in'. To top everything off, she bought me a large suitcase and overnight bag that matched.

Two hours later I found another pay phone and called Glenn back.

"There's a vamp in Boston that was in on the raid at your apartment," he said in a low voice.

"Son of a bitch." I didn't believe I could get that lucky. "Which one?"

"Valerie," he replied.

I couldn't stop myself from gasping.

"Do you recognize the name?" he asked.

"She bit me," I told him. She'd almost killed me that night. "Where in Boston?"

"She hangs out at McDougal's on the pier."

"I know it," I said slowly. "I've hunted there."

"Will you be hunting there tonight?" he asked, amused.

"I never stake and tell," I told him in the same tone. "You know me better than that."

He laughed, then sobered quickly. "Do you plan on spending any time with the new and improved Cormac?"

I closed my eyes. "I'll be spending the next two weeks with him," I replied calmly, "to try and help him regain his memory. After that, I'm done."

"Let me know how things turn out," he said. "Let me know if he's...."

"Yeah," I whispered. "If he's still the same, or if he's a bad guy."

"And if he's bad?"

"I tried to kill him once, Glenn," I admitted softly. "I can't do it."

"I could," he said in a hard voice. "Mac was my friend, a long time ago. If he's a black hat, I'll take him out for you."

"I might take you up on that, Glenn," I replied with a sad sigh. "It's hard to aim in the dark."

"Those damn lights," I heard him say as I hung up the phone.

I walked back to Corrine and she insisted on taking me out to eat.

"You didn't eat much breakfast this morning," she chastised. "When was the last time you really ate?"

I didn't answer because I honestly didn't remember. She ordered me a large lunch and watched over me until I'd eaten at least half of it. I had to force myself; I had no desire to eat.

When I'd eaten all I could, I pushed my plate away and studied her for a moment. "Corrine," I began softly.

"Yes, Eliza?"

"I really wanted us to spend the day together before I left with Cormac tonight," I told her.

"But you can't," she finished, disappointed. "Why?"

"Cormac thinks that someone close to me knew about or maybe caused his accident," I replied carefully. "I need to find out if that's true."

She glanced up at me in surprise. "And if it is?"

I looked away. "All I ever wanted was a normal life, Corrine," I whispered. "Mac and I could have had a chance at that life. If this person caused his... change, or knew that it was going to happen and did nothing to warn us or stop it—" I couldn't continue.

Corrine did it for me. "Then you have to seek vengeance," she said sadly, shaking her head. "I never knew you could be like this."

"I wasn't always like this," I replied simply, looking away from the disappointment I was afraid to see in her eyes. "I can understand how it might disgust you."

"No," she said, reaching across the table and taking my hand. "From what you've told me, you have reason to be like this. It can't be easy living the life you lead."

"I don't want your pity," I said emotionlessly, giving her a level look. "I knew when I started down this road exactly what the price would be."

"Your eyes tell me that you can be very dangerous," she said. "But I know your heart, Eliza. You haven't lost everything you think you have."

"What do you mean?" I asked with narrowed eyes.

"You haven't lost your soul."

"I sold my soul a long time ago," I told her in a cold voice. I barely stopped myself from adding *to the devil*.

"I don't think so," she said thoughtfully. "Maybe you thought you did."

"You don't understand the things I've done, Corrine," I replied, pulling away from her hand.

"No?" she asked. "Maybe you're right. Maybe you have lost your chance at the white picket fence and the dog. But at least now you have a chance to find out for sure."

I shook my head, but smiled at her, determined to let her have the remainders of her illusions as long as possible.

"I need to go to Boston today," I told her, "to look for someone who might be able to tell me the truth."

"Can I come with you?"

"I don't think so, luv," I said gently. "I don't want to put you in danger. I'll call Gillian and see if she can give me a ride into Boston. I'll call you in a few days."

She looked disappointed, but didn't argue with me. "Is there anything you want me to tell Cormac if I see him?"

"Yeah," I said. "Tell him that Gillian took me to Boston, and that he won't have to worry about the problem we talked about anymore. He'll know what I meant."

"Okay," she said. "Let's go back to my place and you can pack everything up. Cormac is flying out of Boston tonight, isn't he?"

That was a good question. "I'll find out."

We returned to Corrine's apartment and she helped me pack all of my new clothes. Somehow I got everything I'd taken from the apartment except the crossbow into the suitcase without her seeing any of it. She insisted that I shower and change before leaving, and I had to admit that I felt better after having done so. Gillian agreed to run me to Boston, which left me with only two more calls to make.

The first was to Brenda's cell phone, even though I knew she wouldn't be awake. Her boy-toy answered.

"This is Eliza Dushku," I told him, trying very hard to be civil.

After a surprised pause, he said, "What can I do for you?"

"I realize that Brenda is unavailable," I began tactfully, mindful of Corrine's presence beside me, "but I need information and it can't wait until she... returns."

"All right."

"You are aware that Brenda has made the arrangements for Cormac to leave town tonight?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied. "I understand you were going to travel with him."

"I need to know what they are," I said. "I have a few things I need to clear up in Boston and if he is flying out of the airport there, I'll just meet him at the plane."

"He is," Rafael confirmed. "I believe he's planning on leaving some time after midnight, but I don't know exactly what time. The plane is being readied now."

"Do you think it would be possible for me to leave my things on board while I run my errands?" I asked.

"It shouldn't be a problem."

"Thank you for your help," I told him.

"You're welcome, Ms. Dushku," he replied.

I hung up the phone and sighed deeply. I was grateful the ghoul hadn't given me a hassle, but it still gave me the creeps to talk to him. It reminded me too much of Linda, Kate's ghoul when I was growing up. She'd hated me, and never had a problem showing it.

"Why didn't you call Cormac for that?" Corrine asked.

"I would rather surprise him at the plane," I told her, thinking quickly. "He may still be upset with me. Can you give me a minute? I have to make one more call."

"Sure," she said. She walked out onto the balcony of the apartment and I dialed Kate's number.

"Prudence," I said in a hard voice, "I heard a rumor that you might have known about the... accident before it happened. If that is true, my dear, hide."

Gillian picked me up a few minutes later and on the ride to Boston, we talked about Corrine. I explained that I knew she had 'Awakened,' and that Cormac had once been the same Tradition that I believed her to be. She agreed not to question anyone about him or Corrine, and for that I was thankful. As much as I liked Gillian, Corrine was the most important thing in my life, and I'd already more than proven I would do anything to keep her safe.

I did ask a favor of her while we were on our way to Boston. I knew that I couldn't keep my apartment now that first Kate then Cormac and Corrine had compromised its location. I told Gillian that I no longer felt safe in the flat, and she agreed to look for another place for me. She thought she could find something by the time I returned and agreed to keep the matter a complete secret.

We dropped my suitcase and carry on at the plane. I laid my crossbow on the floor near the suitcase, knowing I'd have to find a case of some sort for it somewhere. Gillian dropped me off near the docks and returned to Salem.

I spent most of the afternoon asking questions and looking for Valerie's lair. I found a few locations that might have worked well for vampires, but there were too many people around for me to check them out like I wanted to. I did find an abandoned building I thought might be useful if I managed to find Valerie.

It turned out that the clothes Corrine had bought for me weren't as much of a hindrance as I thought they'd be; guys took one look at my cleavage and bare midriff and forgot to ask why I needed the information I was asking for.

At sundown I was at McDougal's waiting for Valerie. She came in an hour later with her puppy and sat out on the deck 'drinking' martinis. I watched from the dining room and sipped coffee while they ate. When they finished, I followed them out.

They walked south toward the water and I kept far enough back that they didn't see me tailing them. When they went into a converted warehouse, I darted forward and caught the door before it closed. Valerie turned and when she saw me she gasped.

"You're dead," she said in disbelief.

I smiled. "I'm the ghost of Christmas past," I told her.

Her ghoul looked between the two of us, confused.

"Let the puppy leave, Valerie," I told her in a low dangerous voice. I didn't want to kill him if I didn't have to.

"Oscar," she whispered, never looking away from my eyes, "get out of here."

"I won't leave you," he replied urgently. "She looks dangerous."

"Leave, or die," I told him. I pulled a stake and readied myself to use it. To me, Oscar wasn't really human, he was one of them, a ghoul, and just because I didn't want to kill him didn't mean I would hesitate to do it if I had to.

Valerie pushed him toward the door. "Now, Oscar!"

The boy hit the door running and I turned back to Valerie. Her fangs were bared, and she was doing her best to intimidate me. "Funny thing, Valerie," I told her, "vamps don't scare me. I guess that comes from killing so many of them."

She backed away from me toward the stairs. I grabbed her arm and drove the stake through her heart. When she collapsed to the floor, I picked her up and threw her over my shoulder, then carried her out into the night.

Twenty minutes later we were in the abandoned building I'd found earlier and prepared especially for her. Heavy chains secured Valerie to a workbench, and quite a few woodworking tools lay collected nearby. I pulled the stake from her heart and she gasped as she regained control of her muscles.

Quickly taking in the situation, she looked at me with real fear in her eyes. "What to you want?"

"I want to know everything you know about that night," I told her.

"I don't know anything," she claimed almost hysterically. "I just did what I was told!"

I gave her a hard smile and reached for the nearest tool. Luther had taught me a few things about pain, and now it was time to teach Valerie.

An hour later, I was convinced she'd told me all she knew, which actually wasn't all that much. According to Valerie, the vamps that'd raided our apartment had orders to embrace Mac and me. She said that Dougal wasn't supposed to turn either of us personally unless something went wrong. I didn't understand what that meant, and she couldn't explain.

She had no idea if Kate had known about the raid before the fact. Dougal had his orders directly from the Tremere Primogen of Baltimore and no one else knew the details. She told me she hadn't really meant to kill me, but my blood had tasted so good, she'd gotten carried away.

I was going to let her go when I'd gotten everything out of her I needed, but in the end she got stupid. When I left the building, there was nothing left of her but a disgusting pile of decomposing fluid on the floor.

CONFESSIONS

IT DOESN'T MATTER WHAT I WANT; IT DOESN'T MATTER WHAT I NEED

YOU'VE BEEN ON A ROAD DON'T KNOW WHERE IT GOES OR WHERE IT LEADS

IT DOESN'T MATTER - ALISON KRAUSE & THE UNION STATION

I caught a cab and as it drove through the dark streets of Boston, I tried very hard to remember every detail of that night. A lot of things weren't very clear, but others I remembered as if they happened yesterday. There was nothing in my memories that led me to believe Kate had been involved in the raid, but nothing that told me who'd planned it either. And I didn't want to believe that she'd been so cruel as to deliberately take Mac away from me, no matter how much she disliked him.

The driver dropped me off at the plane just before midnight. The pilot was going over the plane, but he hadn't heard from Cormac. When I went inside to wait for him, the long nights of little or no sleep finally caught up with me. I sat down on one of the couches and fought with my fatigue, but I'd been too stressed out for too long. Within minutes, I was asleep.

I pulled on Mac's shirt and started picking up our dinner dishes. I could feel his eyes on me like a light shinning on my heart. As if from a distance, I heard a noise from the spare bedroom of the apartment. When I looked in toward the room, I saw my lover quietly rise to his feet.

I edged toward the fireplace and grabbed the fireplace poker. It wouldn't do me much good against the monster I knew was coming, but it was the best I could do. The only light in the room was from the fireplace, but I was able to see Mac stake the first vamp that came into the room. Then the Nosferatu was tripping and falling to the floor. I shoved the fireplace poker through its abdomen, but it just laid on the floor and laughed at me.

The blood on my hands seemed to take on it's own life, and I backed away. The vamp rolled to its feet and grabbed my shoulders, then threw me across the room. I hit the wall hard enough to drive the breath from my lungs. I lay stunned while it pulled the poker from its body and tossed it aside.

Mac shouted out my name, but I couldn't hear him over the ringing in my ears. I could only whisper his name when I saw that Dougal had him in his grasp.

Then the one I'd impaled was on me again and I barely brought my leg up in time to kick it away from me. It flew across the room with a look of surprise on its face. Then Valerie grabbed me from behind. I felt teeth sink into my neck and tried to fight her, but she grabbed my hair and held me firmly in place.

I looked helplessly across the room to where Dougal stood holding Mac to his chest, his head bent over my lover's neck. Once more I tried to scream his name before—

Something pulled me from sleep and instinctively I struck out, a stake in my hand. At the last moment I pulled back, realizing it had been Cormac's hand that woke me. I had to have been totally out of it not to feel him come on the plane.

"Cormac," I gasped. "Damn, I could have staked you." I ran a shaking hand through my hair and took a deep breath. I put the stake away and leaned back on the couch, rubbing the last of sleep from my eyes.

"You need to sleep," he told me. He was standing in front of me, almost looming over me.

"Not after that dream, thank you very much," I replied, still very much shaken. I wished he would go away until I had a better hold on myself but he didn't look like he was going anywhere.

"What was it?" he asked.

"It-it's just a nightmare," I said softly, not looking at him. "One I have way too often. I saw the bitch that bit me tonight, and it just brought everything back."

"And how is the bitch?"

I glanced up and gave him a grim smile. "It's a shame really, she lost her head and tried to bite me, but not necessarily in that order."

"What was her name?" he asked, still standing over me.

"Valerie." I ran my hand through my hair again and looked around the cabin hoping for something that would clear the last of sleep from my mind. "Is there any coffee on board?"

He shrugged. "Possibly back in the bedroom." He emphasized the last word, hoping I'm sure that I would take the hint and go to bed.

I stood unsteadily and walked around him toward the back of the plane. The dream had really upset me, more than it had in years, more than I cared to admit. Perhaps it had been seeing Valerie again, or knowing that I'd be spending the next few weeks with Cormac, but the nightmare had been particularly vivid tonight.

I splashed water on my face in the kitchen area and made myself some of the instant coffee I found in the refrigerator next to half a dozen blood packs. The sight of the blood made me stop and stare for a minute. That, more than anything, drove home the reality of spending two weeks with a vampire.

He was still standing near the elbow of the couch when I returned. I sat down on the end of the couch, nearest the doorway to the back of the plane, which just happened to be right next to the crossbow. If he meant to hurt me, he could have tried while I was still sleeping, but I'd spent years surviving by trusting only one person: me.

"Do you still not trust me?" Cormac asked.

"What?" It was uncanny how he could still read my mind, almost as if the last twenty years had never happened.

"We are the only ones on board," he told me, gesturing toward the weapon at my feet.

"There is the pilot," I reminded him, avoiding the question.

He glanced toward the cockpit. "He's a ghoul."

"Crossbow kills him just the same," I replied with a shrug.

"And if Jax tried anything I have friend who would be more than willing to deal with him," he commented softly.

The ghoul had told me his name when I'd boarded the plane, but I had spent as little time talking to him as possible. "Would that be the friends in your gun that all run faster than he does?"

He smiled grimly. "If those don't get him, Brenda will."

"Brenda?" I asked, knowing I shouldn't have been surprised. "She knows Jax?"

"Yes," he drawled. "Brenda dislikes Jax, very much so."

"Hmm," I murmured, "I'm liking the boy all ready."

I sipped at the coffee and waited for the caffeine to reach my brain. Cormac sat down on other end of couch and took out a book to read. We sat in uncomfortable silence until after plane was in the air.

"So," Cormac asked, his eyes still on the page in front of him, "did Kate ever call you back?"

"I'm not sure how she would have gotten a hold of me," I said with a frown. "Why, did she call you?"

"First thing this evening," he replied coolly.

I winced, pretty sure I knew what their conversation had been like. "Well, I'm sorry about that."

"She threatened me, yet again," he said.

I gave him a small smile. "That's only fair, I threatened her."

"So I hear."

"How did you hear?" I asked with a frown. "Did she tell you?"

"No," he murmured still looking at the book in his hands. "I have contacts."

Contacts that would have known about the message I'd left for her? Then it hit me and I shook my head. "Corrine didn't move far enough away, did she? I mean, when I called and left the message on Kate's voice mail."

"She called your machine and got my number," he told me.

"I meant to tell you about that," I apologized.

"And speaking of Corrine," he said, finally looking up at me, "I believe she knows."

"Knows what?"

"What we are," he replied vaguely, but I knew what he meant.

I stiffened. "And how would she find this out?"

"Apparently you planted the seeds of the information."

My eyebrows shot up. "Excuse me?" I had spent years hiding her parentage from Corrine; I didn't see how my actions could have given anything away.

"Telling her that you had certain abilities and that I did as well," he explained. "And that mine have changed and now I'm the same as your mother, etc."

"I'm not sure how that leads to the conclusion that we're her parents," I told him.

"Do you remember Jared?" he asked.

"Jared?" The name was familiar, but I couldn't place it.

"Think back two decades," Cormac prompted.

"Jared." From Baltimore, of course. He'd lived at the brownstone with Mac and the others. "Yeah, I remember him. You used to hang out with him quite a bit, actually."

"I asked a friend of mine to look in on Corrine and possibly mentor her, since she has Awakened," he told me.

"You know Dreamspeakers in Salem?" I asked, surprised.

"Apparently I did," he murmured. "I know several people in Salem. I'm related to three or four of them, it turns out."

"I wasn't aware you had any family in States," I said softly. As far as I knew, Mac's entire family lived in Ireland.

"Extended family."

"Okay," I muttered under my breath, "if I knew what you were talking about."

"My friend sent Jared," he continued.

"Jared Smith is in Salem?" I asked, wondering just who this friend of his was. I tried to force down the jealousy I felt, telling myself again that it had been a long time since Baltimore, and Cormac had only just remembered me.

"Yes, he has been for about ten years."

"I didn't know that," I said, looking away. "I haven't talked to him since that... night." I couldn't help the way my voice broke, the dream was still too vivid in my mind.

"He asked about you," Cormac told me. "He thought you were dead. He thought I was as well."

"A lot of people thought I was dead," I replied dryly. I'd walked away from my old life like a duck shedding water. No one but Kate had known where I was.

"And my contact," he stated in an irritated tone, "in her becoming more apparent bad timing sent Jared to Corrine's apartment as we were finishing supper."

"I knew she was going to call you," I said, taking note that Cormac's friend was female. "She wanted us all to have lunch."

"That would have been interesting," he drawled with the beginnings of a smile.

"Yeah, I told her it wasn't a good idea." I sipped at the coffee again, hoping for some kind of mental clarity to kick in sometime soon.

"Anyway, Jared recognized me."

"Really?" It had been twenty years, but then Cormac did look exactly the same. Exactly.

"Extremely," he added, telling me that Jared had also realized what Cormac was.

"I guess you'll have to explain a little more," I told him. "He recognized you, but how does that lead to Corrine finding out that we're her parents?"

"He asked how you were," Cormac replied, "then immediately looked at Corrine and said, 'Oh is this your daughter? She looks just like Eliza.'"

I stared at him in amazement. All the work I'd done to hide my relationship to Corrine, and some bastard from the past walks in and blows it all away? "First the bitch that bit me," I muttered angrily, "then the nightmare, now this shit."

"It is not shit, Eliza," he told me in a matching tone, "it is our child."

I stared at him coldly. "I am well aware of that," I told him, my voice low and dangerous. "I've had to take care of her for some time now."

"I was not questioning your parenting abilities," he said softly, "or the decisions you have made concerning Corrine."

"What exactly were you doing?" I asked, still angry with him.

"I was not questioning anything," he replied. "I was merely informing you so that if she contacts you about such subject matters you can be prepared."

"Oh, like I can prepare for that," I shot back. "It's been almost twenty years and I still don't know what I'd say. It's not exactly an easy thing to explain."

After several moments of awkward silence, he said, "She is well on her way to becoming a mage as well."

I nodded, some of my anger draining away. "Hopefully she'll have support in that and someone she can talk to about it."

"I believe Jared will suit the purpose well for now," he replied.

"That's good." The coffee was cold, but I drank it anyway. I was fully awake by then but even so Cormac's next words took me by surprise.

"And providing we keep you happy, healthy and breathing," he drawled, "or two out of the three, we won't have to worry about her becoming what I have become."

I looked at him with narrowed eyes. There was only one thing he could be referring to. Someone had to have told him about the contract. "Who have you been talking to?" I asked sharply.

He pulled out an envelope from his pocket and removed a sheet of paper from it. I would have recognized the document anywhere; it was a copy of the blood contract. "Ford William Radek, Duke of Wales," he read, looking at the bottom of the page, "your guarantor." He put the contract back in the envelope, and the envelope back in his pocket.

I sat down the mug on the floor next to the crossbow very slowly, very carefully. "How did you get a copy of that?" I asked him softly, fighting the rage that swept through me. How dare he interfere in my life this way?

"I asked for it," he told me calmly.

"It was that simple," I said, anger still coloring my voice.

"For me, yes."

"You know," I mumbled, "I had asked myself how this night could get worse."

"I merely wished to have all the information I can going into this mission," he told me.

"Like you need that information." My hand pulled a stake out as if it had a mind of its own. Until last night it had been years since I'd handled stakes in agitation; something about being with Cormac again brought the nervous gesture back. More than anything I wanted to throw the stake at him, to pierce his heart and shut him up, at least for a while.

He took the contract back out and read it over while I watched, stewing. "There are a few things in here I was not aware of," he commented. "You realize by signing on with me for this little adventure you are considered—"

"Off contract," I muttered.

"—other than in direct performance of the contract," he finished.

"I know that," I growled.

"I believe Ford and Alden have plans for Corrine should you... perish," he told me. Alden Monroe was the Tremere primogen of Salem.

My hands tightened on the stake as rage rose within me. I would never allow them to embrace my daughter; I would see each and every one of them dead before I let that happen. Just because they ruled the night did not mean they could make that kind of decision for her, steal her life like Dougal had stolen Mac's.

"Interesting name your mother chose there," he commented, "as well as 'Prudence Gentry.'"

"Yes," I murmured, barely containing my fury. "I found that a little unusual myself. Perhaps it was a joke on her part."

"Is that her true name?" he asked me.

"Her true name is on the contract," I told him coldly.

"Then where did the 'Prudence Gentry' of your name come from?" He folded the contract and replaced it in the envelope.

I looked away for the first time since he had pulled out the contract. "I never asked her why she named me what she did," I said in a low voice. "Although I believe Gentry was my father's name."

"So how did you come in contact with Valerie again?" he asked, putting the envelope back in his pocket.

"Well," I replied slowly, "I called an old friend."

"And that old friend is?"

There was no reason not to tell him, Cormac would never find the mage if he didn't want to be found. "Glenn Johnson. He told me that one of the vamps from the raid was in Boston, conveniently," I said coolly. "Turns out it was the one that bit me, almost killed me. If I wasn't what I am I would have died." I shook my head and looked down at the stake in my hands. "Anyway, he helped me look her up."

"Did you perchance talk to her before you summarily executed her?" he asked, almost amused.

"Oh, yeah," I drawled wryly. "We had quite a bit of a conversation, actually. I didn't mean to kill her, really. It just kind of happened when she tried to bite me."

"Ah yes," he replied. "She fell on your stake."

I smiled, remembering the satisfaction I'd felt at her death. "No, actually I believe it was my knife. It went across her throat."

He blinked at the venom in my voice. "Did you ascertain any interesting information?"

I shook my head regretfully. "She didn't really have any, she was a petty leech, low in your clan," I told him. "I was trying to find out if she knew who had planned the whole thing. She told me that Dougal had talked to the primogen and that no one really knew the details but the two of them. She didn't know if Kate was in on it or not."

"I believe my embrace and your planned embrace was to be a deterrent," he told me, stunning me with the casualness of his words, "an alternative to our death. I have reason to believe they had planned on embracing both of us, however left you for dead when they had thought they had killed you."

"Well, more like Kate got me out of the chantry and told them I was dead." Despite the calmness of my voice, I was still very upset. I wanted so badly to throw the stake that I forced my hands to still on the slim piece of wood and concentrated on calming down.

I came out of my daze when Cormac took the stake from my hand. He replaced it with a daisy and I stared down at it in amazement, caught for a moment in the past.

"The daisy will not do as much damage to the plane if you throw it at me," he said as he walked back to his seat.

"What makes you think I'd be throwing stakes at you, Cormac?" I asked slowly, still stunned.

"You've done it before," he reminded me. "Last night, as I remember."

"I take it you've been getting some of your memories back." It wasn't a question. I stared down at the flower, wondering if he had remembered just what daisies once meant to us.

"Actually," Cormac admitted, "quite a bit."

"Nothing like twisting the knife," I murmured closing my eyes to hide the pain that remembering our lovemaking had caused me.

"Thank you." He sounded pleased he had hurt me.

I laid the flower down very gently beside me on the couch and pulled out another stake. If Cormac were remembering very much about me, he'd know that I never carried just one weapon. I also had a knife at my side and another stake at my ankle. I had a few other tricks up my sleeve that weren't so useful in dealing with vamps, but worked well against other supernaturals. 'Be Prepared' is not just the Boy Scout's motto, it's mine.

"I'm all out of daisies," he told me, "but please put that away."

Was he worried? "You want I should not throw this?" I said with dark mischief in my voice.

"I want you should not throw this," he agreed, his face very serious.

"I'll set it right here, next to the daisy," I told him mockingly. I wanted it in easy reach. He'd been right before, a part of me still didn't trust him and maybe never would.

"So tell me of this nightmare," he encouraged.

I forced my hand to move away from the items beside me. "I just—" I bit my lip and tried again. "It was about that night, the night you died," I said slowly.

"I don't believe I died for a few nights after," he replied.

"The night I thought you died," I corrected. "I—that night."

I glanced up to see that he was fondling the stake in his hands. It made my hand itch to hold it again, to strike out against something, anything, and bring the pain and grief inside of me to an end.

"What did happen that night?" he asked finally.

I leaned forward with my elbows on my knees and put my head in my hands. I really didn't want to talk about the nightmare or that night, but I had agreed to help him regain his memories and that meant telling him exactly what had happened.

I didn't look at him as I began to speak in a carefully controlled voice. "There's not a lot to tell," I began. "We celebrated our first week in the new place with dinner and wine in front of the fireplace." I made a meaningless gesture with my hand and glanced over at him. "The whole sappy music and dancing thing."

"Barefoot and half clothed," he added.

I couldn't help the blush that came over my face. I quickly looked away and continued as best I could. "Later I got up to take care of everything and we heard them come in. We fought them, but it didn't do any good. You staked one, and I gutted an ugly one with the fireplace poker, but he just laughed at me." I looked at my hands as if I could still see blood on them.

It took a lot, but I was able to strip all emotions from my voice. "I didn't see how Dougal got a hold of you, but he did. Then this vamp, Valerie, grabbed me from behind. She bit me." Unconsciously I rubbed the scars on my neck. My hair covered the spot most of the time, and I didn't think Cormac had seen them when he was stitching my shoulder.

I glanced at him again, but his face was unreadable. I could feel the tears filling my eyes, but by sheer will I kept them from falling. "In my dreams I hear you calling my name. I try to scream for you, but I can't make a sound," I told him, looking away. "I watch him kill you over and over and a part of me dies every time."

Despite my best efforts, I felt a tear fall down my cheek. I looked down at my hands and let the sadness I felt fill my voice as I confessed, "I told you that it took me a long time to get over losing you, Mac, but the truth is I never did. And now I find that I can't bring myself to kill you no matter what we once promised each other. Since I can't kill you and I can't forget—"*how much I loved you*, I'd almost said. "—everything that happened, I figure I might as well help you."

I wiped away the tear from my cheek and stood up. "Excuse me," I whispered, turning toward the back of the plane. I went into the bathroom and turned on the cold water. I rested my forearms on the sink and buried my face in my hands. How could I bear to do this for two weeks? How could I be with him and dredge up all these memories of our life together and not fall in love with him all over again?

Yeah, he was different now. Hell, he was a damn vampire, but more than that had changed. He was harder now, not that he'd ever been exactly carefree to begin with. And the ease in which he'd killed his own kind at Mother Abigail's.... Ah, but he'd had a point about that. If he hadn't been so quick to pull the trigger, Corrine would now be a blood-sucking fiend, and with her sire dead, Elvira would have seen me dead too, not it would have mattered.

And it wasn't like I was the same girl he'd once loved either. I dreaded his memories returning because I knew he'd hate me when they did. We'd lived by the same code once, the two of us. Destroy the vampires any way possible to make the world safe for the children of the world. Now look at me, a Kindred mole.

I worked for and protected the vamps for a selfish purpose, to protect my child. If I'd had any kind of scruples, I would have let her die ten years ago and kept hunting the damned leeches. But you never know what you'll do until fate throws you into the worst possible circumstances. That's when you find out exactly where you stand, what you're really made of. It had been the ultimate test, and one I'd ultimately failed.

I washed my face and dried it, careful to remove all traces of my tears. I left the bathroom and made myself another cup of coffee before rejoining Cormac in the main cabin.

PLANS

USED TO BE'S DON'T COUNT ANYMORE

THEY JUST LAY ON THE FLOOR 'TIL WE SWEEP THEM AWAY

YOU DON'T BRING ME FLOWERS - NEIL DIAMOND & BARBARA STREISAND

I came out and sat down again without saying a word. Cormac picked up a few things from the couch beside him and walked over to me, holding them out. I looked up and he gestured for me to take them. I took the passport readily enough, but I hesitated over the money in his hand.

"There is more," he said. "This is just...."

"Pin money?" I asked dryly.

"Yes, complements of Brenda," he told me, a smile playing around his lips.

"Oh, really?" If it was Brenda's money, I didn't have single a problem taking it.

"Yes," he replied.

I counted the money quickly; he'd given me seven hundred and fifty dollars. "I must be buying a lot of pins."

He walked back across the cabin. "As I said, there is more."

A quick look at the passport told me the picture was what I'd expected; bad.

Cormac sat back down and cleared his throat. "And there is something else," he said hesitantly. "In Berlin, due to the way their chantry is run, arrangements have been made for both of us to stay there, but unfortunately as you are not Kindred they have been told that you are my ghoul. Ghouls are not allowed to, um, how did she put it? Roam free within the chantry."

I didn't understand what he meant. "What, you get a leash?"

He gave me a level look. "You must be with me at all times or else locked in the room."

I stared at him in disbelief. He was going to lock me alone in a room? In a building full of blood-sucking fiends?

"And Brenda was not sure if two beds were included in the arrangements," he added softly.

I closed my eyes at his words. "Why am I not surprised?" Visions of our shared past haunted me and I had to open my eyes to chase them away.

"I have also asked Brenda to keep an eye on Corrine in our absence."

"Gee," I murmured, shooting him a hard look, "lets just have the wolf watch the sheep."

"She is doing it as a favor to me," he told me. "She is not to become involved in her life, rather she is to make sure that nobody else does in specifically your absence, other than Jared."

Reluctantly, I nodded. "At least someone will keep an eye on her." Not exactly the best choice, but a good one under the circumstances.

"And possibly Summer," Cormac added.

I didn't recognize the name. "Who?"

"A friend of mine," he explained.

"Summer?" The more I thought about it, the more the name seemed familiar. "Does she have a sister named Winter?"

"As a matter of fact," he confirmed, "Winter is her twin. There is also Autumn and Spring is the youngest."

"Let me guess, they own The Four Seasons." It was a magic shop near downtown Salem, and one mentioned frequently at Society meetings.

"Yes."

That meant they *were* witches, but since no one at St. Stephen's had been able to prove that yet we hadn't touched them. "So you're having her keep an eye on Corrine?"

"Ah, watch out for her well being would be a better term," he corrected. "I just obtained my copy of the contract before leaving, I will be overnighting Brenda a copy of it so she knows what she's in for. Or into."

I really didn't want to discuss the contract again so I changed the subject quickly. "So we're headed to Berlin. What is it we're supposed to be doing?" I asked him.

"We are going to retrace Dougal's steps," he reminded me. "Hopefully find his grimoire."

"Okay." That sounded simple enough. "And he was in Berlin at this chantry?"

"Yes."

"So how long does it take to fly to Berlin?" Actually, this was the first time I'd ever been on a plane. Cormac's presence had unnerved me enough that I hadn't been bothered by the lift off.

"It will take well over half a day," he said.

"We'll get there some time tomorrow afternoon?"

"Yes, toward evening."

We ran out of things to say and an awkward silence filled the cabin. After several minutes, he picked up one of his books and started reading. I didn't want to just stare at him, so I looked around for my bags only to realize that they weren't where I'd left them.

"Where're my bags?" I asked, trying not to sound too alarmed. All my weapons were in those bags, at least all the ones I wasn't wearing.

"I moved them into the bedroom," he told me, not looking up from the pages of his book.

"Cool," I replied, relieved. I went into the bedroom and took out a hand full of round pieces of wood. A moment's digging turned up my sharpest knife; I kept the scabbard wrapped in an old towel to make sure it didn't accidentally come loose, you could lose your hand on that thing, it was very sharp.

I went back to my seat in the main cabin and laid the towel on the floor to catch the shavings as I started sharpening the pieces of wood.

From the corner of my eye I saw Cormac open what looked like a secret compartment in the book he'd been reading. He took out a letter, unfolded the paper, and began reading. I watched, but didn't comment until he was midway through the second letter. It was edged in black, and made him sigh.

"Bad news?" I asked nonchalantly. I remember Linda telling me once that if a letter was edged in black it usually meant someone died.

"Yes," he replied sadly.

He mumbled something else that I didn't catch, but I didn't ask. If he wanted me to know, I figured he'd tell me. His business wasn't mine anymore and I didn't have a right to ask. Eventually, though, my curiosity got the better of me.

"Anyone we know?"

"They are letters to a mage named Gomi," he told me. "From Dougal."

"That name's kind of familiar," I murmured. "Who is he?"

"He's a powerful mage in Ramadan," he replied softly, apparently not expecting me to know what he was talking about.

The thing was, I did. Ramadan was another world that Mac had once told me about. In many ways it was similar to ours, but for the most part it was very different. Mac had met Gomi in Ramadan long before he'd come to Baltimore. "Dougal knew Gomi? Is this the same Gomi?"

"Yes."

"It's really weird that he would know the same mage that you knew," I commented.

"Gomi is the one who alerted Dougal to my existence." He finished reading the third note and folded it up. "He had no idea what would happen, he had recognized me as a mage and an intellectual."

I shot him an angry look that he didn't see. "So we have some mage in some other world to thank for everything that happened? Gee, that's nice to know. So what was the bad news?"

"It is the letter again to Gomi from Dougal recounting the, ah, the night," he replied.

I raised an eyebrow at him. "The night?"

"*The* night," he said with a meaningful look my way.

"Really?" That was some coincidence. I wondered where he'd gotten the letters. "What does it say?"

He pulled out the black edged note and held it out toward me. I sat down my knife and stake and rose to walk over and get it. He was reading another note and never even looked up. I returned to my seat, opened the note and began to read. I could feel the emotion draining from my face as I read until by the time I reached the end my face felt like stone. The letter was addressed simply to "Friend Gomi."

Friend Gami,

It is with heavy heart that I write you this eve, but I feel I must inform you of recent events. When I last wrote to you, I told you that Cormac Brennan's life was in danger. I approached him as you suggested, even offered the embrace to him. Unfortunately, I barely escaped with my life. However, this is not the worst of it, friend. Our prince ordered the death of Cormac and his lover Eliza Dushku. Only by pleading that it would make far better sense to bring them into the clan than to destroy them was I able to convince our leader to order their embrace.

I and several of my kind went to Cormac's apartment where he lived with Eliza. They fought us, which we expected, but through the ineptness of one of my clan mates the girl was killed. Knowing how Cormac felt about her, the prince felt it would be best if he retained no memories of her. I have told you of the rare properties of my blood, and it was for that reason the prince ordered me to bring Cormac into the clan.

He is truly everything that you told me and more. He is the companion that I had never thought to find, Gomi. Although he remembers nothing from his mortal life, he is very intelligent and his theories constantly challenge my mind.

Still, he is quiet, sometimes too quiet, and I wonder if he remembers his Eliza. It seems that a deep and abiding love is the only way to reverse the curse that my vitae inflicts on those I embrace, but I'm not sure if his memories of the girl would do the trick. Lon only remembered his mortal life after he was reunited with the girl he'd been about to marry when I turned him.

It does weigh heavy on my mind that I had to embrace Cormac against his will. He has asked me briefly about his mortal life, and rather than admit the circumstances surrounding his embrace, I told him that there were horrible things in his past that he wouldn't want to remember. I led him to believe that there may be a spell in my grimoire that would return his

memory, but the truth I fear is that only Eliza could do that for him and she is dead. I have written down everything I knew of his mortal life and the girl he once loved and have hidden it among your letters. Perhaps if he had that information it would be enough to pierce the veil and bring back his memories. I only hope that he never asks for his memory back, as I'm not sure I could live with the loss of his companionship.

I hope that you understand when I tell you that I will not be able to visit any time soon. I will not be able to leave Cormac for some years, and I can't run the risk of someone in Ramadan recognizing him, for I know he was well liked there.

I would send you more information about Kate, the high generation Kindred I told you of, but she disappeared the night of Cormac's embrace. If I come across her again, I will do my best to get the information you seek.

I look forward to hearing from you soon, and pray that you can forgive my actions.

Your friend,
Dougal Galloway

The letter was signed "Your Friend, Dougal Galloway." Keeping my face carefully blank, I stood and returned the letter to Cormac without a word. I returned to my seat and by the time I looked again at Cormac he had already replaced the letters in the book. I made no comment about the note, not even the mention of Kate.

I picked up the stake-making supplies and vigorously applied the knife to the wood. Carefully avoiding looking in Cormac's direction, I made quick work of the wood I'd brought out, wishing with each one I finished that I could stick it in Dougal's dead black heart.

Near dawn, Cormac stood. "Would you like the bed?" He asked me.

I shook my head. "It's probably too soft for me," I told him. "I'll take the couch."

"Suit yourself," he said with a shrug as he bent to gather his things.

"Plus it gives me access to the kitchen and the bathroom," I reminded him.

"I sleep like the dead, you wouldn't wake me," he replied, turning to glance at me.

I shot him a scathing look. "That's the whole entire point," I said harshly. "Do you think it would be fun for me to come out here to watch TV with a stiff on the couch?"

He sighed. "As you wish."

"As I wish," I muttered under my breath. Like I'll ever get what I wished for.

He left the stakes on the couch where he'd sat and walked toward the back of the plane and the bedroom. When he drew even with me, I called his name softly. He stopped and half turned in my direction, looking at me expectantly.

"I was kind of hoping you could do something for me," I said hesitantly. I didn't want to do this, but I knew there was no one else I could trust.

"And that would be?" he asked softly.

"Well," I began, "we don't know what's going to happen on this jaunt. The other members of your clan were right to wonder if one or both of us would survive this whole thing, but if it happens that I don't survive—" I looked everywhere but at him, not comfortable with the knowledge that I actually trusted him enough to ask this. "If I don't survive could you do something for me?"

"Name it."

I glanced up at him from the corner of my eye. "Can you swear that if anything happens to me you'll see that Corrine is taken care of? That she'll never be embraced?"

He paused long enough that I thought he was going to refuse, then said, "I will do whatever is in my power to prevent it."

"Do you swear?" I repeated. This was the most important thing in the world to me; I needed him to swear it.

"Yes."

I let out a breath I didn't know I'd been holding. "Thank you."

"If you will do something for me," he added softly.

I looked up at him, suspicious of his motives. What could he possibly want from me?

He returned my look with a direct one of his own. "No matter if I live or die through this adventure," he said softly, "prevent Corrine from taking the path that I chose, that we chose."

It took me a minute to realize what he was talking about. "The whole hunter thing?"

"Yes."

I looked down. "It would be a conflict of interest if I encouraged her in that, now wouldn't it?" If she became a hunter, I would most likely be the first one on her target list, given both what I was and what I did for the Tremere.

"Yes," he agreed. "Good night."

He'd barely made it into the bedroom when I heard his cell phone ring. He hadn't closed the door all the way and I heard him answer. When he learned who it was, his voice got real hard.

"On what business?" I heard him demand of the caller.

A moment later he was standing at my side holding the phone out to me. "It's your mother," he said coldly.

"Will you quit calling her that?" I asked him, more than a little pissed that he still insisted on calling her my mother. I hated it.

"No," he replied simply before turning and walking back into the bedroom.

I sighed. We were going to have to come to terms on that or I knew I'd end up staking him. I put the phone to my ear. "Kate?"

"Eliza, where are you?" she demanded.

"Somewhere over the Atlantic," I told her, then waited for the explosion.

She didn't disappoint me. "You went with him?" she cried. "After I told you not to?"

After she *told* me? "Since when do you have any say in what I do, Kate?" I asked, my voice very hard and cold.

"Eliza," she pleaded, "you know I only want what's best for you."

"I know no such thing," I said firmly. "I only know you want what's best for *you*."

"I would never do anything to hurt you, dear."

If I didn't know her better, I'd think she was insulted by my suspicions. As it was I knew that she was just trying to manipulate me. "Wouldn't you, Prudence?"

"You would believe him over me?" she said, outraged, "your own—"

I cut her off. "Don't say it, *Kate*," I warned her, my voice like ice. "And who said I believed him?"

"That message you left me," she replied, pleading with me once again. "Do you really think I knew about the raid? Don't you think I would have stopped it if I had known?"

"I don't know," I answered coldly, "would you have? He is right about one thing, *Kate*. You never liked him twenty years ago, and you sure as hell don't like him now."

"Do you have any idea what he's been up to the last two years?" she asked angrily. "He's been living with a witch in LA. Hell, he's visited one of the local Verbena several times in the last week alone. He spends a lot of time with that Nina in LA, and tonight he was with Brenda Thompson and her pathetic sister."

That was *Kate* for you, when she knew she was cornered, she always attacked the most convenient target. "Is there going to be an intermission sometime soon?" I murmured, pretending boredom. "Cause I think I'd like to get some popcorn."

She paused in her tirade, then changed tactics. "I know how much you loved him, dear. I would hate to see you hurt again."

I gave a low laugh, amused that she'd think I'd fall for the concerned mother routine after all these years. "You act as if we're still going to get married," I told her. "It's been twenty years, *Kate*, and he's Kindred. Get over it already."

"Are you sure that you're over it?" she insinuated. "That you don't still love him? In twenty years you've never even looked at anyone else."

I stiffened at her words, angry that she would go this far in pretending to care about how I felt. "What I feel for him is none of your business, *Kate*," I said flatly. "You should be more concerned with your own neck. I meant what I said; if you knew what was going to happen and did nothing to stop it, I will kill you."

"Your own mother, *Eliza*?" I could hear the disbelief in her voice. Even now she didn't think I was serious about believing she could do anything wrong. "You would kill your own blood because of a no-good bastard that would never have made you happy?"

"You have never been my mother, *Kate*," I said fiercely, "and I would kill you in a heartbeat. That raid destroyed all of our lives. Your clan stole everything we could have been from us and now look at what I am, what *Cormac* is. If all of this is because of you, if I had to give my child to someone else to raise just because you thought *Mac* wasn't good enough for me, I will hunt you down and kill you like a dog. I'll find you and I'll send you to final death and believe me, I won't shed a tear over it, *Kate*." I didn't mind being this harsh to her. She had to find out sooner or later that I was serious.

There was a shocked silence on the line, and when she spoke again there was fear in her voice. "*Eliza*, you have to believe that I would never have done such a thing," she begged.

I wasn't falling for her innocent act. If anything, her protests were beginning to convince me that she had known about the raid. "I don't have to do anything but live by my contract and die," I reminded her quite seriously. "But I will find out the truth if it takes me the rest of my unnaturally long life, *Kate*, mark my words."

Taking the phone from my ear I pushed the 'end' button, hanging up on her. I put my head back against the seat and stared at the ceiling. Could I kill *Kate*? She had given birth to me, after all. Then I remembered *Linda*, and *Kate*'s frequent absences. I remembered her manipulations and the times she had abandoned me to do her clan's business.

Mac and I had once had a real chance for a future. We could have raised Corrine together and led a normal, happy life. If Kate had known about the plans to end our future, nothing short of my own death would stop me from killing her.

I could hear Cormac chanting softly in the bedroom and wondered just what he was doing. The smell of burning feathers reminded me of Kate and my childhood, and it made me flinch to remember. I looked down at the daisy on the seat beside me and tried to tell myself that Cormac was just like Kate now, but somehow I couldn't quite bring myself to believe it.

When all sound had stopped in the back of the plane, I rose and walked silently to the doorway of the bedroom. I listened carefully, but all I heard was the drone of the engines. It was unnerving to know he was in there but not hear him breathing. Other than growing up with Kate, I'd never actually spent any time with a vamp; it was bizarre to be doing it now.

I opened the door very quietly and peeked inside. He was lying on the bed covered with a light sheet. He looked dead. Hell, he was dead, what was I thinking?

I knew better than to spend any time in the room with him like that, it was generally believed that sleeping vamps were as likely to wake up and instinctively kill you as they were to ignore your presence. I picked up my suitcase and carefully closed the door behind me. I took the case into the main cabin and sat it on the couch. Opening it, I took out the photo album I'd packed and put it on the low table.

A quick search of the kitchen area turned up some waxed paper. I took it back to the low table and laid two six-inch squares of the paper down. I brought the daisy to my nose and inhaled its fragrant perfume. Had Cormac remembered what daisies had once meant to us? Or had he simply remembered the gesture and repeated it just to get to me? Either way it didn't matter. I remembered and that was enough.

I turned to the back of the album where I kept my oldest photos. This book had been one of the few things Kate had saved from our apartment, although not very many of the pictures had survived intact. Lying under the plastic was another daisy, one he'd given me just weeks before he died.

Blinking away the tears that tried to form, I laid the fresh daisy down on one of the squares of waxed paper. It had been years since I'd pressed a flower, but I remembered how as if it were yesterday. I carefully arranged the petals and laid the second square over it. I placed it on the opened book and gently closed it, pressing the flower between the pages.

I put the book back in the bottom of the suitcase and laid down on the couch. I had to rearrange my schedule to allow for Cormac's, and that meant sleeping during the day so I could be awake and alert at night. I didn't think it would be hard for me to go to nod off, I really hadn't gotten much sleep lately. By all rights, I should have dropped off right away.

It took me a long time to fall asleep.

MEMORIES OF LOVE

I REMEMBER OUR BODIES LYING TANGLED IN THE SHEETS

I REMEMBER WHEN LOVE USED TO BE SO SWEET

TANGLED - JANE WIEDLIN

For most of the day I tried to get some sleep but I'd only actually gotten about four hours rest before I finally gave up. Mac and that night nearly twenty years ago haunted my dreams. I kept waking up wanting to scream but I couldn't.

When I was awake, I found myself wondering what life would have been like if Mac and I had been able to kill the vamps that had attacked our apartment. I'd told myself years ago not to live in the might-have-beens, but now I couldn't seem to stop.

I took a long hot shower before the sun went down to try and erase those thoughts from my mind but it didn't help. I strung the ring on the new chain I'd bought the day before and fastened it on my neck. I'd made sure the chain was a long one; the necklines of the clothes Corrine had picked out tended to be a lot lower than anything I'd worn in years. The ring fell low between my breasts.

I dressed in a tank top and jeans, careful not to pull on the stitches in my shoulder. A quick look at those stitches showed that they were nearly healed. I knew that I could take them out soon and not worry about the wound reopening. I'm a fast healer; it's one of the few perks of being half-vampire.

I sat down on the couch in the main cabin and started to brush out my hair as the sun went down. I'd hoped to be completely ready by the time Cormac got up, but things hadn't worked out that way.

Suddenly I heard the door to the back cabin bang open and instinctively I reached for the stake at my back. Cormac walked quickly out of the bedroom wearing only the dress slacks he'd had on the night before and a white tank top. As he crossed the room, I could see the blood on his face. I stood, looking for the enemy, but then to my amazement I realized that he was crying. Legend is right in this instance; vamps really do cry blood tears.

"What's the matter?" I demanded.

He kept coming toward me, and I stepped back into the corner. He followed me, and fell to his knees at my feet. He threw his arms around my legs and held on as if his life depended on it. His face was pressed against my right side and I could feel the coolness of his tears soak through my shirt. I stood there, shocked, still holding the brush in my left hand and a stake in my right.

"Oh, Eliza," he whispered brokenly.

"Cormac?" I looked down at the top of his head. He didn't seem to be hurt in any way.

"What's the problem?"

"I-I've—" he stuttered, then said in a shaking voice, "Oh Eliza, I've missed you so." He was still crying.

"Cormac," I said patiently, trying to make some kind of sense out of his behavior, "you've had amnesia."

"Notwithstanding," he replied with his face still pressed against my side, "I've missed you so."

"You wanna tell me what's going on here?" I asked him, still very confused. It felt good to be this close to him, but damn it, he was a vamp! Having him this close was setting off alarms in every part of my brain. "This is too weird."

"I've had another dream," he told me, finally starting to calm. "A memory."

"Okay." I still didn't understand, but at least he wasn't crying any more. I'd never seen Mac cry, and the blood was a little too much for me.

"Of *the* night," he told me.

I took a deep breath and tossed the stake to the couch beside me. The events of that night were still fresh in my mind, I'd been thinking or dreaming about it all day long. Maybe my explanation the night before had triggered his dream. I didn't want to believe that he'd actually remembered everything that had happened, it would be too cruel after everything that had happened to us.

"Of how my heart ached when I thought you were dead," he continued, sorrow filling his voice.

"You had a dream," I whispered, trying to keep him calm. It had to have only been a dream, but I know better than most people that dreams sometimes had the power to do more damage than the memories themselves.

"A memory," he insisted.

I slowly put my hand on the top of his head, hesitant to touch him, but unable to stop myself. Just then his being a vamp didn't seem that important to me. As he lifted his head from my side, I noticed a burn scar on his right upper arm, a scar that had quite obviously destroyed a tattoo that had once been there. The brush fell from my hand to the floor.

I remembered the first time I'd seen the tribal tattoo on his arm. We hadn't been dating for very long, only a few weeks, and had gone to the beach with Glenn and his girlfriend Jane. From beneath my lashes, I'd watched him strip off his shirt and seen his tattoos. He had been proud of the tribal Dreamspeaker tattoo, and now it was gone, destroyed like our lives.

I ran my fingers lightly down the rippled skin, remembering how I'd once touched that tattoo in our warm apartment in Baltimore. His skin was so cold.

"I saw the entire night," he told me. "The wine, the pasta, the... sappy music."

I refused to give in to the tears that filled my eyes. The deep breath I took shook from the strain of holding them back. Unconsciously, I bit at my lip.

"Making love in front of the fire," he continued.

I couldn't stop the sob that escaped. I could only stare at the scar on his arm and remember that night with him. In a tight whisper, I asked, "What happened to your arm?"

"Dougal erased my tattoo," he said softly.

"Why?" Why had his sire been so cruel? The Dougal who'd written that letter to Gomi didn't fit the image of someone who would brutally and deliberately burn away a tattoo that Mac had once been so proud of.

"I thought you were dead, Eliza," he admitted sadly. "I wanted nothing more than to forget everything, and I did."

I started crying, I couldn't help it. "So easy, was it?" I tried to make my voice hard, but it shook. He'd wanted to forget what we had shared, what we had meant to each other. I'd spent twenty years fighting my memories, but he'd decided to forget me then done it in a single irreversible moment.

"It was the hardest decision of my life," he professed. "I knew I couldn't live without you."

The strength ran out of my legs and I collapsed onto the edge of the couch. Cormac came with me, balancing me so that I didn't fall to the floor. He knelt between my knees, his hands on my waist and mine on his shoulders. I stared at him, speechless, wounded to the core.

I almost envied the ease with which he'd been able to forget me, regardless of what it had cost him. If I'd had the choice to live the life I've lived for the last twenty years or forget the pain of losing him—I knew that for Corrine's sake I wouldn't have changed anything. The embrace would have killed her.

Cormac leaned in closer and rested his head on my chest. I looked down at him for a long time, torn by my emotions. Regardless of what he now was, I had loved him once, maybe I still did. My hands slid from his shoulders around his back, embracing him for the first time in nearly twenty years. His skin was chilled, but if I tried really hard, I could pretend that he'd just come inside from a cold winter's day.

I took a deep shaky breath and rested my cheek on his hair. We had been so close once, closer than two people had a right to be. I shut my eyes tight and relished the feel of him near me again; at least I did until I realized that he wasn't breathing. It was almost surreal to know that he still functioned so much like a human, but he did it without his heart pumping, without drawing life-giving oxygen into his lungs.

He pulled back to look up at me, bringing our faces very close together. He reached up to wipe the tears from my face with his thumb, but as soon as he'd cleaned off my cheek, more tears fell. I looked back at him, wanting so badly to pretend that nothing mattered except that we were together, but the traces of blood tears still around his eyes made me realize that I just couldn't do it.

I found myself biting my lip, a habit I thought I'd given up years ago. Cormac saw it and smiled slightly. "What?" I asked softly, feeling very self-conscious.

He shook his head but didn't answer. Finally the tears stopped falling from my eyes and I reached up to wipe them away, sniffing. I knew I probably looked very human to him then, with eyes red and swollen from crying, my face flushed with embarrassment.

One of Cormac's hands slid from my waist to my thigh while the other reached up to tuck my hair behind my ear. He did it so slowly, lingeringly, as if he was relishing the feel of my skin beneath his fingertips, that I couldn't stop myself from blushing and I had to look away.

He ran his finger down my cheek and beneath my chin, where he lifted my face back to his. It occurred to me suddenly that I hadn't voluntarily been this close to a man since the night the Kindred had destroyed our lives, and here he was kneeling between my thighs. I pushed the memory of Luther's ghouls out of my mind; Mac would never hurt me like that, would he?

My hands were shaking on his upper arms, and I could feel the rough scar that was a blatant reminder to me of just how many things had changed. I couldn't keep pretending that his cool skin meant nothing. He was a vamp, pure and simple. Other than Kate, I'd never been this close to a vamp that wasn't hurting me or that I wasn't trying to kill.

He must have read something of the unease I felt on my face because he dropped his hands and fell back to sit cross-legged on the floor at my feet. He cupped his hands in his lap in a familiar fashion and seemed to fall into almost a meditative state, one I'd often seen him use when he was human to calm himself.

I watched him for several minutes, unable to look away. It was so strange to see him like this. He acted and behaved so much like the Mac I remembered, but he was a monster, wasn't he? A monster with the memories of our life together.

"So," I asked haltingly, "you remember everything about that night?"

"I believe so," he replied, not looking up.

I sighed. This had been so much easier before he started to remember what we had shared. That he remembered our last night together made me sad and uncomfortable at the same time.

Abruptly he pulled the bottom of his shirt from his pants and raised it to wipe the blood from his face. The movement bared his chest, and unwillingly my eyes were drawn to the tattoo on his upper chest. I remembered when he'd gotten that tattoo. We'd gone together with Glenn and Jane and all of us had walked out of the tattoo parlor marked in one way or another.

He mumbled something about dry-cleaning and rubber clothes that made me chuckle.

"Well, you're not real good for my wardrobe, either," I reminded him, looking down at the blood on my shirt. I had to stop myself from biting my lip again, and added, "Corrine will be upset that I'm ruining the new clothes so soon."

"I believe Corrine was happy that you even bought the new clothes," he told me.

"Like I bought them," I muttered under my breath.

He heard. "Allowed her to buy them for you."

I shrugged. "I didn't have a choice, the girl is stubborn," I told him, then I frowned and pretended to think about that statement for a moment. "Gee, I wonder where she got that from."

He looked at the ceiling trying to look all innocent and started whistling. I was reaching down for the brush I'd dropped earlier when I recognized the song. I stopped in mid motion; it was an Irish lullaby that Cormac had once told me his mother used to sing to him, one I'd sung to Corrine when she was little.

I shook off the memories and picked up the brush. I stood and walked toward my suitcase to put some distance between us. I quickly finished brushing out my hair and reached into the case for a white tank top. I could feel his eyes on me, and it made me feel awkward.

I turned to look in his direction. "I'm, ah, I'm gonna go change." My hands made a useless gesture and I willed them to still as I walked toward the rear of the plane to change in the bathroom. He watched me leave the cabin in silence.

In the bathroom I splashed cold water on my face to try and clear my head. I looked into the mirror and saw the need in my eyes, the need to be with Mac again, to feel once more what it had been like when we made love.

I closed my eyes and rested my forehead on the mirror. I'd known the dangers of being with him like this; in my heart I'd known exactly how being with him would make me feel. Things hadn't changed for me; the lights still dimmed when he walked in the room. We hadn't even been together twenty-four hours, what would it be like at the end of the two weeks?

The most I could hope for was a broken heart. There was no future for us, not now. I kept reminding myself that he was a vampire, a monster. His heart no longer beat, how could he ever love me again? And we were searching for his memories, although they seemed to be finding him at an astounding pace considering that he hadn't remembered a thing in nineteen years.

And close on the heels of that was the knowledge that when he did remember everything he'd realize exactly how much I'd changed. Could he forgive me for giving up all we'd once believed in to save our daughter? Or would he hate me for it?

There was nothing I could do to avoid it now. I'd committed myself to being with him for these two weeks and I would do what I promised, come hell or high water, regardless of the cost to my sanity or my life. In thirteen days we would be back in Salem and I'd just walk

away, let the past fall dead again. If something happened to me, he'd sworn to make sure Corrine remained human. There was nothing more I could expect from him, was there?

BERLIN

DEEP WITHIN MY SOUL I FEEL

NOTHING'S LIKE IT USED TO BE

QUIT PLAYING GAMES WITH MY HEART - BACKSTREET BOYS

I quickly changed my shirt and was able to get most of the blood out of the one I'd been wearing. When I came out of the bathroom I could hear him moving around in the bedroom. I quickly packed the rest of my things and stood looking down into the suitcase for a moment, thinking about what was most familiar to me now; weapons.

When Cormac came back out I looked up at him. He was wearing clothes identical to what he'd had on the night before, which didn't surprise me. His shirt wasn't quite buttoned all the way, and he had a leather trench coat over his arm. He also wore a figure-eight holster that held two large handguns.

"I assumed we were doing the whole prince thing," I told him, "and I didn't know how obvious I could get with my... accessories."

He knew exactly what I was talking about. "What accessories do you have besides stakes?"

I shrugged. "A knife or two." I had a few other things too, but nothing that worked well on vamps, so they weren't worth mentioning.

"Those would be better," he said.

"Than the stakes?" I asked, surprised.

"Where we're going?" he replied. "I believe so."

It was a lot harder to hurt Kindred with a knife than with a stake. "Good point."

"Exactly."

"Okay," I said to myself, "knives are good, but stakes are in the suitcase."

"If you can hide one well," he told me, "you may take a stake."

"I may?" I asked dryly, trying not to smile. "I have your permission?" I pulled a stake from its usual place at the small of my back.

"Eliza," he said patiently, "you are supposed to be my ghoul while at the chantry."

I froze for a moment at his words, not liking the reminder of our deception. I dropped the stake into the suitcase and pulled out a large double bladed knife in its holster. With ease of motion that came from years of habit, I fastened it on my belt at my right hip.

As I closed the suitcase and picked up my jacket, Cormac checked his guns with a practiced motion that told me he'd worn them for years. I wanted to cry; although he'd owned a gun and known how to use it quite well, my Mac hadn't needed anything more than his mind and his magic to defend himself. Then I remembered that his magic hadn't been enough to save us from the monsters that had invaded our apartment.

Unaware of my morbid thoughts, he put on the trench coat and finished buttoning his shirt. As he began to do up his tie, the ghoul entered the cabin.

"Excuse me sir," Jax addressed Cormac with utmost respect. "I understand you will be seeing the prince as a first stop on your visit here?"

"Of course," he replied.

"The car is ready whenever you are ready." The ghoul stood patiently as if waiting for orders. At least he was a well-trained puppy.

"Jax," Cormac asked, "exactly what will you be doing while we are staying at the chantry?"

"I'll be staying with the plane," he explained. "There's not enough room at this airport for it to remain here so I will be taking it on to Paris." He stepped forward and handed Cormac a business card. "When you are ready for me to return just give me a call."

"Okay," Cormac agreed. "Then we should take everything with us."

The 'everything' consisted of my suitcase and carry on bag, Cormac's suitcase, knapsack, duffel bag, and a sword shaped object wrapped in a tarp that I was betting really was a sword. I grabbed my luggage and the crossbow while Jax helped Cormac with his things. Soon everything was packed into the waiting Mercedes.

Cormac put his knapsack on the floor behind his seat, then watched as I laid the crossbow on backseat within easy reach. "You're not planning on taking that in, are you?" he asked quietly.

I shot a glance between him and the weapon. "Do you think they'd let me?" I seriously doubted they would, but I also knew that anything could happen between here and our destination.

"Do you think I would let you?" he said in a low voice.

I turned away to hide my smile. "Party pooper."

Jax handed Cormac an envelope that contained maps and directions to both the prince's palace and the Tremere Chantry. It also listed a few nightspots and restaurants, not that I thought we'd need them. Mac and I had never been much for nightclubs, and I hadn't had much of an appetite since he'd returned from the dead.

As Cormac drove toward downtown Berlin, he asked for his phone back. When I handed it to him, he asked, "Did your mother call again?"

I took a deep breath to control the anger I felt at that word. "You know, we're really going to have to come to terms on this. Either you're gonna have to quit calling her that or I'm gonna have to start carrying more stakes." When he didn't reply, I added, "Cause I'll start using them."

"As long as you start with her," he told me.

"She at least listens when I tell her to quit referring to herself as my mother." Well, sometimes she did.

"She didn't last night."

I shot him an angry look. I'd forgotten that Cormac would now have the same ability I had to enhance his hearing. I made a mental note to take pains not to be overheard in the future and said, "You know, there's a time and a place for overlistening, and my conversations are not the time or the place."

"I heard you tell her to not call herself that rather loudly," he replied, glancing at me. "It is a rather small plane, Eliza."

Yes it was, but I knew he'd made the effort to hear both sides of the conversation just the same. "Mmm hmm. So are we gonna come to terms with this whole thing?"

"What would you prefer I call her?" He seemed to be concentrating on traffic, but I could tell he didn't like talking about Kate.

"I believe right now she's going by—"

"Be nice," he warned me in a low voice.

"—Prudence," I continued, hiding a smile, "so why not use it? Although you know I call her Kate."

His phone rang, and I hoped it wasn't Kate. Just because the sun was still up over Salem didn't mean it wouldn't be her. Rules that applied for normal Kindred didn't always apply to her. He let it ring once more, then answered it.

"Hello?" he said so calmly that I wondered if he'd even considered that it might have been Kate. "Corrine."

I breathed a sigh of relief. I didn't really want to talk to Kate where Cormac might overhear again. It didn't occur to me that this might be worse.

Cormac shot a glance in my direction. "Yes," he told her. "Yes, just a moment, dear."

"Dear?" I raised my eyebrows at him as I took the phone. "Corrine, I'm glad you called," I said into the handset.

"How are things going?" she asked.

I looked out the window at the streets of Berlin. "About what I expected."

"You're arguing?" she accused.

I was very conscious of Cormac sitting beside me; I knew he was probably listening to the entire conversation. "Have we done anything else in the last week?"

"At least you know the fire's still there, don't you?"

I closed my eyes. "Corrine, please," I asked softly. I knew she was only trying to do what she felt was best, but I still very much had my doubts.

"You have to admit you still care for him," she pressed.

"I don't have to do any such thing," I told her coolly. Then I did the only thing I could do, I changed the subject. "I hear you had a visitor the other night."

"Jared," she confirmed. "We talked for hours, Eliza. There are so many things I never dreamed about! Things I can learn how to do, powers I can harness. I never thought it could be like this." She was so excited that I wanted to cry for her happiness.

"I'm glad," I said softly.

"Look," she said tentatively, "Jared said something when Cormac was here that made me think, Eliza. He said I looked like you."

Here was the very thing Cormac warned me about. "People have said that all your life," I reminded her cautiously. "Why would it make you think about it now?"

"Well," she replied, "I always wondered why you picked me to take care of all these years. Why you loved me like you have."

I rubbed my forehead and the sudden ache I felt there. "I loved you because you're you, Corrine," I told her honestly. "I take care of you because I love you."

"No other reason?" she persisted.

"Do I need another? Look, I wish I could tell you that I was your mother, luv. When I thought Mac was dead—" abruptly I remembered that he was right beside me and could hear everything I said. I dropped my voice, but made myself continue. There were things I had to tell Corrine, and if things turned out badly this might be the only time I had to do it.

"I wanted to die too," I admitted softly. "You were the only reason I kept on, Corrine. You know I couldn't love you any more if you were my daughter. I wish—" My voice caught, and I had to take a deep breath before I could continue.

"Corrine, the Wrights did right by you," I told her, turning away from Cormac and keeping my voice low. "They loved you like you were their own and gave you a wonderful home to grow up in. That's a lot more than I could have ever given a child, my life has been... unusual. I hope you understand."

"I understand, Eliza," she replied softly. "I do."

I smiled sadly; I think she did understand that I was her mother and that I loved her, but that I couldn't claim her for reasons I wasn't going into. "Good," I said aloud. "Is everything else going well? School and all?"

"Yeah, why wouldn't it be?" she asked.

"Just checking," I murmured.

"I know," she said. I could tell she was smiling. "You worry."

"Sometimes," I admitted. "Look, Call Cormac's phone if you need anything, okay?" If Kate was taking me seriously, I didn't want to run the risk that she'd hurt Corrine.

"Sure," she replied, obviously confused at my request, "but I don't know what I'd need."

"Okay, well, take care of yourself," I said softly. I wanted to warn her about Kate, about so many other things, but there was no good place for me to start without telling her everything.

"Have a good trip," she told me cheerfully. "Call me."

"Yeah, I will, I'll call you," I promised, knowing I'd try to do it when Cormac wasn't right next to me. "I love you."

"I love you too," she replied. "Tell Cormac I hope everything's okay."

I shot a glance at him. "Yeah. Yeah, I'll tell him." Like I needed to, he was probably listening to every word we said.

We said our good-byes and I hung up the phone. I handed it back without looking at him, not sure how he would react to what had been said.

"How is she?" he asked.

"You weren't overlistening?" I asked in surprise.

He looked at his watch. "We missed the time by about an hour and I don't see the place...."

I shook my head. Maybe he hadn't been listening. Maybe I was too suspecting, too mistrustful after years of caution. Did it matter? What we'd felt twenty years ago was over, things would never be the same between us, they couldn't be.

"She's fine," I assured him. "She seems to like Jared quite well. She would, he was a nice guy, from what I remember of him. It looks as if that she had a few things to think about after Jared's visit."

"Oh?" He turned his blinker on and changed lanes.

"Yeah, well you did warn me," I reminded him.

"Yes, I did." Did he have to sound so smug when he said that?

A few minutes later we pulled through a set of large gates in front of a large palace. Cormac pulled up to the doors and turned off the car. A ghoulish came around and opened his door, and then waited for Cormac to grab his bag and me to exit before he drove the car away to a parking area nearby.

Walking into a palace full of bloodsuckers without a dozen stakes and the crossbow made the skin between my shoulder blades itch, but it couldn't be helped. I was supposed to be one of the 'in' crowd now, Cormac's ghoulish. I wondered if he had enough power in their society to protect me from other vamps, but in the end I knew it would come down to my own wits, just like it always did.

A tall Hispanic gentleman stood at the top of the steps waiting for us. He had several facial piercings, but surprisingly none that looked too tacky. He held his hand out to the Kindred

beside me and said, "Cormac, it is good to see you again." He had a Spanish accent and might have been cute if he wasn't a monster.

Cormac shook his hand. "Jurgen, it's been quite some time."

"Yes, it has been," he agreed with a smile. "Too long. Eduardo suggested that I meet you here. I was supposed to be at the airport, but I was running a bit late."

"That is fine," Cormac assured him. "I remembered my way fairly well."

"Good, good." He shot a glance at me and I looked back at him coolly.

Cormac caught the look. "Jurgen, this is Eliza," he said evenly. "Eliza, this is Jurgen."

"It is good to meet you," the fiend told me pleasantly.

I nodded as respectfully as I could, but kept my mouth shut. Just because I had to be around a bunch of vamps didn't mean that I had to socialize with them.

"If you'd like to come in I'll sit with you until the council is ready for you," Jurgen told Cormac. "They're having a bit of a crisis at the moment, but as soon as they're ready...."

"Oh," he asked, curious, "in relation to...?"

"Just Kindred politics," Jurgen replied vaguely.

"The usual."

"Yes, you know how the Ravnos clan is." He stepped aside and gestured into the palace. "If you'll follow me, we'll get you to the prince and then I'll accompany you to the chantry."

He led us through this magnificent palace to a large waiting room. On one end of the room was a love seat and two chairs arranged in a seating area. Cormac sat down on the love seat and I sat next to him, feeling very uncomfortable. Jurgen sat in one of the chairs across from us.

The vamps talked while I stayed out of the conversation. I didn't think anything I had to say would add either to our pretense of me as his ghoul, or the chat they were having. Not anything they wanted to hear, anyway.

"Did you see Dougal when he was here last?" Cormac asked, pointedly not looking in my direction when I shifted on the seat.

"Yes, I did," Jurgen replied, "but I didn't really get a chance to talk to him."

"Did he say if he was journeying on from here?"

"Well, as I said, I didn't really talk to him all that much," he repeated. "I was in the middle of a project when he was here. I don't know where he was headed, I believe he left rather suddenly, actually."

They talked for several minutes about an Earl Hardy and some vamp named Garaboldy. I'd never heard of either of them, but apparently when Dougal disappeared he was involved in a blood hunt. A Blood Hunt occurs when a Kindred breaks too many rules. They are hunted down and killed by any means necessary. Now that's my kind of party.

At some point in their conversation we heard angry voices coming from the next room in French. Jurgen glanced toward the doors, but didn't comment and continued on with the conversation.

It seemed that no one knew where Dougal had gone when he left the Berlin Chantry. He'd requested an out of the way room while he was there, and Cormac wanted to see it. I knew he hoped to find some of Dougal's belongings there, but somehow I doubted he would.

The door to the next room slammed open and a very pretty vamp stormed out. She was extremely angry and her movements were almost violent. A tall male ghoul with long dark hair

followed her out and was nearly running in an effort to catch up with her. Neither of them saw us as they stormed out of the waiting room without a backward glance.

Now we could hear the angry voices quite clearly, but again they spoke in French and I couldn't understand a word. Soon another ghoul came and closed the door, blocking the voices.

Cormac and Jurgen continued to talk for about various subjects, none of them interesting. About ten minutes later, the puppy that had closed the door opened it again and nodded to Jurgen, who stood and gestured for us to precede him into the next room.

The room was large and fancy, like a throne room. There were stools in an 'L' shape down the right side of the room and across the far end. The prince sat on a throne that had wings spread out on either side of it, and he had a white tiger lying at his feet.

One of the vamps on the right, another Hispanic gentleman, nodded pointedly at Cormac, who returned the greeting. We walked forward until we were about fifteen feet from the throne. At first a female ghoul translated what was said into English, but when Cormac replied in German, she quickly stopped. It seemed too pretentious to me; I was very glad that Dougal's plan to embrace me had failed, I never would have survived in this kind of society, I don't have the patience for it.

Not soon enough for me, the audience was over. Cormac nodded again at the Hispanic vamp and Jurgen led us back out of the room.

Once we were walking through the waiting room, Jurgen spoke to Cormac. "Eduardo wished to meet you at the airport himself however, this whole mess came up. He does look forward to speaking with you at the chantry later."

"As I him."

I figured Eduardo was the vamp Cormac had nodded to, Tremere tended to keep to themselves a little so than most clans do.

Jurgen led us back through the palace to the exit where he asked if he could ride back to the chantry with us. Cormac agreed, and while they were waiting for the car, they discussed the Ravnos clan, one I knew almost nothing about.

"They have a fine temper," Jurgen commented.

"I've had very little contact with them," Cormac replied.

"You're fortunate in that," the other Kindred told him. "They tend to be like cockroaches, they multiply, they're everywhere, and they're extremely annoying."

"And they scatter when the lights are turned on," Cormac added.

"Yes, yes," Jurgen said, pleased. "That is exactly it."

The car pulled up and without a word I got into the back seat with the crossbow. Cormac and Jurgen got into the front, and before taking off, Cormac adjusted the rear view mirror so that he could see me clearly.

I smiled wryly; did he expect me to pick up the crossbow and shoot Jurgen with it? As much as I hated having another vamp to watch, at least they were both in the front seat. Why did I feel guilty about thinking like that? They were both monsters, I told myself as I watched the streets of Berlin streak by. They were.

Damn it, they *both* were.

THE CHANTRY

WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME?

ALL THAT I CAN STAND.

DAMNED - BON JOVI

A little while later we pulled up to the palace that was the Tremere Chantry. A ghoul ran around opening doors for the vamps, but I got out before he could touch my door. I wanted to keep the crossbow with me, but I knew they'd never let me take it into the palace.

Jurgen led us into the building, through gilded rooms as impressive as the ones at the Ventrue palace had been. He and Cormac kept up a steady stream of conversation as he led us through the halls, but I wasn't listening. I was too busy trying to keep my eyes on all the vamps and ghouls roaming the halls to pay attention to them. By the time we reached our room, I had a killer headache.

The bedroom was large and very nice except for one thing; it only had one bed and no couch. On one wall were two bedside tables on either side of a very large bed. A writing desk stood to the left of the door, and a dresser to the right. Near the center of the room lay two chairs with a low table between them. Two doors led off the room one to what looked like a bathroom and the other to what had to be a closet or dressing room of some sort.

"One of the house ghouls will bring up your luggage within the next fifteen minutes," Jurgen told us.

"Be careful of the one that looks like a sword wrapped in a tarp," Cormac warned.

"Because it is," Jurgen replied with a smile. "I will let them know that. I believe you know the rules about the ghouls in the house?" he asked, looking pointedly at me.

Cormac didn't even blink. "Yes."

"That is good," he said firmly. "We would hate to have another incident like the one we had two hundred and...." He paused, trying to remember.

"Fifty years ago," Cormac supplied.

"Ah, yes. What a shame."

"Yes, it was," my companion murmured with a pointed look at me. "I'm sure Eliza will be on her best behavior."

I tried to look innocent. "Of course, I will be," I told him in my best 'good-girl' voice.

"Good," Cormac replied.

"I'll leave you two to get settled in," Jurgen said, turning toward the door. "I will come back and alert you when Eduardo returns."

"That room that Dougal requested," Cormac called before the other vamp could leave.

Jurgen turned. "Yes?"

"When would it be possible for me to have a look at it?"

"Well," he replied, thinking, "I have a few things I have to do right now, but possibly after Eduardo returns?"

Cormac nodded. "Of course."

"Perhaps he'll want to show you the room himself," Jurgen suggested.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." At that, he turned and closed the door behind him on his way out.

Cormac took a step away from me as if he expected me to explode. I shook my head as I walked further into the room. I knew I hadn't exactly been the most pleasant, but did he really think I'd stake him for playing the game we'd both agreed to?

I looked around the room taking in the single large bed. "I suppose this was Brenda's idea."

"I don't know that she knew whether to specify double beds." He walked over toward the desk and stood staring down at the items on its surface.

"There's not even a couch in here," I mumbled.

"I'll be quite comfortable on the floor," he told me.

"One of us will be." If he thought I'd be more comfortable on that big soft bed, he was sadly mistaken.

"Do you have something against beds, Eliza?" he asked in a low voice.

"Oh, it'll be just great!" I exclaimed as sarcastically as I could manage. "We can stay up all night and talk girl talk until the sun comes up and then you'll... sleep like the dead. Then I can paint your toenails cherry red and listen to you not breathe and watch your dead body for twelve hours. I'll love it, Mac. It'll be just like fun, only much more gruesome."

I ran a hand across my forehead and looked away, feeling wicked stupid. "I'm sorry," I said softly. "I'm just shooting my mouth off. I'm sorry."

"I can call Jax and have him return you to Salem if you would like," he offered quietly.

"No," I told him more firmly. "I'm on board here. I was just shooting my mouth off." I hadn't meant to say any of that, it just kinda slipped out. It wasn't his fault I hated vamps, hated being around them.

An awkward silence filled the room, broken only when a ghoul knocked on our door. He brought the luggage in and carried it through to the dressing room, where he sat them on stands made for that purpose. We both unpacked a few things into the dresser, avoiding meeting each other's eyes.

As I was wondering exactly what he remembered of the past we were interrupted by another knock at the door. Cormac opened it to find Jurgen.

"I hate to interrupt," he said softly, "but there is a messenger downstairs for you. Of course we cannot allow him in the house and it is a verbal message. Would you like to accompany me down to receive it?"

"Of course," Cormac replied. He gave me a long look. "Be good, stay here," he told me.

"Okay," I answered obediently, although I had to grit my teeth to do so.

When they'd gone, I paced the room restlessly. After a while I crossed to the suitcase and reached in for stakes. I limited myself to four, knowing it would never be enough if they attacked, but hoping against my better instincts that they wouldn't attack a member of their own clan.

Then there was nothing for me to do but pace. I didn't like being left alone, locked in a room this way. I didn't like that I couldn't watch Mac's back in case he needed it. I didn't like being this far away from Corrine if she needed me. I wanted to strike out in frustration, but forced myself to just pace.

When Cormac returned nearly an hour later, I spun toward the door expectantly. He looked at me and gave a slight smile and chuckle as he walked to the nearest bedside stand.

I watched him closely, and he turned to study my face for a moment. "Did you happen to see the blond gentleman in the conclave room?"

I frowned and thought for a moment. "The funny looking guy with the weird pants?"

"Yes," he replied. "Mikko."

"Is that what his name is?" I was more concerned with what Cormac was doing at the nightstand.

"Yes," he murmured, reaching for the drawer and pulling it open. "He has developed an interest in you."

"Oh, really?" Just what I needed, a blood drinking admirer.

"Yes, he offered me payment and a replacement for you for a few nights."

That pissed me off. "What are you, my pimp now?"

"Ah, I declined quite tactfully," he said, looking down into the drawer. "I don't believe any other feelings will be hurt." At that he glanced quite pointedly my way.

Maybe not his feelings. "Last time I checked I wasn't just a piece of meat," I told him angrily, "so I'm going to take offense at that."

"As I said," he replied in warning, "no other feelings were hurt." He removed the stake I had placed in the drawer and looked sternly at me, fingering the wood in his hands.

"What?" Had he really expected me to be defenseless in a building full of monsters?

He didn't answer, merely walked around the bed for the other nightstand.

"What are you doing?" I demanded.

"I thought I asked you to keep your accessories to a minimum," he reminded me.

I shrugged. "I'm only carrying one, the rest of them are around the room and in the suitcase."

He reached into the other drawer and removed the stake I'd hidden there. "Where are the rest?"

I pretended ignorance, or tried to. "The rest what?"

"The stakes, Eliza."

I could tell he was starting to lose his patience and I sighed. "There's one in the desk."

He walked to the desk and looked in the shallow pencil drawer. He pulled out the stake he found inside and looked at me. "Any more?"

Without a word, I went to the dresser and took the stake out of the top drawer I'd put my clothes in. Cormac sighed and walked over to me, handing me the other three.

I looked up at him nervously. "We couldn't just leave them around the room?"

"No," he told me. "We will not be here that long."

"We've already been here that long," I murmured, more worried than angry. "You want me to put these back in the suitcase?"

He nodded. "It would be appreciated."

I went to the dressing room and put the stakes back into the suitcase. I didn't like it, but I was in Cormac's world now. It would be better for both of us if I followed his rules while I was there. Tremere weren't likely to attack one of their own, were they?

When I returned to the bedroom, Cormac said, "We will be leaving for Paris, possibly tomorrow or the day after. I have a lead on where Dougal went after he left here."

"Okay, so why are we waiting to go?"

He shrugged. "I never actually spent any time in Berlin and Jax was thoughtful enough to give me a few addresses of nice restaurants. I thought that maybe you would care to go out and have a decent dinner... on Brenda."

I smiled grimly. "Sure, as long as she's paying."

He glanced at my clothes, then asked, "Do you have something...?"

"A little less break and enterish?"

"Yes."

"Yeah, Corrine made me get a few things." She'd bought me much more than she should have; I'd never wear half the stuff. Most of it didn't exactly lend itself to hiding in the dark or slaying. "How nice are we talking?"

"A little better than what you're wearing."

I walked back into the dressing room. I hadn't unpacked everything by any means, just the things I thought I'd be wearing. "What did you have in mind?"

"Admittedly, Eliza," he replied, walking to the door of the dressing room, "I've never seen you wear anything but jeans and the tank top."

I paused in the act of opening the suitcase and looked at him. "What's wrong with my clothes?"

"What else do you have?"

I noticed that he didn't actually answer me, but I ignored that and pulled out a thin black dress from the case. It had only one strap, and was slit down one side to mid thigh. Corrine had included a pair of strappy sandals that matched perfectly.

Cormac's eyes widened a little. "That would work."

I looked at the dress and frowned. "I'm not even sure how this goes on."

"It looks like something Brenda would wear," he commented.

"Oh, yeah," I agreed wryly. "And it goes real well with the stitches, too."

"Yes," he said, reminded of my injury, "by the way, how are those healing?"

"Actually," I replied, "the stitches could probably come out. Got a pair of scissors?"

"I don't."

"Maybe there's a pair in the desk?" I suggested.

"Maybe," he agreed. He walked over to look in one of the drawers and added, "There is."

He brought them over to me and I took them, then took off my jacket and laid it on a chair. I went into the bathroom and it only took me a few minutes to remove the stitches. I walked back into the bedroom and returned the scissors to the desk drawer.

"Do you want to change first," I asked him, gesturing toward the bathroom, "or do you want me to?"

"Go ahead," he replied.

"This may take a while," I warned him. "I'm not really sure how this goes on."

"I'll just change out here," he told me.

"I'll take my time," I said quickly.

He took off his jacket, and I have to admit I panicked. I tried to move slowly, but I know it looked like I was hurrying as I grabbed the dress and stopped briefly at the dresser for undergarments before retreating into the bathroom.

I closed the door quickly and leaned against it for several minutes before I could gather my thoughts. Finally I shook my head at my hormones. This was just a simple dinner, not a date. Cormac wanted to see the sights and didn't want to leave me alone in the chantry. That's all this was, I told myself. Ri-ight.

The evening gown was actually very beautiful. Its one strap went over my left shoulder and did a pretty good job of hiding the still healing scar the Garou had given me. I stripped to

the skin and put on the undergarments Corrine had told me went with the dress. The gown itself went on easy, and I brushed my hair until it shown.

When I picked up the shoes, it took me a minute to understand how they were supposed to fasten on my foot. There were two very long laces attached to the back of the shoe, too long to tie at my ankle. I tried various ways of wrapping them around my leg, but they all looked strange and felt weird.

I was startled a little by a tapping on the door. "What?"

"Are you all right?" Cormac called through the wood.

"Did you think I strangled on the dress?" I muttered under my breath. Louder, I said, "I'm trying to figure out how to put these shoes on. Got any suggestions?"

"Take the old ones off first," he said dryly.

"Funny, did that," I growled in frustration.

"And the socks," he continued.

I stalked to the door and wrenched it open, holding the shoe out to him. "Here, you figure it out," I told him irritably.

"They're not my size," he replied seriously. Then he took the shoe and gestured toward the bed. "Please, have a seat."

I walked to the nearest chair instead and sat down silently. He knelt on the floor and took my left foot gently in his hands. He slid the shoe on my foot, then rested it on his thigh. Picking up the ends of the laces, he wound them several times around my calf until they almost reached my knee, where he tied a bow at the back of my leg.

When he put my foot back on the floor, I flexed it experimentally and realized that the ties actually felt right. He lifted my other foot and put the shoe on the same way.

"You're just doing this way too easily," I told him with a frown.

"Well," he replied, "you don't spend time with the likes of Nina and Christina and Brenda and not learn a thing or two about—"

"Women's clothing?" I couldn't stop myself, it just came out.

He glanced at my face. "Their footwear."

Sometimes my foot lives in my mouth. "I'm not sure I can walk in these," I said in an effort to cover my error. "I don't think I've worn heels... ever." There wasn't much call for it in my profession; monsters don't usually care what you're wearing when you kill them.

He stood up and offered me his hand. "I'll help."

After a brief hesitation, I took his hand and stood, unsteadily at first but, but soon I had the hang of it. I had to force myself to let go of him.

"Do you have everything you require?" he asked softly.

I shook my head, still feeling naked. "Well, there is a problem with this outfit."

"No place for spikes?"

He knew me too well for someone who didn't remember me. "That would be the problem," I admitted.

"Did Corrine not think to buy a purse?"

I hadn't thought of that, I never carried a purse. Too much chance of losing it in a fight. "I don't know. I guess I could go look." I went back into the dressing room, careful not to overbalance on the heels. I looked in the suitcase and sure enough there was a purse that matched the dress. It was awfully small. "Small stake, maybe a little knife," I said to myself.

After rummaging through my things, I found a stake small enough to fit in the bag, as well as a little knife, then I returned to the bedroom. "Okay, I guess I'm ready, although another stake would be nice, but I can't think where I'd put it, so...."

Cormac was counting the money he'd hidden in the book, which reminded me that I might want to take some money myself in case we were separated. I got my pants from the bathroom and put a hundred dollars in the purse, along with my passport. Adding that stuff to the purse made it bulge suspiciously, but I wasn't dressing for fashion. Okay, so maybe I was, but the purse certainly wasn't going to be making a fashion statement.

After checking the battery in his cell phone, he changed batteries and set the one he'd removed up in a charger. He turned and offered me his arm. I took it and he led me toward the door. He locked it behind us and we started down the hall.

"So what was so much fun that it took you an hour to meet someone at the door?" I asked him.

"I told you," he replied, "it was the Ventrue ghoul at the door."

"Yeah," I muttered, "from the guy who thinks I'm a piece of meat."

"Yes, Mikko," he agreed. "I had a few things to take care of."

I didn't press him for details, not sure if I wanted to know what else he'd been doing. We walked through the chantry and out to the car.

DINNER

BUT I WILL SOAR UNTIL THE WIND WHIPS ME DOWN
LEAVES ME BEATEN ON UNHOLY GROUND AGAIN
SHACKLED - VERTICAL HORIZONS

We had an uneventful drive to the restaurant, and Cormac was able to get us a table in a secluded corner of the room. The menu was in German, and I couldn't read the language any more than I could speak it, which of course was not at all. After a bit of discussion, I decided on steak, well done. When the waitress came back he gave her our order, and we sat in uncomfortable silence until she brought us a bottle of wine.

Cormac had always had an excellent taste in wine and he hadn't lost that with his embrace. I merely sipped at mine, knowing that I'd need my wits about me as long as I was with him. When the salad came, I couldn't really find my appetite, and of course he had to notice that I wasn't eating very much.

"Is there something wrong with your salad?" he asked softly.

I glanced up. "No, it's a salad."

"You need to eat more," he told me firmly. "You look like you haven't eaten in a week."

His comment was closer to the truth than he knew. I really hadn't eaten very much since the night Mother Abigail's had been attacked almost a week ago.

"What are you, my mother?" I asked him caustically.

He shot me a level look. "I've beheaded people for less than that," he said in a low tone, then added more pleasantly, "Actually, I promised Corrine that I would make sure you ate."

How could I argue with that? Reluctantly, I stopped playing with my food and started eating it. After a few minutes, I asked politely, "How did you find LA?"

"It was quite fine," he told me. "I stayed in the basement of a friend's place while I was there. Aurora, the woman Kate was telling you about."

I looked up at him with narrowed eyes. "I thought you weren't listening to that conversation."

"The acoustics on the plane are quite good," he reminded me. "I couldn't help but overhear some of what was said."

I shook my head, but I couldn't stop from asking curiously, "Who would name their child Aurora?"

"I believe it was quite popular when she was born," he told me. "She reminds me of someone I once knew, I just haven't figured out who yet." He paused and looked at me pointedly. "She is a friend of mine, nothing more. I know that Kate tried to insinuate that there was more between us and I feel the need to defend myself."

"There is no need," I told him. What he did in his spare time was no concern of mine. That was what I told myself, anyway, but my self hadn't been listening to me for some time.

"I feel there is," he replied. "As Kate told you, I do spend quite a bit of time with Nina Rodriguez as well. She also reminds me of someone I haven't remembered yet. Summer is the Verbena in Salem, and we are quite good friends, but that is all. And I have spent some time recently with Brenda and her sister Christina Strong, but it was also not what she implied."

I could see the truth in his eyes, but what he was saying didn't change anything between us. "That is really none of my business," I said firmly.

He took a sip of his wine and decided to change the subject. "How long did you spend in Bar Harbor?"

"Ten years."

"And the next decade?" he prompted.

I shrugged. "I was at other Society houses, mostly in Maine but in a few other New England states too."

"And did you have the same type of contract at each city you were stationed in?"

The reminder that he'd not only seen the contract but had a copy of it irritated me all over again. "Actually, the contract covered all of those places."

"With Ford as your guarantor in each one?" He was still watching me carefully, as if trying to catch me in a lie.

"Yeah, apparently Ford is some kind of big shot in the clan." Although why Cormac didn't know that was beyond me.

"Speaking of the contract," he murmured, "who was the witness? I didn't recognize the name."

"That's Kate," I reminded him. Was he pretending ignorance or trying to trip me up? "I told you her true name is on the contract."

"Ah, yes."

"You can't sign a blood contract with an alias." I said reproachfully. "You should know that, you're Tremere."

"I've never taken any part of a blood contract," he explained.

"Don't they have some handbook for you to study from or something?" I asked only half joking.

"Yes," he said tolerantly, "but nothing we have to sign."

I shook my head. "It just seems like you'd know this stuff."

"Why," he asked, a little irritated at my comment, "because I'm Tremere?"

"I guess it's the whole myth that all vampires are rich and beautiful, and know everything about their powers," I said apologetically.

"I'm neither rich nor beautiful," he told me, "nor know everything about anything."

I couldn't agree with him about his beauty, I'd always found him way too attractive. "Well, you know, stereotypes."

"Besides, not all vampires are controlling, manipulative people."

"Just all female vampires?" I asked with a smile.

"No, not all," he said smiling in return.

"Just Brenda and Kate."

"No, just your mother." He corrected himself quickly. "Kate."

I looked down at the floor by my feet where I'd put my purse. "It's probably not the best place for me to pull out a stake," I admitted in a low angry voice, "but call her my mother again and I will."

"So you've said," he replied softly. "I slipped, forgive me."

I remembered his words from earlier and repeated them, hiding a smile. "I've beheaded people for less than that."

"Yes, so I've heard."

Had he? "Where did you hear this?"

"Around."

I did smile then. "The other stereotype," I murmured. "All your kind just tell each other everything."

"No," he corrected me. "Only the higher ups know everything and those of us who are controlling and manipulative."

I was saved from replying by the waitress coming with our meals. She put our plates down in front of us and refilled our wineglasses. She asked Cormac something in German, and after a brief reply, she left us alone.

While the food looked and smelled good, I really didn't feel like eating. I kept my hands clasped together in my lap while Cormac began to cut his meat. I don't know why I thought he wouldn't notice.

"Now Eliza," he told me, "you know I promised Corrine that you would eat while in my care."

Since when was I in his care? "I ate." I had eaten at least half of the salad, and a whole piece of bread.

"Eat some meat," he prompted. "It's good for you."

Reluctantly, I picked up my silverware and cut my meat into small pieces then began to eat slowly. He seemed satisfied at that, and we ate for several minutes in a comfortable silence. I refused to look at him and concentrated on my plate.

"Jurgen," Cormac said, surprising me into looking up.

Jurgen was standing next to the table with a ghoul, probably his ghoul, a woman. "Cormac, Eliza, it is good to see you. I wasn't aware that you were going to be eating here this evening."

"We were taking in a little of the local color," my companion replied.

"Doing the whole tourist bit," Jurgen said with a smile.

"Yes."

"And how is your dinner?" He glanced at me when he said that, but Cormac answered.

"Ah, fair as food can be nowadays."

"Yes," Jurgen replied, "I know exactly what you mean, although Lorelei likes the food here."

Cormac nodded to the girl, then glanced toward the entrance.

"What are your plans for the rest of the evening?" the tall Tremere asked.

"I though we might just drive about town," Cormac told him, "taking in the sights, relax a little bit."

"Ah, well there's a little club toward the center of town, the 488."

"488?" Cormac seemed interested in the club. "We may stop down there. I would like to stretch my legs after the long plane trip and car rides."

"It's a bit Goth, but still quite amusing," Jurgen added.

"Interesting choice of words, amusing." Cormac looked toward the entrance again, then said to Jurgen, "I believe we may have some company."

I glanced over my shoulder, but I couldn't see through the screen of plants behind me.

"Ah, the Gangrel," Jurgen murmured.

"Is there bad blood between our clans?"

"Not necessarily," he replied, "but they think they run the city."

"Oh?"

"Yes, unfortunately."

At that point, the tall shaggy haired Kindred I remembered from the conclave room approached our table. The girl who'd been standing behind him was at his side, looking quite different in a casual evening gown. He said something to Jurgen then nodded at Cormac. His eyes moved past me around the table, then returned to me.

Thankfully, Lorelei began to translate the conversation into English for my benefit.

"Good, Wolfgang, how are you?" Jurgen asked politely.

"I am fine," the shaggy Gangrel replied. "I see that you are enjoying the nightlife this evening."

"Yes, we were taking in a bit of the city life." Jurgen didn't seem to like the Gangrel, but at least he was being pleasant.

"Ah, good," Wolfgang replied. He kept shooting glances at me, almost as if he was thinking about how I would taste. "Yes, Heidi and I are out ourselves to see what is going on."

I shifted a little in my chair, uncomfortable with his gaze that lingered on me almost to the point of rudeness.

"Wolfgang," Cormac said politely, "this is my travelling companion, Eliza."

The Gangrel smiled hugely at me, and I forced myself to nod in return. I couldn't quite bring myself to smile.

He turned back to Cormac, but only for a moment. "Young Cormac, I haven't seen you in our city before, is this your first trip to Berlin?"

Once more his eyes came back to rest on me and I glanced down at where my purse lay at my feet. I decided that Cormac and Jurgen would probably take offense if I staked the bastard right then and there, and resigned myself to being stared at.

"I have visited your city on a few occasions," Cormac replied, "but I plan this to be my first lengthy stay, albeit two or three days."

"And where are you from?" Wolfgang asked. "Is it America?"

"Yes."

"And I take it that is where your companion is from as well?" Once again his gaze settled hotly on me.

I gave him a level look that told him I would not be intimidated while mentally I calculated how long it would take me to get the stake from the purse and strike. Unfortunately, I knew it would take too long, he'd have time to react and I probably wouldn't have been able to stake him.

"Yes," Cormac replied.

"I must say, your German is impeccable," Wolfgang complemented him. Again, his eyes fell on me. I was getting really tired of his hungry looks, but I tried not to react openly to his rudeness.

"Thank you."

"I assume you have passed on this knowledge to her?"

"Actually, no," Cormac admitted. "I haven't begun teaching her any foreign languages yet." He made it sound like I was a dog that he hadn't taught any tricks to yet.

Wolfgang grinned. "Oh, I see."

Jurgen glanced at Lorelei and abruptly she stopped translating the conversation. I looked questioningly at Cormac, but he was looking a bit uncomfortable at whatever the Gangrel was saying. Cormac replied in a firm tone, and Wolfgang looked back at me with hunger strong in his gaze. He even licked his lips and chuckled. For real now, it wasn't a sound I liked to hear.

"What are you saying?" I asked Cormac with a forced smile.

"In a moment," he replied soothingly.

Wolfgang said something else to Cormac, sounding a bit disappointed. My companion asked a question of the other two vamps to which Jurgen replied matter-of-factly.

"What are you saying?" I repeated in a low voice.

"Nothing dear," he told me firmly.

The Gangrel watched our exchange and a smile played around his lips. His date looked at me for a moment with a smile of her own, then leaned down and spoke softly in my ear.

"He says that you are a tasty morsel and that he is interested in trying you," she told me, her voice spitefully amused. "Despite your dress, you look like you would fight well, and he believes the best meal is one that bites back. Your master refused. It is a shame, I would have liked to have been 'kissed' by him." When she'd dropped her bombshell, she straightened and smiled sweetly at her own master.

Why in hell did all these damn vampires want to bite me? I smiled politely and thanked the girl for her translation as pleasantly as I could, avoiding looking at either of the vamps standing by our table.

I looked down at my hands clenched in my lap to hide the hate in my eyes and noticed that Cormac's foot had moved under the table to drag my purse out of my reach. Did he think I'd actually stake the vamp in the middle of the restaurant? I shot him a hard look that told him I knew exactly what he was doing.

Wolfgang started speaking again, and his puppy made sure to translate the rest of what was said for me.

"What a pity," the Gangrel murmured. "I enjoy a tussle with a less than enthusiastic partner."

"I do apologize," Cormac replied. "You will have to find your prey at another table."

"Well, the night is young," Wolfgang told him. "I'm sure I'll find something."

"Good hunting," my companion replied.

"If you will excuse us?"

Cormac nodded. "Of course."

As Wolfgang turned to Jurgen to say his good-byes, I leaned closer to Cormac and grabbed his coat sleeve to pull him toward me. I tried to make it look like I was whispering sweet nothings in his ear.

"What is it with vamps in this city wanting to bite me?" I hissed at him through smiling lips. "Do I have 'bite me' tattooed on my forehead?"

"They can smell your blood," he replied softly.

"And the point is?" I demanded.

"You are not like normal mortals, Eliza," he reminded me.

"That doesn't matter, Cormac," I said flatly. "I have never been a willing donor and I don't intend to start now."

"And I don't intend to let you become one," he assured me calmly, "willing or unwilling."

I relaxed a little. "At least we agree on something."

"If I may have my jacket back?"

Abruptly I realized that my hand was clenched into a fist in the fabric of his suit coat. Whoops. "Yeah, sorry about that," I murmured as I released him and smoothed the fabric

down. I sat back and glanced at the Tremere standing next to our table. Jurgen was studying at me with a calculating look in his eyes. Wolfgang and his girl were gone.

"Well," Jurgen told Cormac, "we have other places to go, we will be at the 488 a little later, will we see you there?"

"Perhaps we'll visit, thank you," he replied.

"It was good to see you, Eliza," Jurgen said politely to me. That calculating look was still in his eyes when he looked at me.

I smiled and nodded, worried about what he'd heard me say.

After they had said their good-byes, I looked back at Cormac. "You know, that purse doesn't really go with your outfit," I told him.

"No," he agreed, "but I was afraid the spike would go all to well with Wolfgang's."

I smiled grimly and pointed to a spot in the center of my chest. "I think it would look really well right about here."

"You're off," he told me dryly.

"Okay," I corrected, moving my hand an inch to the left, "here. I'm off on me, I've never staked myself. Vamps I can do with my eyes closed. Probably in my sleep," I added under my breath.

"Let's not find out, shall we?" he suggested wryly as he slid the purse back toward me under the table. I moved it back out of his reach.

"Are we done here? I seem to have lost my appetite." I think it had something to do with Wolfgang practically drooling on me.

"I believe I have as well," he replied. "You don't care for any desert? Pudding perhaps?"

"Not unless it comes with Wolfgang's heart sitting on top," I said murmured darkly.

"Ah, blood pudding," he replied glibly. "I do believe I saw that on the menu."

I frowned at the reminder of his vampiric nature. For some reason I kept forgetting what he was and I didn't like it. Hell, I could *fee* him at the base of my spine, why did I keep forgetting he was a vamp? "I think you'd like that a bit more than I," I told him.

Cormac called for the waitress, then while she was going for our bill he turned to me. "You handled yourself quite well during Wolfgang's inquires."

I smiled ironically. "He probably would have liked it too much if I'd have stood up and punched him."

"Yes," Cormac agreed. "I believe so."

"And Jurgen probably wouldn't have liked it at all," I added.

"No, neither would I." He met my gaze meaningfully. "Let me handle the Kindred problems."

"Well, if you don't handle them, I will," I warned him, then conceded with a sigh, "But I'll give you the chance first."

That almost earned me a smile. "Thank you."

The waitress came back with our check and Mac laid a hundred dollar bill on the table. He got up and took his coat from the back of his chair. "Shall we?"

"Yeah." I allowed him to pull my chair out for me and waited while he put his coat on. He offered me his arm and I took it without thinking.

As we walked toward the exit, I noticed Wolfgang on the other side of the restaurant annoying another couple. I smiled, glad that we'd gotten out of that one with no bloodshed, especially mine.

A WALK

GIVE ME A SIGN THIS IS DAY.

GIVE ME SOME PATIENCE, SO I PRAY.

IT'S TIME TO DIE. IS THAT WHAT I WANT?

B.B.K. - KORN

Cormac paused to talk to the matre'd for a moment, then guided me out. As we went outside he asked, "Would you care to take a walk?"

"Either you're going to have to start teaching me German or talking in English," I told him. "This is getting annoying."

"Perhaps," he murmured.

I shook my head. "I guess I'll have to buy a pocket dictionary."

"I have one back in the room," he said softly.

"You would," I replied, remembering how thorough he'd been as a human.

"I do. Would you like to walk with me?" He asked again.

"Yeah," I answered. "It will give me a chance to walk off some of my frustrations."

"That too," he agreed. "I believe the fresh air would do us good."

"Clear the stench of the undead from my nostrils," I mumbled, not expecting him to hear me. I needed to get away from that nagging feeling I had whenever vamps were too close for comfort.

He looked down at me. "You're walking with one."

"Or maybe not." I'd be having that feeling as long as I was around Cormac, wouldn't I? I glanced at his face, but he didn't seem overly irritated with my remark.

We walked left from the restaurant, not hurrying. The street was fairly busy as we strolled the four blocks to the park. Near the street there were quite a few people sitting on benches, but as we moved further away from the road, the park was deserted.

A dimly lit path led our way over small bridges that spanned a winding brook. The moonlight danced off a small pond to our right. The setting was almost too perfect, too romantic.

Cormac's sigh broke the silence. "Getting back to your conversation with Kate, and what she believes me to have been doing these last few years," he said softly, "still defending myself, and remembering that night...."

I looked everywhere but at him. I still wasn't sure I liked knowing that he remembered our being together that way.

"You were—are the last woman I was—have been with in any sort of physical manner." He seemed uncomfortable, unable to decide on the present or past tense while explaining this to me.

Why was he telling me this? As much as I liked hearing that he hadn't actually screwed any of the women that Kate had tried to make me think he had, it really wasn't any of my business. Did he expect me to be happy about it? Okay, so I was happy about it, but what exactly did he want me to say? Did he want me to admit that he was the last man I'd voluntarily slept with?

"Again," I said, not looking at him, "that's none of my business. What you choose to do with yourself is—has not been my concern for a long time." God, now he had me doing it.

"How are the shoes working out?" he asked, once again changing the subject.

I shrugged. "I can walk in them." Honestly, they hurt; I was definitely not used to wearing heels.

"We can sit down and rest your feet if you'd like," he offered, gesturing toward a nearby bench.

"Sure," I agreed. He led me over and I sat down, not quite sure what to do with the hem of the dress.

"Hold it up slightly," he suggested.

I shot him a questioning look. "Cross-dress much?"

He sat down on the bench with me, not close enough to crowd me, but still too close for my comfort. Who was I kidding? I hadn't been comfortable since I'd learned he was still alive, or rather undead.

"As I said," he reminded me, "you don't spend that much time with all of the women that I have and not pick up a few pointers."

"You spent twenty years with all these women, and—" I stopped my words abruptly. "No, I so do not want to go there," I muttered angrily to myself. He had no reason to lie to me about his sex life or lack of it.

"You must understand, Eliza," he explained patiently, "with my memories of my life, I also lost my memories of love, and lust."

I decided to keep my mouth shut so I wouldn't say something I'd regret. I bent down to furtively adjust the heel of my left shoe, hoping to take the pressure off of a blister I felt forming.

Cormac leaned forward to see what I was doing. "Are the straps bothering you?"

"No, no," I said quickly, too quickly.

"Are you sure?"

I looked down and pulled on the back of the shoe. "The heel a little," I admitted reluctantly.

He stood and crouched in front of me, lifting my foot gently in his hand to examine the shoe for a moment. He slowly reached under my skirt to the back of my knee and untied the laces that held the shoe on. Then he unwound them from my calf, pulled the shoe off gently and set it beside him on the path. To my stunned amazement, he started rubbing my foot, easing the ache out of the muscles. I stared down at him, feeling his cold hands on my skin and lost for a moment in memories of Baltimore. I wanted to reach out and touch his face to see if it still felt the same.

What the hell was he trying to do to me? I didn't get how he could shoot past all of the barriers I'd put up against ever feeling these things again. In twenty years I'd never willingly let a man get as close to me as he'd been tonight, and I'd never once regretted the loss, especially after Luther's 'punishment' in Burlington. Now Mac just had to touch me once and I wanted more from him, much more.

I tried not to show what I was feeling, but despite my efforts my foot tensed up. He rubbed a little harder for a moment, then looked up at me.

"Relax a little bit, will you?" he said impatiently.

"Yeah." Like I could with his cold hands on my skin and the tingle at the base of my spine that told me a Kindred was entirely too close to me.

His hands froze on my foot. "Would you rather I stopped?"

Why did he always ask me things like that? Hell, yes, I wanted him to stop, but there was a part of me that wanted him to continue rubbing my foot and more. There was no way I would tell him that, he already knew too much about me for my own peace of mind.

"If we're not going to be on our feet all night," I told him finally, "my feet are fine. You don't have to do that."

"If the shoe is bothering you, you don't have to wear them," he suggested.

"I think the dress would drag if I didn't." His hands were making shivers to run up my legs and I ignored the sensation as much as I could, trying to concentrate on the vamp vibes he was giving off instead. It didn't help.

"Pick it up a little bit." His hands started rubbing my foot again, making the shivers worse.

"I don't think they let you barefoot into clubs," I said wryly.

"Who said we were going to a club?"

"You talked about going to 488 with Jurgen," I reminded him.

"Who said we were going?" He had a half smile on his face as if he were teasing me.

I smiled in return. "I hate to say I assumed."

"We don't have to."

I hated to ask this, but, "Do you have something else in mind?"

"We have all night," he told me, his soft voice sending gooseflesh down my arms.

Mentally shaking my reaction off, I said, "You just sounded like you had something in mind."

"No, just spending time, relaxing." With that he increased the pressure of his hands on my foot as if he could force me to relax. "The other portion of this mission was to get to know each other again."

"Yeah, it was, wasn't it," I murmured. I wished he hadn't reminded me of that.

"Would you prefer to go to the club now?" he asked. "Or back to the chantry?"

I shrugged. "I guess it doesn't matter." We were going to be together anyway, did it really matter what we were doing?

"See where the wall fell?" he added.

"That would be interesting," I admitted. It was almost unbelievable that I had this opportunity to see where the Berlin Wall had been. I'd never even thought about travelling the world and seeing the sights before, and of course now my contract didn't normally allow for it. "Had the wall fallen when you were here before?"

"It had," he told me, still rubbing the tension from my foot, "but we did not have opportunity to visit."

"You were here with Dougal." Somehow, I had put the thought of Cormac's sire completely out of my mind. I really had to stop doing that; I needed to remember that Mac was a monster now, and that things could never be the same between us again.

"Yes."

I forced myself to shake off thoughts of what might have been. "Do you wanna go see the wall?"

"It is up to you, really," he said softly. "I've traveled somewhat, you have not. What would you like to go see?"

"I'd prefer that over the club," I told him with an apologetic smile. "I'm not much of a partier. Well, not that kind of party, anyway." My idea of a party involved sharp objects and dead vamps.

"Well then," he asked, looking down, "would you like me to put your shoe back on or take the other one off?"

"Why don't I just take the other one off?" I said, reaching beneath the dress for the tie behind my knee, but Cormac's hands were there first.

His fingers brushed my skin as he undid the tie and unwound the straps from my calf. He removed the shoe and gently put my feet down on the ground. He stood holding my shoes and held his hand out to me. I tried to be cool about it, but still I hesitated before I put my hand in his.

When I was back on my bare feet, he handed me my shoes. I took them with my left hand, leaving my right still held in his. I reached down and picked up the skirt of my dress to hold it out of the way while I walked. It was a little awkward, with the purse string around my left wrist and holding the straps of the shoes and the skirt with the same hand, but it worked.

Mac led the way back to the streets, avoiding the path. The cool grass felt good on my feet, and I realized that I hadn't walked barefoot across a lawn in many years, too many to try and count. He talked softly about the brightness of the stars and the moonlight, but he'd always done things like that. I used to think of him as my Irish warrior with the heart of a poet.

We made our way to the street and I noticed that the crowd had thinned to the point that we were nearly alone. As we walked back toward the restaurant, the mouth of an alley opened on our right, one I hadn't noticed on the way to the park. Cormac surprised me by stopping to look down it.

"What is it?" I asked him, concerned by the sudden stillness of his face.

"I have seen this alley in my dreams," he said softly.

I looked down the alley, but it turned about twenty yards from us and I couldn't see the end. There was light litter scattered on the floor of the alley, and it looked just like almost every other alley I'd ever seen. "You've dreamed about this alley?"

"Yes." His voice was low and thoughtful, as if he were troubled by something.

"Have you ever been in this alley?" I asked him. "Something weird with you and Dougal?"

"No." He let go of my hand and took a couple of steps closer to the alley. "Stay here," he told me firmly. "Protect yourself."

"From what?" I looked around, but didn't see anything that could possibly be a threat. A tall blond woman stood on the street a block away from us, but my senses told me she was human, certainly nothing to be concerned about.

"Just please," he asked, his tone a cross between annoyance and pleading.

"You want me to stay here while you go down there?"

"Yes," he answered, relieved that I understood so easily.

I didn't think he'd be relieved for long. "I don't think so," I told him. He needed someone to watch his back and I was the only one here.

Cormac turned back and took a step toward me, looking at me very pointedly. "Eliza, please," he asked impatiently. "Just stay here."

Something about the alley bothered him, some kind of danger to me that I didn't understand. After a moment I sighed. "You've got five minutes," I told him firmly. I wouldn't give him anything more than that before I came after him.

He nodded and turned, walking down the alley. I saw the flicker of light as he lit a cigarette. I shook my head wryly; one would think that since he didn't really breathe any more, he'd have quit that damn habit when he'd been embraced.

I took a step into the alley, hoping to keep an eye on him. I didn't like letting him go down there alone, and didn't understand why it had been so important to him that I stay out of the alley. I heard a noise behind me and turned to see that the woman I'd seen standing down the street had joined me in mouth of the alley. She was staring at me intently, a knowing look on her face that raised the hair on the back of my neck.

"Can I help you?" I said, thinking that she probably wouldn't understand me.

"Looking for your master?" she asked in heavily accented English.

"Excuse me?" I didn't get any funny vibes from the woman; she seemed completely human to me. Could she read my aura in some way? Did she know about Kindred and ghouls?

She lifted a large piece of wood over her shoulder. She must have had it behind her because I hadn't seen it until then. I took a cautious step away from her, knowing that this couldn't be good.

"We don't tolerate those of your kind," she told me with righteous anger. "We will destroy your evil."

Suddenly it was as if she was wrapped in magic, it's the only way I can explain it. She felt like a cross between a fairy and a witch, with a little True Faith thrown in for good measure. She swung the wood at me but I sidestepped it easily, dropping the shoes to the alley floor.

"Look," I said patiently, hoping to talk my way out of this, "I don't have a master. I'm on your side in all this, I hate the vamps as much as you do." I used a trick I'd learned from Kate to make myself more agile, knowing that I'd need it before this encounter was over.

I was gambling to use my blood that way and I knew it. I was already weak from doing the same thing in the fight I'd had with the Garou a few nights ago and using more blood to heal the gash on my shoulder, but I knew that I had seriously underestimated the woman as a threat and I had to do something. Still, I didn't want to hurt her if I could help it, she seemed very human to me, even with the eerie golden aura.

"I'm not a fool," she cried angrily, her accent making it difficult for me to understand her. "You're just a tool of your master, as much of a monster as he is. My friends will kill him, and I'll kill you." She swung the wood again, but using blood had made me slower than I'd anticipated and I couldn't move out of the way fast enough.

I lifted my left arm to block the blow and was stunned at the agony that shot through me when the wood made contact. Normally I can take a much harder hit than your average human and walk away without even a bruise, but I'd been hit by werewolves in big-furry form and not felt this much pain. I fell against the wall behind me, surprised by the strength of her attack.

The woman swung again and I barely ducked out of the way to stumble past her toward the other side of the alley. The board shattered on the side of the building, and pieces of brick crumbled to the ground. I cradled my arm against my chest and stared at the woman in shock, trying to figure out exactly what she was.

It occurred to me in that moment that the woman might actually kill me. I could find death in that nameless alley in Berlin, an end to the nightmare I'd survived all those long and lonely years since I'd left Baltimore. Mac would take care of Corrine and I could have peace at last. All I had to do was stand there and let her finish me off.

Out of nowhere, Cormac was there. He smashed the woman in the head with his elbow, knocking her back against the wall. He pointed both of his pistols in her face and said something low in German. The woman bit out a harsh reply and swung at him.

Before I could move to stop him, he fired both weapons at her. One shot missed to explode in the wall behind her but the other hit the center of her chest. She sagged back against the wall and fell to the ground, dead. The smell of burning flesh filled the alley.

"Let's go," Cormac commanded briskly, still holding his guns on her and backing toward the mouth of the alley.

I stared at the woman's body while I moved away, stunned at the finality of her death. She was only defending her race, a race that neither Cormac nor I belonged to. Who were we to end her life like that? A part of me wished that he'd been delayed a minute longer, that she had been able to kill me like the monster she'd named me.

A larger part of me longed to be like her, to die honorably for my beliefs, but it was much too late for that now. What had I done at the first pressure to stop hunting? Not only had I stopped, I'd betrayed the cause to help the enemy.

"Do you want your shoes?" Cormac asked me as he put his guns away.

I shook my head numbly. "They weren't the most comfortable anyway, let's just get out of here." I didn't want to see the woman's body again. I needed to get as far away from the smell of burning flesh and the truth of her words as I could.

As we hurried away I knew she'd been right, I was a monster. For years I'd tried to make myself think that I wasn't by killing vamps and hating them almost as much as I hated myself. That didn't change what I was, though. I looked like a ghoul to the woman because in reality, that's what I was.

No matter how hard I tried, I could never get rid of the vampire blood inside of me. True, I didn't have a master like most ghouls, but I still had the same blood they did. I could use it just like a Kindred ghoul could, to make myself stronger, or faster. And it never went away, either; if I used it, my body just made more of it, something a real ghoul could never do.

Within a few minutes we were back at the restaurant parking lot. When our car was brought around, I saw him slip the valet a hundred-dollar bill as he said something to him urgently in German. We got into the car and drove away.

Right away, he asked, "Friend of yours?" He still seemed pissed, but I didn't understand why. He'd killed the good guy, hadn't he?

"Like I have friends here," I said harshly. "I don't know who she was." I could feel myself shaking, but couldn't seem to stop. I didn't know if I'd been scared by the blow the woman struck me, or thrown by seeing Cormac kill her without a second thought.

"Do you know what she was?" he asked a little calmer.

"Someone that wanted to kill me would be my best guess," I told him as a shiver ran through me. "Human." My arm ached badly, so badly that I knew it must be broken. I concentrated for a moment on healing the injury, but it didn't work as much as it should have, and made me even more tired.

"Not quite," he corrected me.

I shrugged. "She was human enough for me." Human enough that I hadn't wanted to kill her. My arm felt a little better, but the pain was still very bad. How the hell could she have hit me that hard?

"She was something I've never seen before," he said thoughtfully.

"People don't normally just walk up to me on the street and decide I need to die," I said impatiently. I was tired and weak from lack of blood, and I get cranky when I'm tired. "She was a slayer of some sort."

"Yes," he murmured wryly, "I gathered that. There were more of them down in the alley."

I shot a quick look at his profile. "And they didn't see you?" I knew I shouldn't have let him go down there alone.

"No, I didn't stick around long enough for them to," he told me.

"Good thing." I told myself that I didn't want to see him destroyed because if he were I'd have a hard time getting home. I almost laughed out loud at the obvious lie. I knew I had to calm down before I got hysterical.

"So, would you still care to go see the wall?" he asked, relaxing for the first time since he'd sat down behind the wheel.

At that I did laugh, mostly because I was glad to still be alive. I ran my hand through my hair and was startled to realize that I was still shaking. I hadn't wanted to kill her because she was human, but that certainly wouldn't have stopped her from killing me. Would I have been able to defend myself if Cormac hadn't stepped in? In my weakened condition, injured as I was, I knew I couldn't have lasted long.

I laid my hand on my leg to try and hide it's trembling. "I don't care."

Cormac reached over and put his hand on mine. His skin almost felt warm, my hands were that cold. He held it lightly at first and when I didn't pull away, he took a firmer grip.

I took several deep shaky breaths to try and calm my wild thoughts, but it didn't help. I had come close to dying tonight, closer than I had in a long time.

"Would you care to head back to the chantry and change clothes?" he asked softly.

"That's probably a good idea," I told him. "It's hard to be battle ready in an evening gown."

He shot me a quick look. "I didn't have in mind hunting for them."

I hadn't even thought about doing that until he mentioned it, but even so I didn't think it was a good idea. "I think they were hunting for us."

"Perhaps that club is our best bet this evening," he suggested. "Either that or the chantry."

"I think I'd prefer the chantry," I replied, adding under my breath, "as much as I hate that place." Sure, the palace was breathtaking, but that many vamps in one place made me itch to plant my stakes where they'd do the most good. Well, for me anyway.

"They found us out for a nice quiet walk," he murmured, "gallivanting about the city might be just as bad."

"I'm a little jumpy," I confessed. "I don't know if I want to be with a bunch of people."

"I understand," he told me, taking a firmer grip on my hand.

I told myself I should pull away, but I couldn't make myself to do it. Instead, I squeezed his hand slightly in return. Why should I keep pulling away from him? What made him any more of a monster than I was? He'd at least been forced into this existence, at least he'd had years as a human. I was born this way; I'd been damned from the moment of conception. I've never been normal and never would be. Didn't that make him less of a monster than I was?

We rode in silence back to the chantry. The same ghoul who'd brought the car around for us earlier drove it away again. We went inside but before we had gone more than half way across the entry hall, Eduardo approached us.

He talked with Cormac in Spanish for several minutes, and it looked to me like Mac didn't like whatever he was saying. I felt like telling Eduardo to give it up; when Mac set his mind on something, either for or against it, there was no shaking him. The only thing that kept me quiet was the certainty they were talking about me; they had both glanced my way several times during the conversation.

Cormac waited until Eduardo disappeared into the depths of the palace before he started walking toward our rooms.

"What was that whole thing about?" I asked in a hushed voice. Now that Eduardo was gone, I cradled my wounded arm against my chest.

"Your witty repartee at the restaurant," he told me.

"What would that be?" I'd said a lot of things during dinner that could have pissed the elder Tremere off.

"It appears that most ghouls at least around here are rather more...." He paused, looking for a tactful term to use.

"They're puppies," I finished for him, not caring about niceties.

"Yes," he agreed. "They are fed from regularly."

Even the thought made my skin crawl. "Oh, yay. And that has what to do with us?"

He glanced over at me. "Your sparkling comeback when you were told what Wolfgang was propositioning."

My eyebrows shot up. "You mean what I whispered to you in your ear?" I kept forgetting that I was hanging around monsters with excellent hearing.

"Yes, close enough."

"You Kindred have this habit of overlistening," I muttered darkly.

"Mmm, I believe we have Jorgen to thank for this."

I knew there was a reason I didn't like him, as if I needed another besides his vampness. "So, what, that puts you in hot water?" That was the last thing I wanted. It wasn't Cormac's fault that I hated all Kindred. Well, almost all Kindred, I couldn't quite bring myself to hate him, no matter how hard I tried to.

"A little bit, yes," he admitted as we turned down the hallway to our room.

"How much is a little?" Basically, I wanted to know if we had to fight our way out of the chantry.

"Ah, that remains to be seen." He looked a little uncomfortable so I decided not to push the question. "However, given the events of just now, I plan on leaving tomorrow."

"Good idea." I walked ahead of him into the room, feeling exhausted and wanting nothing more than to be left alone. I crossed to the dresser and put down the small purse, turning away from the mirror and the guilt and shame I saw in my eyes.

Cormac took off his coat and looked my way. "Will you be okay if I take care of some business for a while?"

"Yeah." What, did he think I was afraid to be alone?

"Stay here, be good," he told me, adding, "don't hide too many stakes."

"Yeah," I replied with a weak chuckle. My arm still ached badly and without thinking, I fingered the spot where the wood had hit, feeling carefully to see if it was still broken.

"Are you sure you're all right?" he asked, noticing my movements. "Your arm?"

I shrugged, not wanting to admit how bad it was. "It hurts. It'll get better," I assured him.

"How badly?"

"It just hurts," I repeated, hoping he would just drop the subject.

He didn't. "Broken?"

I glanced at him and flexed my arm. It had been broken at first, but I think the healing in the car had taken care of that. "I don't think so, I can move it."

He relaxed a little, making me aware that he'd waited tensely for my reply. "You might want to draw yourself a hot bath and relax."

"Yeah," I said wryly, "like I could relax here." Surrounded by vamps and locked in a room alone. Ri-ight.

"Well, I think I'll take one when I get back." He took his cell phone from his jacket pocket and turned toward the door.

I closed my eyes at the thought of him soaking wet and naked in the next room. "I bet that will be real relaxing," I muttered sarcastically.

"I promise I'll mind myself," he said as he left the room. I heard him lock the door behind him, but it only made me feel caged in.

A bath, he'd said. Well, it did sound good, and it might relax me after all, if I could stay awake long enough to take one. I went into the bathroom and turned on the water. Digging around in the carry on bag I found that Corrine had thoughtfully packed the bath oil she knew I liked. I opened the top and inhaled the fragrance, hoping to wipe away the smell of the alley from my mind.

I poured a generous amount into the bath and checked to make sure the temperature was hot enough. I felt chilled to the bone and hoped that the water would warm me up. The dress had been difficult to get on, and it was even harder to get off one handed, but somehow I managed. I made sure there was a large towel nearby and climbed into the tub.

The heat and aroma of the water worked to relax me somewhat. I tried to keep the arm out of the water knowing that what I really needed was to put ice on it. When Mac came back, I'd have to ask him to get some for me. I didn't like the idea of letting him know that I was hurt, but ice would help the pain. I didn't understand why it wasn't healed already.

When I realized that I was falling asleep in the tub, I pulled the plug and got out. I dried off and wrapped the oversized towel around my body. I went into the bedroom with a brush and a stake to sit down on the edge of the bed. I put the stake in the drawer beside me and started to brush my hair.

My arm still hurt very badly, and I knew I couldn't function like that. If I used blood to heal, I'd be really out of it, but I knew I'd at least be adequate tomorrow night. And I should be safe in the chantry, right? Mac would be back soon and he'd take care of me. Without a second thought, I concentrated on healing my arm.

Exhaustion and pain ate at my consciousness, and I told myself that I would just lie down for a minute. I fell back against the pillow and cradled my bruised arm against my chest. I'd get up soon to get dressed and make a bed in the corner of the room, really I would.

I was asleep an instant later.

HEALING

MY HEART STILL BEATS FOR YOU, BREATHS FOR YOU, SINGS FOR YOU
AND THOSE FEELINGS WILL NEVER FADE
YESTERDAY'S LETTER - 98°

I drifted in an exhausted sleep, aware of the cold but unwilling or unable to do anything about it. A part of me knew why I was so tired, why I was so cold, but mostly I just shivered in the darkness of my mind.

Then I felt something warm and soft cover me and it seemed to bring me awake a little. I shifted on the bed and opened my eyes. I saw Mac and tried to smile. He was always doing nice things for me. I wanted him to lay down with me and warm my body with his, but instead he stepped back from the bed.

"How are you feeling?" he asked. His voice seemed to come from a long way off.

"Tired," I whispered. I could only remember being that tired once in my life, but then the memory slipped away, leaving me confused.

"Do you need anything?"

What could I possibly need? He was here with me, which was all I'd ever wanted. I tried to sit up, but my muscles wouldn't cooperate. Mac motioned for me to stay lying down and I relaxed on the bed. I knew he'd keep me safe. But hadn't he asked me what I needed? "Coffee?" I heard myself ask him. "I'm really tired."

He looked down at me thoughtfully. "You've been using your blood, haven't you?"

How did he know that? He always seemed to know everything. "You've been talking to people haven't you?"

"Of course," he replied.

Wasn't there something I wanted? "Coffee?"

He nodded. "I will see what I can do."

I could hear him moving around in the room for several minutes, then the rich scent of coffee filled the room. My mouth began to water for the taste. I knew that it would help me wake up, help to clear the fog from my head.

When Mac came back to the bed, he helped me to sit up propped against the pillows. For a moment I worried about the towel, but he made sure I stayed covered. Not that it mattered, I could remember the feel of his hands on my body and suddenly I was very warm.

He tried to hand me the coffee, but for some reason I had no coordination. I almost dropped the steaming liquid all over myself, but Mac caught the cup before it fell. He lifted it to my mouth and I took a sip gratefully before I laid my head back against the pillows with my eyes closed.

I felt the bed move when he sat down beside me. After several long minutes of silence, he cleared his throat and I looked up at him.

"May I ask you something, Eliza?" His voice was soft and warm, just like I remembered, but his hands were chilled on mine around the coffee cup. Had he been outside? Was it winter?

"Sure." Of course, I'd tell him anything he wanted to know. This was Mac after all; I'd do anything for him. Wouldn't I?

"This evening when you were attacked," he gestured toward my left arm, and dimly I realized that it hurt, a lot. "Why did you not defend yourself?"

"Hmm." Attacked. I vaguely knew I'd been attacked earlier. "I did," I told him. I remembered raising my arm to block the blow.

"Why did you not defend yourself in your normal manner?" He seemed puzzled.

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Spikes and knives and such," he explained.

That seemed funny somehow. "Stakes and knives and crossbows, oh, my," I said with a half smile on my face.

He waited for me to look up at him, then asked, "Why didn't you defend yourself, Eliza? You had weapons."

Weapons. Somehow they didn't really seem important, although a part of me was worried that I didn't have any within reach. I tried to ask Mac for one, but something else came out instead. "Where's the coffee?"

"You're holding it," he reminded me.

I was surprised at that, I didn't remember him getting the cup for me. I tried to lift it, but he had to guide my hands, I didn't have the strength. After I took a sip, I laid my head back down. The hot coffee warmed my stomach.

"Do you need blood, Eliza?" I heard him say through the exhaustion that pulled me down.

Blood. I'd used some, hadn't I? I remembered something about fighting, and a wound that had needed to be healed. I could feel pain somewhere in my body, but I knew I didn't have enough blood left to try and heal it. "Not enough," I mumbled aloud.

"Not enough what?" he asked.

I drifted, thinking how nice it felt to have him sitting beside me on the bed. I knew I must be sick, but that was strange because I usually don't get sick.

"Eliza?"

I turned my head to look at him, but it seemed too much of an effort to answer. I closed my eyes against the brightness of the room.

"Are you going to answer me Eliza?"

Had he asked me something? "About what?"

"Do you need blood?"

"Hmm," I replied wordlessly. I frowned a little, then whispered, "Be all right in a few days."

"But I need you well now," he protested. When I didn't answer, he added, "I have extra, Eliza."

I didn't understand what he was saying. "What?"

"Blood," he repeated patiently.

I wrinkled my nose at the thought of drinking blood to replace what I'd spent. It would have to be vampire blood to do any good, and I didn't want to risk the addiction my foster mother had gone through. I never wanted to be like Linda, ever.

"I have extra," he repeated.

I was too tired to wonder what he had extra of that he thought I would need. I closed my eyes and let my mind drift.

"Do you need me to hold your coffee all day?" I heard him say.

I opened my eyes to see him smirking and holding a steaming cup of coffee. It sounded so good, how had he known that I wanted some? "Oh, thank you," I said gratefully. I tried to lift the cup, but I wasn't strong enough.

Mac lifted it and helped me take a drink. "Would you like something to help you sleep, Eliza?" he asked. "I have a few things that may make you feel better, herbs and natural medicines and such."

Feel better? I felt fine, just tired. Except, "Mac, why does my arm hurt?" I looked up at him, trusting that he would have the answer.

"We were attacked, luv," he told me softly.

There was something wrong with him calling me that, but I was too tired and in too much pain to figure out what. "Make it go away," I whispered pleadingly.

"Just a moment," he replied. "I have something." He got off the bed and I heard him rummaging through his bag for a few minutes. By the time he came back I was almost asleep again. "Open," he instructed kindly.

It took me a moment to process what he'd said, but eventually I opened my mouth. He put something on my tongue that was the size of a marble. I didn't know how he expected me to swallow it and would have told him that, but I felt the cup against my lips and hot coffee filled my mouth.

"Take a drink," I heard him say. I did. It felt like he was dumping coffee into my mouth, and for a moment I didn't think I could swallow it all. It was hot, and burned a path to my stomach. I pushed the cup away and laid my head back against the pillow. My stomach felt like it was on fire, but somehow I felt a little better. I could feel warmth flowing into my frozen limbs.

"Once more," he told me. He put another marble in my mouth and helped me to drink.

Once again I felt like he was trying to drown me. The taste was disgusting, and I grimaced. I pushed the cup away more firmly this time, gagging.

"'Tis a natural remedy, luv," he said softly.

"Nasty," I exclaimed. My entire body was tingling, as if all of it had fallen asleep at once and everything was just now coming back to life.

"But it will help," he assured me, then added under his breath, "I hope."

"Nasty," I repeated, looking up with a scowl. It wasn't hard to realize that I felt a lot better. "Do you not know how to make coffee?"

"I'm a little out of practice," he said apologetically.

"Yeah, I'm thinking you are," I told him, still wincing from the horrible taste. "Is there anything in here to get that nasty taste out of my mouth?"

"I believe I saw something in the fridge," he offered.

"Please, no more coffee." The taste on my tongue was almost enough to make me gag again. That was weird, because it hadn't seemed so bad just a minute ago.

"Perhaps the machine was unused in a while," he suggested. "I'll pour that batch out and try a fresh one." He walked over to the coffee maker and poured out the soured brew, then proceeded to make another.

While he was waiting for the batch to finish, I realized exactly what I was and wasn't wearing. I still had the towel wrapped around me, but he must have covered me with a blanket while I'd slept.

I pulled the cover up higher until it was almost to my chin, then felt disgusted with myself. He was a damn vamp, after all. He didn't care about my nudity or lack of it. He hadn't reacted even a little bit when he'd sewn me up a few nights ago, and then I'd been completely naked from the waist up.

Cormac came back with another cup of coffee and an apple. He handed them to me with a glance at the blanket and said, "It's nothing I haven't seen before, dear." As he walked across the room and added, "Granted it's been a while."

I looked at the apple and almost threw it at his retreating back. Then I felt hunger burn in my stomach and decided I'd be better off if I ate it instead. I took a large bite and the crunch echoed in the room.

"If you are still hungry after the apple," he told me, "there are a few other things in the refrigerator, cheese, crackers and such."

"I didn't say I was hungry," I objected around the apple. "I said I needed this nasty taste out of my mouth."

"Sorry," he murmured. "Homemade remedies tend to run a bit on the foul side."

I took a wary sip of the coffee and it tasted like ambrosia. "At least this coffee's a little better."

"Thank you."

"Practice," I suggested.

"As you wish," he said, settling down on one of the chairs in the room.

I glanced around, but there was no clock to be seen and my watch was in the bathroom. "What time is it?"

He looked at his watch. "Four-thirty."

"Damn, why did you let me sleep so long?" I exclaimed. I'd slept over four hours and it had felt like only minutes.

"Because last time I tried to wake you, you nearly staked me," he reminded me, "again."

Again? "When did I ever stake you?"

"You've tried, several times," he replied calmly.

"If I tried, I'd do it," I told him with a grim smile. "I don't miss."

"You keep saying that."

My eyebrow shot up at what I felt was a challenge to my abilities. "Would you like me to try?" I bit into the apple and held it in my mouth as I reached for the nightstand drawer.

"Not now, dear," he said firmly.

I stopped in mid motion and took the apple out of my mouth. "Maybe later."

"Oh, by the by, Eliza," he murmured, "did you happen to bring that photo album you had at your apartment?"

My eyes narrowed. He hadn't shown any interest in it then, why the sudden change of heart? "Why?"

"I'd like to look at it if I may," he admitted. "You offered it to me once."

"And you refused," I reminded him.

He shrugged lightly. "I was under a bit of stress."

He'd been under stress? I was the one who'd just killed a werewolf, I was the one with a new scar on my shoulder, I was the one whose life he'd invaded. Still, I remembered the look on his face before he'd walked out of the apartment that first time. I dropped my eyes and nodded. "It's in my suitcase."

"May I?" he asked, rising to his feet.

"Careful the sharp knife," I warned him. "It's likely to cut to the bone."

He smiled. "Careful the, ah, knife shaped object in a sheath, it is," he said, reminding me what he'd said to Jurgen about his sword earlier.

I watched him go into the dressing room and open the top of my suitcase. He picked up the towel and sat it and the knife aside. When he didn't see the photo album right away, he glanced at me in question.

"It's on the bottom," I told him.

He hesitated for a moment, then reached under the clothing and pulled it out. He brought it back into the bedroom and walked around to the other side of the bed where he sat down. He put the album on the bed between us and opened to the first page.

While I finished off the coffee and the apple, I told him about the pictures as he flipped through, starting from those of Corrine as a baby and ending with a photo taken only a few weeks ago. The pictures told the story of her life, of her time in ballet class, her school plays, her graduation from high school.

"Would that be Gene and Martina?" he asked the first time the older couple showed up in a picture.

"Yeah," I told him, not sure how he knew their names. "Those are the Wrights. They adopted Corrine."

"Yes." He continued leafing through the pages, lingering over the photographs and listening to every word I told him of our child.

I was only in one of the pictures with Corrine, one that had been taken at her graduation open house. We looked like sisters and I remembered that day with pride in her accomplishment. I'd been kicked out of high school for fighting and never gone back.

When he reached the last picture of our daughter, I had to stop myself from reaching for the album. "That's-that's it of Corrine," I told him, not really wanting him to see what else was in the book.

He glanced at me, but continued to slowly turn the page, watching my reaction. I bit my lip, but didn't say anything. The next two pictures were as much a part of his past as they were of mine.

The first one had always been special to me. It showed Mac and me at Jane Anderson's family cottage in the mountains of West Virginia. We were standing on the deck with the mountains behind us. I flushed when I remembered that it had been the morning we'd made love for the first time.

The picture on the opposite page had also been taken that weekend. Mac and Glenn had been horsing around near the cars, and Jane had snapped a photograph of them standing side by side. It had meant so much to me that they'd been friends. I'd never really been serious with Glenn, and he and Mac had been like brothers. Mac had understood that Glenn was my friend and it hadn't seemed to bother him at all that we'd remained friends.

"Glenn," Cormac murmured.

I frowned and looked up at him, startled to see recognition on his face. "You know, you keep saying you have amnesia," I said thoughtfully, "but then you keep saying things that make me doubt you."

"I have a good memory," he replied, turning the page to reveal several pressed flowers that Corrine had given me when she was a child.

My heart almost stopped when I realized what was on the next pages. "There's no more pictures in there," I told him, reaching for the book to take it away from him.

He started to turn the page anyway, but I blocked the movement with my hand. He really didn't need to see the daisies I'd kept if he didn't remember why I'd kept them.

"There's no more pictures in there," I repeated harshly.

"I don't mind," he told me.

I held my hand so that he couldn't turn the page. "I mind."

He looked up at me, but didn't press the issue. When he let go of the book, I quickly closed it and moved it onto my lap.

"There's no more pictures in here," I said again, softly this time.

"I believe you," he said honestly. "What is it that you're hiding?"

"I'm not hiding anything," I denied hotly. "I just don't think you need to look at everything that's in here." Why should I bare my soul to him? I couldn't think of one good reason to.

"What else is in there?" he asked again.

"Nothing you need to be concerned with," I told him firmly.

"I liked you better before I fed you," he said quietly. When I shot him a questioning look, he gestured toward the nightstand. "The apple and the coffee."

I looked away. "Usually I'm more cranky when I'm hungry," I said apologetically.

"Really," he replied with a smile. "I hadn't noticed. Would you like me to put your book back? I will mind the sharp knife."

"No," I said quickly. "I'll put it back later." I set the book on the nightstand as if doing that would put it out of his mind.

"Very well." He shifted a little on the bed. "I have made arrangements for us to fly out at the beginning of tomorrow evening for Paris."

"Jax is bringing the plane back?"

"Yes, Jax will be waiting," he replied. "He will be accompanying us within the city because I do not speak French, but he does."

"Normally I'd complain about that," I muttered to myself, "but since Brenda doesn't like him, he has something going for him right there."

"I have also made arrangements for us to stay at a rather luxurious hotel while we are within the city," he added.

I glanced up at him. "Hopefully with more than one bed?"

"Yes, separate beds," he assured me. "A suite actually. The bedrooms will be separate. Jax will be staying in the hotel, either next door or across the hallway."

"Okay." Having a locked door between Jax and us made me feel much better about him staying in the same hotel. It didn't occur to me to think there should be a locked door between Mac and myself. "So," I asked cautiously, "were there any repercussions from our incident earlier this evening?"

When he sighed, I looked at him in surprise. "Actually, Eduardo phoned LA to inquire about myself and my... ghouls," he told me. "He received directions to phone Antonio, Brenda's sire. Have you met him?"

"No." I wasn't sure I wanted to, he had to be worse than Brenda.

"A rather charming fellow," Cormac said, almost rambling. "Distinguished gentleman, a Spaniard. Quite the person. Anyway, Eduardo spoke with him for some time, I gather, and Antonio filled him in on enough of the truths of our relationship."

I raised an eyebrow. "And how does Antonio know these truths?"

"Antonio was the acting primogen of LA," he explained. "He is one of the higher-ranking members of our clan within the states. He has knowledge of the contract. As he and Eduardo knew each other from before, Antonio felt he could trust Eduardo with the information."

Hell, did every damn Tremere in America know about the damned contract? "That still doesn't explain—" What exactly did this vamp I'd never met know about my life? "How far truths are you talking?"

"Enough that Eduardo knows that you are not my ghoul and we both still live," he said calmly.

"Interesting," I murmured. "Does this Antonio like you or something?"

"Apparently so," he replied thoughtfully. "Whether he is actually fond of me and my abilities, or is respectful due to the fact that his adopted daughter Christina, Brenda's sister, is ah..." he paused for a long moment, then continued with, "my sister, I don't know."

I frowned. "That's not your sister's name," I told him. Her name was Siofra, and I'd seen pictures of her, but never met her.

"Not my, ah, mortal sister," he explained. "Dougal's childe."

I don't know why that surprised me. "He was busy."

"He was asked to bring her into the family," Cormac added.

"Kicking and screaming?" I asked wryly.

"I was not with him on that mission," he said lightly. "Oh, which reminds me. What do you know of a Tremere named Lon?"

"Nothing," I answered truthfully, "should I?"

"No," he replied, almost sounding disappointed. "It is unimportant. I shall ask some of my other contacts."

I didn't really care about a vamp I didn't know, so I let it drop. "It's good that you didn't get into trouble about what you said to Eduardo earlier," I told him, "but when I asked if we were in trouble, I meant about the thing earlier than that, in the alley."

"No," he assured me. "Eduardo was pleased that we were both well, or at least alive. If anything arose, he will have it taken care of."

"Okay, well that's good," I replied, glad that we wouldn't have to be concerned about repercussions from the attack. Then I thought about the poor girl lying there dead and I got mad. "It's nice when you can blow someone away in an alley and walk away and not worry about it."

"It was self defense," he reminded me, his voice too calm for my liking. It didn't seem to bother him that he'd killed the woman, she was just another human to him, part of the herd. I couldn't help but wonder just how many humans he'd killed in cold blood like that.

I sat up abruptly, needing to get away from him. From the corner of my eye I saw him turn his head to give me privacy in case the towel slipped. I wrapped the blanket around my body and stood carefully, making sure I had the strength to balance myself before I let go of the bed.

"I'm just gonna go get some clothes on," I told him, walking over to the dressing room. I grabbed undergarments, jeans and a tank top, then went into the bathroom and closed the door. When I was dressed and returned to the bedroom, he was sitting at the desk.

I stood in the doorway and looked around the room for a minute. "Are there any other extra blankets or pillows or anything else in here?" I asked him. "Did you notice?"

He glanced up. "No, I didn't actually go through the closets. Why?"

"Well, you know, one bed, two people."

"You can have all of the blanket and pillows," he told me, "and the bed if you wish."

I shook my head stubbornly. "I'll make a bed over here on the floor."

"You may have that bed if you wish, Eliza," he repeated. "As I said I sleep like the dead."

Thanks for the reminder, Mac. As if I could forget. "I wouldn't want to trip over you on the way to the bathroom in the middle of the day, either," I said aloud. "I'm assuming it's going to be dark in here?"

He looked around. "I don't see any windows. I guess you wouldn't want me to sleep in the bathtub, would you?"

Yeah, I could just see that. Contrary to popular fiction, vampires could and sometimes did wake during the day. "No," I said firmly. "I don't think so."

"Well, so are you taking the bed or not?" he sounded impatient, as if he were angry that I was refusing the bed.

Too bad, I much preferred the floor. "No."

"Suit yourself," he murmured.

"Sure." Although if I suited myself, would I be here with him now? Would I?

He lifted all of the pillows from the bed except one and stood there looking at me. "Where would you like them?"

"You know, I can do this," I told him impatiently. I took the pillows from him and walked over near the bathroom door where I threw them down. The ache in my arm irritated me, but I knew it would be all right in a few days. "Think you've given me enough pillows?"

"I don't need them," he replied. "Good to see you're feeling better."

"Yeah," I said thoughtfully as I bent to arrange the pillows on the floor. I'd been really out of it earlier. "What was that you gave me anyway?"

"A holistic medicine," he said softly.

"Well, whatever it was it seems to have done the trick," I admitted with a shrug. "Although I don't know if it was the coffee that was nasty, or whatever it was that you gave me."

"Probably a combination," he replied.

"Yeah." I rose and turned to find him standing next to me with his arms full of blankets. I took them and spread them awkwardly, favoring my injured arm.

I tried not to watch while he stripped to his pants and undershirt, but he didn't seem to notice me looking. As he was getting into bed, I returned to the nightstand and retrieved the book I'd left there, along with the remains of my snack and the stake in the drawer. I put the photo album back in my suitcase, then rinsed out the cup and threw the apple core in the waste bin.

When I bent to put the stake under one of the pillows on the floor, Cormac warned me that I might roll over on to it in my sleep. I smiled to myself. "I've been sleeping with a stake for twenty years, I've never rolled over onto one yet."

"There is a first time for everything," he told me.

"I think if that were going to happen, it would have a long time ago." I glanced around the room, but the only thing left to do was turn out the light. I did so, then made my way carefully back across the darkened room and laid down on my makeshift bed.

It was unnerving to be this close to him and still so far away. When he was human.... But he wasn't human anymore, he was a vamp. I had to keep reminding myself of that or I'd really be in trouble. Actually, it was already hard to keep telling myself he was a black hat. He kept doing things that reminded me of the Mac I'd loved so long ago, even though he didn't remember much of it.

I could feel that dawn was close and although I was very tired, I knew I couldn't sleep, not yet. Something that Cormac had said earlier, something he'd left out of his account of the raid still bothered me. I knew I had to ask him about it, even though I wasn't sure he'd tell me. If he didn't then he didn't, but either way I knew I had to ask.

"Mac?" I said quietly.

Just when I thought he was dead for the day, he answered me. "Yes?"

"What—" I stopped, unsure what to say. Hell, there wasn't any way to ask but to just do it. "What was it like when Dougal bit you?"

"Do you really want to know?" he asked slowly.

Did I? Yeah, I guess I did. "Well, you didn't-didn't fight him," I said warily. "You almost looked like you liked it, most people do when they're bit. What was it like?"

"At first I did fight it," he told me softly, "but it has a power within it, a calming property. And when I thought you were dead I welcomed the rest."

His embrace. I felt tears fall from my eyes toward my hairline, but somehow I kept the emotions from my voice as I tried to concentrate on what he was telling me. "Calming property?" I'd never felt anywhere near calm with Kindred fangs in me. Never.

"It creates a sense of... serenity," he explained.

I didn't understand. Every time I'd ever been bit I felt only pain and anger at the attack. "I've been bit before," I said in a low voice, "and I've never felt like that."

"It might have something to do with your blood," he said thoughtfully, "or possibly the emotions with which you are being bit. As I said, our planned embrace was an alternative to being outright killed."

"I've been bit more times than that," I murmured, remembering the two other vamps who'd bit me.

"Good morning," Cormac said in a weary voice. The room fell silent.

"Mac?" I called softly. When he didn't answer me, I knew the sun had come up.

I sat up and leaned against the wall, staring toward the bed that I couldn't see in the darkness. Tears streamed down my cheeks as I tried to understand what Cormac had told me about the bite that Dougal had given him. Could there really be that much difference in what the victim felt based on how the vamp intended the attack?

I'd never understood why blood dolls and ghouls kept coming back for more to the vampires that drained them, but if it felt as nice as Mac said, that was probably the reason. Would I have felt that way if the girl had been kinder that night in Baltimore? Somehow I didn't think so. Luther had made it clear that his feeding was to punish me, and the Brujah who'd bit me in Salem had been convinced I would like his 'kiss.' I definitely had not enjoyed any of them.

I shook my head. I could go crazy wondering about the whole thing. I wasn't likely to take a bite from a vamp without a struggle, so I'd probably never know the serenity that Cormac had described. For a heartbeat I wondered what it would be like to be 'kissed' by him, then I forced the thought from my mind. I wasn't here to feed him; I was here to help him get his memory back and that was all I was here for.

Abruptly I remembered the feel of his fingers on my calves, his hands rubbing my foot. I got goosebumps all over again just thinking about it. How could I have responded that way to him so quickly? Hell, he's a vamp, I reminded myself. He's a blood-sucking fiend, no longer human, no longer the man I loved. At least, that was what I tried to tell myself, anyway.

There in the darkness with his corpse on the bed, I finally faced the truth. I still loved Mac, my heart didn't care if he were human or mage or Kindred. I still loved him and I still trusted him to keep me safe from harm. I didn't understand how I could feel that way after a lifetime of hating vampires, but it was true just the same.

Did he really remember how much he'd loved me? If he did, where did that leave us? He'd asked me to give him a chance, give us a chance, but that had been days ago and he hadn't brought it up since. What exactly did he want from me?

Well, it wasn't likely that he'd tell me now. The sun was up and he was out of it for the day. I wiped my tears and laid back down on the pillows, but as tired as I was my eyes refused to close.

Through all of my restless thoughts, I kept thinking I should be hearing Cormac breathe. Each time I found myself waiting for his next breath, I called myself ten times a fool. He was a damn vamp, he didn't breathe, he would never breathe again.

Finally I fell asleep, though I would have sworn it wasn't for long. The nightmare woke me an hour before dusk. After a long time I got up and flipped on the bathroom light, then turned toward the bed. It was so unnerving to see him lying there completely motionless.

Despite the dangers of getting close to a sleeping vampire, I walked over to the bed and studied his face in the light spilling from the open bathroom door. He looked so peaceful, and if it hadn't been for his absolute stillness, I could almost pretend he was merely sleeping. I sighed, and the sound seemed to echo in the quiet room.

Abruptly I shook my head and strode quickly to the bathroom, where I showered and dressed with care. When I returned to the bedroom, I piled the pillows and blankets on the floor near the bed and repacked my suitcase in the dim light. I knew I could have turned on the overhead light and not bothered Cormac, but somehow it didn't feel right.

I was just tidying up the bathroom when I saw the light go on in the bedroom. I peeked my head out and saw that Cormac was up. "Oh, the sun must be down."

"Yes," he replied as he walked toward the dressing room to pack his suitcase. "Will you be long?"

"No," I told him, turning to gather the few toiletries left on the sink. "I'm almost done. I was just waiting for you."

I returned to the bedroom and threw the rest of my belongings into the carryon bag while he went into the bathroom to change. When he returned I noticed that his shirt wasn't quite buttoned all the way. I saw water in the hollow of his neck, and quickly looked away when I found myself wondering what it would taste like.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked as he pulled on his figure-eight holster.

"Kind of," I replied absently, trying not to watch him put on his guns. Once again I didn't like the reminder of how much he'd changed, even though those guns had saved my life last night.

He straightened and looked at me. "Kind of?"

"Yeah, kind of," I repeated resentfully. "It's hard to sleep when you keep having the feeling that someone else should be breathing and they're not." I didn't mention that I'd had the nightmare again and had woken staring a long time into the silent darkness listening for intruders before I'd finally remembered where I was.

"Sorry," he said, almost sounding like he actually meant it. "Would you like a pet? Something to breathe with you?"

I shook my head and looked away. "No, I don't do well with pets. Generally, I don't play well with others anyway," I admitted.

"Did you get all your stakes back?" he asked when he'd finished getting ready.

"Yeah." There had only been the one I'd put in the nightstand by the bed and I'd slept with that one.

"Good."

I leaned against the wall, silently watching him gather his things together and place them in his suitcase.

"Feeling... normal?" he asked.

"Almost." I still needed a couple more nights before I was completely back to normal, but at least I could fight again if I had to.

"That is good," he said with some satisfaction.

"I'd still like to know what the hell you gave me last night," I told him. Whatever it had been, it had certainly brought me up to speed much faster than I could have done naturally.

"It's a little something I carry with me."

Now who was being vague? "Do you normally travel with humans who get sick?" Not that I was human, right? But you don't use the word 'Dhampyr' lightly in a Tremere chantry, especially when they don't know what you are.

"It works equally well on those of my kind," he explained. "An all around sort of cure."

I glanced at my watch, eager to be gone from this room. "Are you ready yet?" I still felt very much caged, and wanted some fresh air.

"Yes." He picked up his things as I gathered mine and opened the door for him.

"You first," I offered. "If I walk out first, they might think I'm alone." I did not want to have to fight anyone this early in the night.

I followed Cormac through the halls and about halfway down to the car, a ghoul approached him and offered to take some of his things. Cormac gave him the large duffel bag and the sword, cautioning the ghoul about the later. We continued without interruption until we reached the entry hall, where we saw Jurgen.

The vamp met us halfway across the room and said his good-byes to Mac. A few minutes later we were outside waiting for the car, which was brought around rather quickly.

We packed the luggage in the trunk and got inside. A glance in the backseat showed the crossbow exactly where I'd left it. Cormac drove to the airport and we sat in the first comfortable silence we'd shared since he walked up to me at Guilty Pleasures.

Jax had the plane waiting for us in the same hanger we'd arrived in. He helped us carry everything on board and when we were ready to go he asked us to be seated and put on our seat belts.

That takeoff bothered me more than the last one had, probably because I wasn't as worried about being alone with Cormac as I had been two nights ago. I told myself it was normal to be nervous, it was only my second flight, after all.

When we'd reached our cruising altitude, Cormac pulled out his phone and dialed a number. After a short pause, he said, "Corrine, it is Cormac, just calling to check in, see how you are faring in our absence. Call if you'd like to, you have my number."

He hung up the phone and I could feel his eyes on me. I looked up to see him studying me thoughtfully.

"Now that you have your wits more about you, Eliza," he said softly, "you never did tell me why you were not fighting back."

I frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"When we were attacked in the alleyway," he replied. He watched me like a hawk, as if he thought I would lie to him, or simply refuse to answer the question.

"Okay," I murmured resentfully. "I don't remember you being attacked in the alleyway." So I was avoiding, it wasn't the same thing as lying.

"Anyway," he growled irritably, "you had none of your weapons drawn."

I didn't understand why he was so upset about that. "Why would I?"

"Someone was trying to harm you," he said as if that explained everything.

"She was human," I told him simply. I don't kill humans if I can help it. "And I was defending myself."

"She was more than human," he said reproachfully. "Look at your arm."

I didn't have to look to feel the injury. It felt a lot better today, but it still wasn't completely healed. "I'm still not sure how that one happened," I muttered darkly.

"Tell me, Eliza," he prompted thoughtfully. "What other abilities did you gain from your—" My hand went inside my jacket, but I hadn't yet touched the stake when he corrected himself. "Kate?"

"What do you mean, abilities?" I asked, playing dumb. If he didn't remember, I wasn't about to tell him what I could do. It was stupid, but I felt that gave me an advantage in our relationship, the only one I felt I had.

"Well, you obviously have the enhanced strength, as such," he told me. "What about Auspex, Thaumaturgy, Domination?"

Auspex was what allowed me to heighten my senses and see auras. I could also make people to do or believe what I said, but I only used that power when I had no other choice. Thaumaturgy was a form of blood magic, or so Kate had told me, but one I'd never tried to develop. It had been Auspex and Dominate that had caused me problems in high school.

"Well, ah," I stuttered, not wanting to admit anything I didn't have to. "I don't know."

"Did you see the girl's aura?" he asked pointedly.

The way things were going, he'd eventually learn or remember that I saw them anyway, so, "Yeah."

"And?"

"Well," I said slowly, "she was human until she picked the piece of wood up."

"And when she picked the piece of wood up?"

I shrugged. "Then she got all funny looking, kinda like...." I thought for a moment, remembering. "Okay, kinda changeling-sorcerer-priest thing."

"You are still convinced she was human?" he demanded softly.

"Well, she was 'til she did that," I told him firmly. "You know, and I really don't have anything against mages or changelings, most of the time. Or priests."

"So she was human until she changed," he said thoughtfully.

"Yeah." I wondered where he was going with this line of questioning. I didn't have to wonder long.

"So was I," he reminded me rationally. "You have something against me. Why were you not—"

"You don't change back and forth," I said crossly. "You can't blink and become human again."

"Why were you not defending yourself?" he asked again, plainly irritated with me.

"I don't know what you think I was doing," I answered quite honestly, "but I was defending myself."

He looked at me for a moment, then apparently decided to try a different approach. "Why were you not attacking back?"

I looked away and sighed. That was the heart of the matter, wasn't it? I'd defended myself when she attacked, but I hadn't pulled either of my weapons, or even struck out at her once. If she really had been human, I wouldn't have needed a weapon to kill her.

"You know, she was obviously a hunter of some sort," I reminded him unnecessarily. "To most people who can see that type of thing, I look like a ghoul, even though I'm not. And you know, hey, ghoul, hunter, dead ghoul. That's usually the way it turns out."

"So you're saying you should not be damned for what you are, or appear to be?"

I could see where he was trying to go with this, but he was way off base. "No," I said, plainly stating what I felt was the obvious. "I am damned for what I am. That being the case, who am I to kill her for defending her race?" Deep down I felt that the hunter had been right to try to kill me, that I deserved to die for what I was, what I always would be.

My logic or lack of it seemed to puzzle him. "She was trying to kill you."

"Which only makes sense, because of what I look like," I replied patiently. "She didn't kill me."

"She could have," he reminded me.

I didn't need the reminder of how close I'd come to dying; I knew that if Cormac hadn't shown up the woman would have killed me. I'd never lived in fear of death, and I didn't intend to start now. "So can any number of things that go bump in the night. The plane could crash."

"The plane is not actively trying to end your existence," he said irritably.

"Are you sure?" I asked with wide-eyed innocence. "It could be haunted."

He gave a frustrated growl low in his throat and just looked at me.

I shook my head and let my own anger rise. "I know she was trying to kill me, it was pretty obvious. But it makes sense, you know, I look like one of the black hats. So who am I to decide she should die just because I look like a bad guy? Who am I to end her life when by all rights I should be helping her?"

After a moment, he nodded slowly. "I merely asked."

"I merely answered," I replied, my voice cold.

"And then some," he added irritably.

"You did ask," I reminded him, feeling more than a little irritated myself. "I did try to avoid the subject and you did continue to pry. So now that I see you really haven't changed much in the last twenty years, can we move on to another subject?"

"I was just wondering if I was going to have to defend you every time we were attacked," he murmured thoughtfully.

"Only if we're attacked by slayers." I said sarcastically, then added grimly. "I can defend myself, thank you very much."

He just smiled smugly. "How's your arm?"

I closed my eyes and sighed. I knew he was right, my arm still hurt and the bruising was turning some very interesting colors that I hadn't seen since I first learned the right way to

hunt alone. He was right, damn him. What would Corrine do without me? No matter how I felt about slayers and my damnation, for her sake I had to do more than defend myself if we came across another of this new breed of hunters. For her sake, not because it was important to Mac.

After some time of angry silence, Cormac pulled out his cell phone and dialed a number on it. He left a message for someone, mumbling something about a noble cause and asking the person to call him back when they awakened, leading me to believe he was trying to reach another vamp.

When he'd hung up from that, he quietly reloaded his guns. I tried not to watch, finding a magazine and leafing through it blindly. I'd never been much for guns, I always felt they gave the shooter an unfair advantage and preferred to be closer to my enemy. I didn't know why his guns bothered me so much, but they did. It wasn't as if he hadn't owned one before, hell, he'd tried to teach me how to use one more than once.

After a while Cormac got up and walked into the kitchen area of the plane. I heard him open the refrigerator and wondered if he was drinking from the blood bags I'd seen in there the last time we'd been on the plane. I couldn't help but study him when he came back into the cabin, trying to see any difference in his coloring, but I really couldn't tell. When I noticed that he'd seen my questioning look, I lowered my eyes back to the magazine.

He sat down and fell almost immediately into a meditative state. I tried not to watch him, but my eyes kept going to his face. I kept telling myself not to be stupid, but my self wasn't listening.

I spent some time thinking about what he'd said earlier. He'd had a point, he had been human until he changed, why was I so set against him now? It wasn't as if he'd sought to become a monster, or even remembered how anti-Kindred he'd once been. He was existing as best he could considering what he'd been told by Dougal, but he didn't actually seem that much different from the Mac I remembered.

As much as I hated to admit it, I was beginning to realize that spending time with Mac was good for me after all. The longer I was with him, the more I felt like he was healing a part of my soul that I had thought damaged forever. He didn't condemn me for the choices I'd made about Corrine and the contract, and he didn't think I was evil for following the terms of that contract, not that I'd actually had a choice once I'd signed the damn thing.

Being with him also made me rethink my views of myself. How was I any better than Jax, or Rafael, Brenda's boy-toy? All three of us had Kindred blood inside; it didn't matter where it came from. I'd meant what I had told Cormac earlier, I was a black hat. I had no more right to judge them than I did to kill the hunter in the alley. How could I hate an entire race just because Kate had been a bad mother?

I wondered what Corrine would think if she ever found out exactly what her father now was. I remembered my promise to prevent her from following the path we'd taken. Somehow I had to get rid of this hatred of Kindred from my heart, this hatred of myself. If I didn't and Corrine ever learned the truth about vampires, I'd never be able to hide it from her and I'd never be able to explain it without making her want to destroy them too.

I wouldn't let my daughter take up hunting and die young just because I hated Kindred. I couldn't.

THE CARNIVAL

THE FREAKIEST SHOW I KNOW IS THE SHOW OF MY OWN
LIVING MY LIFE IN AND OUT OF THE TWILIGHT ZONE
NOBODY WEIRD LIKE ME - RED HOT CHILI PEPPERS

Cormac came out of his meditation as the plane landed. I tried not to clutch at the couch, forcing my fingers to relax against the fabric. When the plane stopped, Jax came out of the cockpit and helped us collect our bags before he opened the door.

We put our things in the waiting car with help from a mortal who didn't seem to know what we were. The man looked at me funny when I placed the crossbow on the back seat, but he was too polite to comment.

A few minutes later, Jax rejoined us and we got into the car. Jax drove, and Cormac sat beside him while I had the back seat to myself. It took us nearly an hour to get into Paris, and I couldn't help but be thrilled to see the many famous landmarks I'd only heard about. Jax pointed out the hotel we'd be staying at, but drove directly to a house across the avenue from the Eiffel tower.

Paris was a bustling city, with a lot of old beautiful buildings. I tried very hard not to look like a gaping tourist as I got out of the car and a ghoul drove it away. Jax led us inside one of those old buildings and down into the basement of the house.

The basement seemed very ordinary except for a large set of bookshelves set along one wall. Jax pulled on one of the books and a panel swung out to reveal a wide staircase. As soon as the panel opened, we could hear music and talking from below. Jax led us down what turned out to be a set of stairs wide enough for five people to walk and not rub elbows. It was built like an old grand staircase, except that it was made entirely from metal. It looked very industrial, down to the holes in each metal step.

We hadn't gone downward very far when Cormac's steps faltered and it surprised me. "What is it?" I asked, worried about some unknown danger we might be walking into. I knew there were vamps down there and I didn't want to have to fight our way to the prince.

He sighed, but kept walking downward. "A Carnival."

Why would that be a problem? "And that means what, merry go rounds and dart tossing?"

"Ah, merry tossing and darts go round," he said dryly with a shake of his head.

I didn't understand his hesitation. "Is this a bad thing?"

He glanced over his shoulder at me. "You're going to see some very interesting things this evening," he warned me.

Everything I saw looked interesting, actually. The entire place was very high-tech and everything seemed to be made of metal or plastic. The room was huge, with several chrome and glass domes dominating the center that concealed booths of some sort.

As we walked downward, I saw that there was a picture gallery of some sort at the bottom of the stairs. With a start I realized that all of the artwork hanging there showed people in various stages of undress. Most of the paintings were very tastefully done, but a few were quite graphic.

I glanced away from the gallery only for my steps to falter when I realized that fully one third of the people in the crowd were quite naked. I didn't know what bothered me more, the bare servants, or the sheer number of Kindred and ghouls that I could see and feel walking among them.

A beautiful dark haired ghoul met us at the bottom of the stairs wearing a very revealing dress. She was greeting people, and talked to Jax in French.

"Gee," I mumbled to myself, "I'm glad my dress didn't look like that."

Cormac glanced at me, an uneasy look on his face. "I'm glad she's wearing the dress."

I looked at the many naked people in the crowd around us. "Uh-huh."

"This is the hostess of the establishment," Jax told us after a few minutes. "Cormac, this is Cerise, Cerise, this is Cormac"

"Good evening," she said in heavily accented English. "Monsieur Knight has told me that you are visiting the city, that you have come to see the prince. Please feel free to make use of the carnival after you have spoken with him."

She turned to me and gave me the once over twice. "What a lovely young lady you have here, sir," she told Cormac. "There is quite a number of things the carnival has to offer, feel free to peruse it after your meeting." She handed Cormac and I packages of what looked like tokens that we both took with some hesitation. "Because you are first time guests, it is customary to allow a certain amount of testing of the games area. Have you been to a carnival before, Monsieur?"

"I briefly visited the one in Las Vegas," Cormac replied.

I shot him a startled look at that. He'd been to one of these... flesh-peddling establishments?

He looked right back at me and added, "On business."

Cerise looked pleased. "Ah, then I don't have to explain the bridal path to you, sir."

"No," he assured her, "that is quite all right." He looked very uncomfortable and I wondered just what exactly the Bridal Path was.

"I personally have never been to the Las Vegas carnival," she told him, "but I'm sure it is quite lovely. Jax knows where the conclave meets, he will lead you there."

"Thank you."

"It was a pleasure to meet you," she said as she turned to greet the next visitors. "Enjoy your stay in Paris."

"Thank you," he repeated.

When Jax had led us a few feet into the room, Cormac reached forward and tapped him on the shoulder. When the ghoul turned around, he demanded, "Why didn't you warn us? How did you introduce Eliza?"

"I-I thought you knew," Jax said softly, confused.

"How did you introduce Eliza," he repeated more calmly, "in case I need to maintain?"

Jax seemed puzzled. "I said that she's your ghoul, sir."

Cormac nodded. "Very well, then."

"Is that inappropriate?" he asked, worried. "That was my assumption."

"No," he replied. "That is quite all right. Never mind."

Jax nodded and turned to lead us through the throng.

"Business?" I hissed at Cormac as we followed him. "There's business here? Are you in the sex trade now?"

He glanced back at me. "We were trailing a rouge Gangrel who was killing indiscriminately, Eliza." He sounded very irritated with me.

"And you didn't call me?" I asked, trying to keep my mind off the naked people all around us. "I could have helped."

"I did not know you existed," he reminded me.

"I could kill something," I told him distractedly. "Or maim, maim would be good."

"Well, if you feel the need to release some tension," he drawled, "I'm sure we could find something here for you."

I glanced around, seeing naked flesh everywhere and feeling vampires all around me. I swallowed and fastened my eyes on Cormac's back. "I'd rather be elsewhere."

"I believe this *is* elsewhere," he told me.

We followed Jax past a large bar area covered with an enormous dome. Smaller domes covered game areas, but I couldn't figure out just what games they were playing. We walked past a café style area toward a large solid looking door.

From what I could tell there were about twenty vamps in the crowd, and for real now it made me very edgy. A group of five stood to one side of the door Jax was leading us to, two male and the rest female. The others seemed to defer to the tall dark vamp, and it was hard to miss the fact that he was staring right at me through the crowd. I felt a shiver go up my spine and instinctively stepped a little closer to Mac.

"This is the door of the conclave room," Jax told us when he stopped in front of it. "Do you want me to come inside with you?"

"If you would like to," Mac replied.

He shook his head. "I'll just wait out here."

"As you wish."

I was really getting tired of hearing Cormac say that, but I tried to let my irritation slide as Jax knocked on the door.

A pretty female ghoul opened the door and looked at Cormac. "The prince is expecting you," she told him, stepping back to let us into the room.

At that point it occurred to me that if Jax didn't have to go in, maybe I didn't either. Of course it was too late by then to say anything, so I followed Mac into the room. It was a hell of a lot different than the carnival, very old worldy. Brocaded fabric covered the walls, and the stone floor had been worn smooth.

A large round table surrounded by six tall chairs stood opposite the door. Near that was a huge desk behind which sat a woman, a ghoul. At her side was a little boy but I couldn't get a good enough look at him to see exactly what he was.

To my right I saw a huge fireplace and seating area. Two couches faced each other, with vampires seated on both of them. Two chairs faced the couches, and a tall Kindred man stood leaning against the mantle, one foot propped up on the hearth.

The girl who had opened the door led us to the empty chairs and told us to have a seat. Then she joined two other women at a sideboard behind one of the couches.

Mac stood back a little to let me walk to the far chair, but I waited for him to sit down before I did. The Kindred woman that was closest to him made a point not to look in his direction, and I wondered at her obvious hostility.

The vamp near the fireplace straightened and adjusted the cuffs of his expensive suit. "Good evening," he said pleasantly. "The Tremere have arranged for your stay within my city, and I believe everything is taken care of, this is just a formality. Have you any idea how long you plan on staying?"

"Not as yet, my prince," Cormac replied. "We have just arrived and I have not had occasion to investigate the few clues I have."

The girls came forward and sat crystal bowls filled with some type of berries on the low tables in front of the couches. As a few of the vampires took some of them, another girl sat a small bowl down on the table between Cormac and me.

"Very well," the vampire I assumed was the prince said. "I'm sure if you have any problems, your clan will be more than willing to help you. The rules for my city are very simple."

Yes, definitely the prince. Probably Ventrue, too, he looked like he had a bug up his butt.

"You know the Masquerade. Feel free to hang around at the carnival here, it is rather popular with the local Kindred. There are a few other places," he added, snapping his fingers. "I have had a packet arranged for you that gives a few of the Kindred hangouts in the city so you have an idea of where to go."

The girl at the desk stood up at the prince's finger snapping and brought him a manila envelope, which he passed down the vamps on the couch near Cormac. The woman on the end never glanced toward Mac, just held it out to him. I noticed she avoided looking at the vamps on the couch across from her as well.

The prince introduced his conclave to us, or rather to Mac. The male vamp on the couch near me was Ignatius, the Tremere primogen. Beside him sat Lucia Paciola, Ventrue. The woman who so obviously avoided looking at either of the Tremere in the room was Yasmine, a Toreador.

"It is very good to meet you, Yasmine," Cormac surprised me by saying. She still didn't look at him, although her mouth tightened a little at the corners.

Beside Yasmine was Dimple, the Nosferatu primogen. He glanced at me for a moment, only the second primogen to do so. The first had been Ignatius. The last vamp in the room was apparently a Brujah elder named Lisette Sinclair.

The girl from the desk whispered something in the prince's ear then glanced at me. I was wondering what she'd said when Mac spoke up.

"This is my travelling companion, Eliza."

Just ducky, I always wanted to be the center of attention in a room full of vamps when I didn't have enough stakes to go around.

The prince looked at me, and I nodded respectfully in his direction, keeping my eyes on his. It wouldn't do to look intimidated, but the least I could do was follow the standard convention for puppies, whatever that was.

"Is this your first visit to my city?" he asked.

"Yes it is," I replied softly.

"Well, I hope you have a pleasant stay with your master," he told me

"Thank you," I said, trying not to choke on disgust I felt at his words.

The prince looked back at Cormac. "Do you have any questions for me at all?"

"No, my prince," he said politely. "I believe I understand everything."

"I'm sure you know where the Tremere chantry is in town," the vampire commented. "I believe that Ignatius would like to have a word with you. As far as I'm concerned we are done." He stepped forward again and took another of the strange fruit and popped it in his mouth.

When some of the others stood, Cormac rose too. He also took one of the berries and placed it in his mouth. He bit into it, and a look of surprise crossed his face then was gone. I stood up as well and waited, noticing that Yasmine remained seated.

The girl standing between Ignatius and me didn't look like what I'd seen of the Ventrue clan. She was actually dressed in clothes like what I was wearing, and she gave me a questioning look before Cormac stepped between us and addressed the vampire on her left.

"When did you require a word with me, my primogen?"

"Here is fine," Ignatius replied then glanced over Cormac's shoulder at the seated Toreador. "Perhaps we should come over here to the table."

"Of course," my companion replied. He turned and put his hand in the small of my back, steering me toward the table in the far corner of the room. As soon as I moved in the correct direction, he dropped his hand and I fell back to walk a little behind him. The whole master comment still grated on my nerves, but I knew if I didn't make a good show of it, I wouldn't be able to stay at Mac's side when he needed me.

I noticed from the corner of my eye that the Brujah left the room just as Ignatius started to speak.

"Gigi has told me what you have come to the city looking for," he told Cormac. "When Dougal was here last, he did stay at the chantry, so I'm sure you would like to visit there."

"If it is possible," he agreed. "I would like to visit the room in which he stayed."

"Yes, I did some looking into that and there have been others that have stayed in that room since his departure." Ignatius paused for a moment, then said softly, "You know your sire's habits far better than I, if you would like to see the room and look for something the cleaning staff might have overlooked, then by all means, of course. She mentioned that there was an address you wanted to look at."

Cormac told him the address and the primogen handed him a business card. He instructed Cormac to call the chantry when he was ready to visit. He was about to walk away when Mac asked about the blood hunt for Earl Hardy.

"I've heard of this," Ignatius replied, "but I haven't heard any of the results, if he has been captured. Dougal was last with us five years ago. I can make some phone calls and see what happened with that. It shouldn't take very long, by the time you're ready to visit the chantry, I should have it ready for you."

"Jurgen also spoke of a blood hunt declared for Garaboldy," Cormac added hesitantly, "a Tremere."

Ignatius got a disgusted look on his face. "Yes, Garaboldy."

"Has that matter been resolved?"

"Unfortunately, no," the primogen told him. "It has been some time since that blood hunt was called. That bastard is still on the loose."

"I did not mean to dredge up memories," Cormac said apologetically.

"No, it is just that Garaboldy is used here in Paris to strike fear in the heart of our neonates," he murmured with a wry smile. "Garaboldy is very old. He was a good student for a while, then he killed his sire and ran amuck. If you see him and you have the ability to kill him, that would be noteworthy to the clan."

"Of course, my lord," my companion answered with a nod.

Ignatius asked if we would be staying for a time at the carnival, and to my relief Cormac told him we would be touring the city instead.

"Too bad," the vampire murmured. "The carnival is an interesting experience. Have you been to one?"

"I have been to the one in Las Vegas."

"Have you taken the young lady?"

Cormac shot a quick glance at me and said, "Not yet." I avoided looking at either of them.

"Interesting," Ignatius said almost to himself. "Very well. Call me when you are ready to visit the chantry. Good evening."

They shook hands and the primogen rejoined the others. Cormac gestured toward the door and we left the room. Jax was waiting for us right where we'd left him, but the vamps who'd been standing near the door were gone.

"Would you care to stay for a bit?" Cormac asked me softly. When he saw the look on my face, he added, "Shall we be off then?"

"Please," I said firmly. As we turned toward the exit, I really took a look around the room. Suddenly it didn't seem so repulsive any more. The booths with games actually looked interesting, and I found myself wondering where they got all of these naked people.

"Um, you know," I began hesitantly, "maybe we should hang around for a little while."

Cormac stopped abruptly and turned to look at me. "Oh?"

Over his shoulder, I saw Lisette come out of the café area with the man who had been staring at me earlier. The Kindred who had been with him before were with him now, except the dark haired woman who I saw over by the bar. They stopped and looked at us, but were too far away to overhear our conversation.

"Why the sudden change?" Cormac asked me.

"What?" I blinked up at him in surprise. "You've been to one of these, you could show me around."

"I took a tour and then hunted a Gangrel," he told me shortly. "Not much of a visit."

"Well, Jax has been here before."

"Perhaps later you and Jax can visit again," he said firmly. "Now I would prefer to get about the mission."

"You know, we have these tokens." I was trying anything I could to get him to stay, but it didn't seem to be working.

"I said you can come back."

"But we're here now," I said. "Do you have a problem with this place?"

"Slight," he replied. "And I have a mission I am on."

"All work and no play," I warned him with a smile, "makes Mac a dull boy."

"So I've been told."

"So have some fun," I encouraged.

"After we find Dougal's possessions." His face was firm, and I knew he wouldn't change his mind, but I had to try.

"It's waited five years," I reminded him, "why can't it wait a little longer?"

"It's been twenty years," he retorted. "Why can't it wait a little longer?"

I looked away, a little hurt at that comment.

"If you'd like to stay, I'm sure Jax would show you around," Mac told me as he held his tokens out to the ghoul.

Jax took them reluctantly, shooting confused glances between the two of us. Behind him I spotted Lisette talking to the vamp that had been staring at me earlier. As I watched, he took the hand of the blond girl on his other side.

Cormac sighed deeply. "If you two would care to look around I will sit over here." He headed into the café, leaving me with Jax.

"Is there something you'd like to look at specifically?" he asked me.

I shrugged, not even sure why I wanted to look around. "I've never been to one of these."

Jax led me down the row of booths, explaining the carnival as we went. He found me a booth where I could throw things, and I did so well, I won a paddle with the word 'Mistress' on it. I laughed when I saw it.

"I can't wait to show this to Mac," I said softly.

Jax gave me a funny look. "I'm sure that if he's into all that, then...."

"Oh, I doubt that he is," I replied with a chuckle, "but I don't like this whole Master thing and this way I can show him that I'm the mistress." I couldn't help but laugh again, louder this time. It felt strange, as if it had been years since I had laughed like that. Hell, maybe it had been.

That comment got me another strange looks from Jax; I kept forgetting that I was supposed to be Mac's puppy. We moved on to another game and, not surprisingly, I won again. This time the toy I won didn't look so fun, in fact I had to ask Jax what the hell it was. When he explained, I blushed to my toes.

We decided to check out the props booth, which was right next door. The things inside were simply unbelievable, unlike anything I'd ever seen before.

"Are all the carnivals like this one?" I asked Jax.

"They're pretty close, I think," he replied. "I've been to the one on Boston."

I looked at him in shock. "There's one in Boston? Is there one in Salem?"

He shook his head. "No, I don't believe so."

I was holding a bra that would in no way cover a woman's breasts when I heard Cormac's voice behind me.

"Find anything interesting?"

I dropped the undergarment and turned around. "Don't do that."

"Do what?" he asked innocently.

"Come up behind me like that," I told him. I'd felt him, but there were too many vamps here to keep track of.

I caught sight of the blond woman I'd seen with Lisette earlier, and suddenly it occurred to me that I'd seen the Brujah and her male friend at one of the booths I'd played at earlier. Was the group keeping an eye on us for some reason? Following us through the crowd?

"This is really weird here," I murmured softly.

"The owner of this establishment has invited us to join her at her private viewing box," he informed me.

I looked at him in surprise. "There are viewing boxes here?" Viewing what?

"At the bridal path, there are," he said. "For the coming event at said path."

"What's a bridal path?" I asked with a frown.

When Jax gave me a brief explanation, I winced. "That sounds extremely uncomfortable."

Jax turned away to hide a sheepish look. "It's not as uncomfortable as you would think it would be."

I shook my head and turned back to Mac. "Did she say what she wanted?"

"She is rather interested in you, it appears," he told me. "You showed a great aptitude at the games."

Please, not another vamp that wanted to bite me. "I just threw a few things," I protested. "I missed, a couple of times. Of course, I won some really weird toys, which I know I will never use."

"For a first timer in this establishment she was rather impressed," he replied.

"Maybe we should try stakes," I suggested.

"Not at the carnival," he murmured.

"Spoil my fun," I whispered. "So we're supposed to meet her at her booth?"

"If you would like to."

What the hell, no guts, no glory. "Well, we might as well hear her out, I guess. See what she wants."

He turned away. "Lovely."

Damn, must have been the wrong thing for me to say. "Hey, this is your society, not mine," I reminded him.

"Ventrue society," he responded curtly.

I shrugged. "Teeth are teeth." It didn't really matter what clan a vamp is when they're on the business end of a sharp piece of wood.

He studied my face for a moment before saying, "Well then, if you are not purchasing anything, shall we?"

We followed Jax without speaking over to a roped off area against one wall. A beautiful blond woman in an expensive suit was talking to three humans, a man and two women. A servant asked us to have a seat in one of the two empty chairs next to the blond. I let Cormac sit next to the vampire and sat down after he did. Jax stood behind us holding the prizes I'd won in a small bag.

A ghoul asked if we wanted any refreshments. Jax accepted the offer of soft drinks and some snacks, while I asked for a coffee, although I had to settle for an espresso.

The blonde Kindred whose name turned out to be Annabelle gestured toward us during her conversation with the humans. Jax leaned down close to Mac's ear.

"She's telling them about Eliza's luck this evening," he said softly.

"Goody," Mac murmured.

"She seems to be very impressed," Jax added.

Annabelle turned and started talking to us, then realized that her ghoul was nowhere to be seen.

"Jax, I don't speak French," Cormac began, but Jax was already talking to Annabelle.

After listening to her for a moment, he looked down at us. "She asked if you had seen a newscast this evening. They were just talking about a man who killed his wife with a sharpened broom handle." Jax looked at Cormac. "He claims that she was a vampire."

"No," Mac replied slowly. "I hadn't heard that." We hadn't even turned on a radio since arriving in Paris. Even if we had, I'm sure the news wouldn't have been in English.

"Was she?" I asked suddenly.

Jax looked at me for a moment, considering. "Would you like me to ask her that?"

I tried not to smile. "Probably not."

"Yes," Mac told him.

When Jax spoke to Annabelle in French, she laughed. "Apparently," he told us, "yes, she was."

"Go slayer," I whispered, earning a puzzled look from Jax.

"There has been a caitiff around town," he explained after a brief conversation with the woman. "She was embraced a week ago and before anyone had a chance to get with her, the husband took care of it."

Annabelle added something, and Jax translated in Cormac's direction. "She asks if you were the prince what would you do about the situation."

Mac thought about it before answering. "Well, I would certainly try and keep a media control on the situation concerning the husband," he said finally, glancing at me. "As for the caitiff, I would contact a local hunter or two, see if they could alleviate the situation quietly."

When Jax conveyed Mac's answer, Annabelle thought about it for a minute. "She said that that would be a good suggestion," Jax told us after she'd replied, "if all the hunter groups weren't already known in the city. It would have to be someone brought into the city."

Cormac nodded. "Perhaps my companions and I would be able to take a look at the situation, if the powers that be wish." At Jax's concerned look, he added, "You don't have to join us, of course."

"Apparently, Jax has never been hunting," I murmured dryly to Mac. "He doesn't realize how much fun it can be."

Annabelle was delighted with Mac's answer. "She says that perhaps she will mention something to the prince and he will get with you," Jax told us. "She asks how long we intend to stay in the city."

"Well, if the prince would like us to undertake this," Mac replied, "I suppose a little extra time would be allowed. Not too much, we are on a time limit."

When Jax said that Annabelle wanted a phone number to reach us, Mac told him to give her his cell phone number, which she wrote down on a note pad.

"This is what she wanted us over here for?" I asked Cormac.

"I believe partially, yes," he replied. "As she said the hunter groups are known, we are not. Does she know the caitiff's name?" he asked Jax.

"No," he replied after asking Annabelle, "but she can get some information if you'd like her to."

Annabelle's ghoul finally came back and set down the drinks and food on a small table. With the things for Jax and myself was a small bowl of the strange berries, along with drinks for Annabelle and the others. The blond Kindred said something to him in French and he went off again.

I took a sip of the espresso and hated it instantly. It was very bitter, and thick. The taste was much too strong for me and I sat the cup back down on the table with a grimace. I picked up a cracker from the tray and ate it slowly to rid myself of the taste.

"Now, now, Eliza," Cormac said to me, "remember, I promised that you would eat."

"It's just to get the nasty taste from my mouth," I told him. I really wasn't hungry, I hadn't been all day. In fact, I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt hungry.

"Have some cheese," he suggested.

"That's okay."

"No, really," he said. "Have some cheese, or a fruit." He reached for the bowl of berries and ate one.

I watched him chew and swallow, and felt sick to my stomach. "I don't think so, I don't know what they are, and I don't want to know."

Jax interrupted our argument. "Annabelle has asked if there is something the young lady doesn't like. Would she like something else?"

Mac looked questioningly at me.

"Maybe a soda?" I said softly.

"Food-wise as well," he suggested.

I motioned toward the tray of food the ghoul had brought. "There's crackers and cheese here."

Cormac looked at Jax. "Soda," he said in a cold voice.

Was it something I'd said? "The coffee's a little stronger than what I'm used to," I added.

A naked servant came into the box and spoke for a moment to Annabelle. "Holy shit," I murmured, seeing how well... proportioned he was.

"Been a long time, dear?" Cormac asked wryly.

"I don't think I've ever seen one that big," I replied without thinking.

The servant left and came back a few minutes later with a soda for me and a tray of finger sandwiches. I sipped at the drink, grateful that it was a simple Coke.

After Annabelle's ghoul returned and spoke briefly to Annabelle, she said something to Jax.

"They weren't able to come up with the caitiff's name," Jax told us, "but they have a description."

After giving us that, Annabelle asked about Mac's reason for being in town. He explained why we were there, and she seemed sympathetic to his search. When she realized that we had a task to do here in Paris, she told us that we didn't have to stay for her benefit.

Mac turned to me. "Do you want to stay or go?"

I caught a glimpse of Lisette and her friend again, and once more he seemed to be watching me. "What, do we have another Wolfgang here?" I murmured with a frown.

"How so?" Mac asked, following my gaze into the crowd.

I am nothing like Wolfgang, I heard a male voice speak in my mind. *You belong with the boy, not me.*

I shivered violently and shook my head to clear it of the monster's thoughts. Mac saw the movement and laid a hand on my arm.

"What's wrong?" he demanded.

"Okay, that was really weird," I muttered angrily. "Can we leave now?"

"Sure," he replied. "What's wrong?"

"I don't like hearing voices in my head," I told him as I tried to keep an eye on the tall dark vampire, but he was quickly lost in the crowd.

"You too?"

I turned to look at Mac. "You're hearing voices?"

"I heard a voice," he corrected.

"It's nice to know it's not just me," I said wryly. I looked back over the crowd, and saw a girl circulating among the guests selling flowers. Her tray was filled with roses, carnations and, to my anguish, daisies. I looked away, not wanting to draw Cormac's attention to her.

He must have seen my distress and scanned the crowd. "What's wrong?"

"Can we go now?" I repeated.

"Yes," he agreed, "as soon as you tell me what's wrong."

"I told you what was wrong." I didn't want to sit here and talk; I wanted to get as far away from the vamp invading my mind as possible. And from the daisies before Cormac saw them.

"Can you be a bit more specific?" He asked.

I glanced at him angrily. "Voices in my head isn't specific enough?"

"No," he replied. "What did they tell you?"

"That he wasn't like Wolfgang," I said, shifting uncomfortably on the seat, "and a few other things. Can we leave now?"

He turned to Jax. "Please inform Annabelle that we will be taking our leave and thank her for her graciousness."

The human male that Annabelle had been talking to called out to the flower girl, and she quickly came into the booth. He bought a rose for one of his companions then dismissed the girl.

"She understands," Jax told us after he spoke with the Kindred, "and wanted me to tell you to feel free to return to the carnival whenever you wish."

Cormac nodded distractedly as he called the flower girl over. I tried not to watch as he bought one of her daisies, but I couldn't help wondering if he had remembered that morning in the mountains. It was obvious he'd remembered at least one incident of our lovemaking; Mac had often given me daisies after we made love.

He turned to me with a slight grin, the closest I'd seen him come to a real smile. "I just thought you would like one to remember Paris by," he told me.

I took the flower from him, biting the inside of my lip to stop from crying and clenching my left hand to stop from staking him on the spot. This wasn't the time or the place for us to get into one of our once famous arguments.

Within a few minutes we were out of the carnival. When we reached the parking lot, Jax asked if we wanted to go check into the hotel.

"Yes, why don't we," Cormac agreed, then turned to me. "So, did you enjoy yourself?"

"Well, it was different," I replied as we got into the car.

"Yes, did you enjoy yourself?"

I shrugged. "I won some things. I'm not sure I wanted them, but I won some things."

"Oh?" He looked at the packages beside me on the back seat.

"One I'm sure can go right into the garbage," I told him, suppressing a grin, "but the other I thought you might get a kick out of." I opened the case to show him the paddle.

"Interesting," he murmured.

"I thought so," I replied. "Much better than the little master comment."

"I have not made any master comment," he reminded me.

"No, but other people have," I told him coolly. As much as I had agreed to the whole puppy thing, I hated every minute of it.

I was quiet as Jax drove to the hotel, rolling the daisy between my fingers and remembering Baltimore. I'd been happy there, really happy. It had been easy to believe that my life with Mac was going to be perfect and last forever. For real now? Things had a way of never working out for me. Whatever it was that I was feeling for Cormac would do nothing but hurt me in the end, but even knowing that I couldn't make myself stop.

REVELATIONS

SOMEHOW, THIS BODY IS SOMEONE SHE ALWAYS HAS KNOWN
SHE CRIES TEARS ON HIS CHEST O SO SILENT AND SLOW
THE SKY IS A POISONOUS GARDEN - CONCRETE BLONDE

We checked into the hotel without a problem and were led up to our suite by a bellhop. Jax's room was right across the hall, which made him just far enough away for Cormac and I to have privacy. I wasn't sure if that was a good thing, but that's how it was.

As we walked into our suite, Cormac's cell phone rang. He put his sword down on the desk and answered it. "Hello?"

I could hear a female voice on the other end, but when I heard him say the name Christina, I knew it had nothing to do with me and chose not to try and listen.

For some reason, I felt very comfortable in the suite, even though I'd obviously never been in it before. The first thing I really noticed was a large crystal vase on a low table near the middle of the room, filled to overflowing with daisies. I walked silently over to it, remembering the mountain meadow where Cormac and I had first made love. Tears pricked my eyes as I ran my fingertips lightly across the petals.

I'll make sure you always have daisies to remember this day by, he'd told me that morning so long ago. I wondered if he'd arranged for them to be in the room, or if he even remembered that day in the mountains. Carefully I tucked the daisy he'd given me at the carnival into the vase with the others.

I spotted doors to a balcony and headed for them, needing to be away from both Mac and the flowers. The view was spectacular, almost breathtaking. Although it was after midnight, the city was still in full swing. It was hard to believe there were monsters out there in the darkness waiting to prey on the unwary.

I heard a low noise behind me and turned to see that Cormac was staring at me, through me really, growling low in his throat. His face was like stone.

"Several things," he told the caller in a hard voice. "You're detaining him until we return?"

For a moment I wondered if I should have tried to listen to the conversation, but his next question convinced me that I should start now. "What all is Prudence being watched for?"

"You know," the woman replied, "I'm not really sure."

"What's going on?" I demanded.

He raised one finger in my direction, expecting me to wait until he was done. I continued listening, knowing I'd probably learn more that way than from whatever he chose to tell me later.

"I'm not really sure why she's under surveillance," Christina told him, "but they are going some kind of investigation into her background, or so Brenda tells me."

"Oh, goody," Mac murmured.

Personally I could think of a few more choice words to use.

"Is this a good thing?"

"Mmm, yes and no," he replied.

"Something I should know about?"

"I'm sure it will all come out in time," he told her. I hoped he was wrong.

"This involves Eliza in some way?" she asked.

"Yes."

Who the hell was this vamp and how much exactly did she know about me?

"Really," she murmured. "Anything I need to know about or keep an eye out for?"

"Other than the obvious fact that Prudence is a bitch," he drawled, "no."

"Well, I really haven't had any interaction with her."

"You're lucky," he said in a hard voice.

She paused for a moment, then said, "I take it I should not trust this Tremere."

"No."

"Okay. Is there anything you'd like me to do while you're gone," she asked, "other than help Brenda keep an eye on the girl?"

"Well, if Prudence is already being watched, then no," he replied before changing the subject.

While the girl went on about her brother and wedding plans, something in the suite seemed to catch Cormac's eye. He looked around for a moment as I waited impatiently. He got off the phone rather quickly after that, and stood looking at the room.

"What's going on, Mac?" I demanded. "What's up with Kate?"

He didn't answer, just stood staring down at the vase of daisies.

"Mac?" I walked over to him but he didn't seem to hear me. He was staring down at the daisies as if caught in a trance of some sort. I snapped my fingers in front of his eyes. "Mac, anybody home?"

He blinked and looked at me. "I believe someone is home," he said slowly. "Look around, Eliza."

I did as he instructed and realized exactly why I had felt so comfortable when I'd first walked into the room. The layout of the furniture was nearly identical to that of our apartment in Baltimore, even to the large fireplace on one wall. When Mac pointed out the indentations in the carpeting showing that the furniture had been recently moved, I got scared. Then I got mad.

"What is going on here?" I demanded in a low voice.

"I plan to find out," he told me. He turned toward the door and we went without speaking down to the lobby.

"Can I help you?" the desk clerk asked when we approached. "Is something wrong in your suite?"

"Ah, how recently was my room cleaned?" Cormac asked politely. I was surprised by how good of a hold he was keeping on his temper.

"This morning sir," the clerk replied. "When the last client checked out."

"Could you tell me who the last client was?"

"Well, no," he said hesitantly. "I'm afraid I cannot, that is privileged information"

"Please?"

The clerk looked at him for a moment then turned to a computer terminal. "I can look and see what information I can give you."

I looked around the lobby and spotted one of the females that had been close to the vamp that had been watching me at the carnival. I didn't really pay attention to what the clerk had to say until I heard the tone of Cormac's reply.

"It is very important that I find out this person's name," he said meaningfully. "Please, *tell* me." I knew he was using mind tricks on the guy when the clerk immediately provided the man's full name and phone number.

"Cormac," I said softly as he pulled out his cell phone, "remember that girl from the Carnival?"

His head spun to look in the direction I'd indicated and I rolled my eyes. "Mac, you're being wicked conspicuous," I told him.

"That's because I'm wicked pissed off," he replied coldly, staring at the woman and her companion.

It was too much of a coincidence that she would be at our hotel. "We could go stake her," I suggested in a low voice. "I have one." As if I'd ever be without at least one.

"So do I."

I glanced up at his face, but I couldn't read his expression. "Is that a yes?"

"Not yet," he told me. He dialed a number on his phone and I listened with half an ear as he questioned our suite's previous occupant. Apparently the furniture had been moved some time after the man had checked out that morning.

I watched the Kindred and her companion, searching their auras for some clue as to their intentions. The woman was looking at the human lustfully, but he seemed to be daydreaming. No big help there. I couldn't see any other vamps or shapeshifters in the lobby.

When Mac hung up his phone, he asked the desk clerk for the name of the person who had cleaned our room. When the man went into an office to check, I looked up at my companion.

"Why would someone move the room around like that?" I asked in a low voice.

"I intend to find out," he promised.

"How would someone know?" It just didn't make sense to me.

"Well, there are still people alive, or undead," he corrected himself, "that were there that night, at least two by my reckoning."

I frowned and forced myself to think back to that horrible night. "Dougal's dead," I said, counting off the vamps that had attacked on my fingers. "The bitch that bit me is dead, and the really ugly one is dead. I only remember one other one."

"The one that I staked, yes," Mac murmured.

I looked up at him suspiciously. "You're remembering quite a bit for having amnesia, aren't you?"

"As I said," he replied, returning my look evenly, "my memory is coming back."

"So who else was there?"

"Your mother."

At the word, my hand moved toward one of the stakes at my back, then what he'd said actually sunk in. Why would he think Kate had been at our apartment that night? She hadn't told me she was there, but then again, if she had been, why would she tell me? "What are you talking about?" I demanded.

"Kate was there," he repeated.

I shook my head. "I didn't see her."

"Of course not," he told me. "You were dead on the floor."

"You're saying you saw her there?" I didn't like this one bit, but why would he lie about it?

"Yes," he confirmed. "As a matter of fact, Kate is the last thing I saw."

I nodded to myself, knowing that Mac had just signed Kate's death warrant. Then I remembered that he'd been talking about her earlier. "So, who were you talking on the phone to upstairs?"

"That was Christina." Dougal's other child and Mac's Kindred sister.

"And what does she know about Kate?"

"She knows nothing of Kate," he said. "However she does know something of Prudence. Brenda's ghoul has a sister that lives in Salem."

"Samantha," I replied. "She works with Corrine." She was a friend of daughter and I've always made a point to know my daughter's friends.

He nodded. "Samantha has an ex-boyfriend."

When he hesitated, I supplied the name. "Simon."

"I do not know his name," he told me. "Apparently he attacked Samantha a few nights ago and injured her, so Brenda is very steamed about that. Last night while Brenda was driving by Corrine's as I asked her to, she witnessed Simon coming out of Corrine's apartment building and proceed to get directly into Prudence's car. With Prudence." He looked down at me as if waiting for my reaction. "An aura perception showed that he has been ghoulé."

"Really." Kate must be getting desperate to have come so close to breaking the contract she herself had witnessed.

"Really," he said. "Brenda has Simon in custody at the moment."

"And Kate?"

"They are observing Kate at the moment," he told me, "both for that and I believe there are some other things they are, ah, suspicious about concerning her."

I looked out over the lobby, thinking about what he'd said. I didn't like knowing that he'd been right about Kate, but it didn't change the fact that she had to die. For a heartbeat I wished again for the strength to kill him, to release the Mac I loved from the eternity of darkness he now found himself in.

You don't want to kill him, I heard a male voice say in my mind. It was the same one I'd heard at the carnival. *I did this for you, for the both of you. You belong together.*

I shivered and looked around anxiously, but the dark haired man from the carnival was nowhere to be seen. "You know, things are getting really creepy," I whispered urgently. "Can we go back up to the room? Now?"

Cormac was stopped from answering by the desk clerk returning. He said that the girl who had cleaned the suite would be in early the next morning. Or this morning, it was now well after midnight.

"Could you call up to the suite when she comes in?" Cormac asked politely.

The clerk seemed surprised. "Will you still be up at that hour?"

"I will wake," he assured him.

"I'll let her know if you wish," the clerk replied.

"Thank you." Without waiting for a reply, he put his arm loosely around my waist and led me toward the elevator.

I realized that the Kindred I'd seen earlier was gone, and shook my head. "Can I just state for the record that I don't like Paris?"

"You can."

"There was something about that girl that was here," I insisted, "and I'm still hearing voices."

He glanced down at me. "What did you hear this time?"

I shrugged, not really wanting to tell him but knowing I had to. "Just a little advice about not killing you. And how he was doing this for us."

Mac stopped abruptly and looked down at me for a moment. He turned away and sat down in a nearby chair, immediately falling into his standard meditative state. I shook my head in frustration, knowing that he was out of it for the duration of whatever ritual he was performing. I just hoped he wouldn't take too long.

I paced the lobby around his seat, returning the questioning glances I received with cold looks that turned the curious away. I watched the clock above the desk and told myself that I should just leave him there alone, but then I remembered that he had the only key to our room.

Thirty minutes later, he finally stood up and looked around the lobby. I stalked over to stand in front of him. "Are you going to tell me what's going on yet?" I demanded.

He barely glanced at me. "In the room."

I shook my head and walked quickly to the elevators, not waiting to see if he was following. We stepped into the elevator together and the doors closed silently, leaving us alone.

"I need to know exactly what the voices have said," he told me.

I didn't want to tell him exactly, I didn't want to give him the satisfaction that there was someone else out there who thought the two of us should be together. "Well," I said slowly, "when we were at the carnival and I mentioned Wolfgang, a male voice said, 'I am nothing like Wolfgang.' And in the lobby, the same voice said, 'You don't want to kill him, I did this for you, for both of you.'"

He shot me an irritated look. "And the rest of what it has said?"

I should have remembered that he'd always been able to tell when I left things out. "Look, I've gotten one person in my head, I don't need two."

"I'm not trying to get in your head, Eliza," he said impatiently. "I'm trying to figure out who this is."

"There was nothing said that would identify this person—"

"Please."

"God!" I exclaimed in frustration and looked away. I knew I had to tell him. This was a vamp thing as far as I could tell, and I'd promised to let him take care of Kindred stuff. "At the carnival it said, 'I am nothing like Wolfgang. You belong with the boy, not me,'" I said in a rush. "In the lobby, it said, 'You don't want to kill him. I did this for you, for the both of you. You belong together.'" The elevator came to a stop just as I finished.

Cormac closed his eyes as the doors slid open, and I almost didn't hear his low whisper. "Dougal."

I stepped quickly out of the elevator angry that he would think his sire was behind all of this. Dougal was the last person I wanted in my head. Any mention of the fiend still grated on my nerves like fingernails on a chalkboard. I was halfway to our suite when I realized that Cormac hadn't followed me.

Sighing deeply, I turned to see that he was still standing just outside of the elevator. He was staring off into space, and looked like he would be for some time. I crossed my arms and leaned a shoulder against the wall, crossing one foot over the other to wait. Mac had the only key to our suite in his pocket and I wasn't about to go and take it from him.

"About fucking time," I muttered a few minutes later when he finally looked around for me.

At first I wasn't concerned when he stared at me intently then started walking toward me. When I saw the look in his eye and realized that he didn't intend to walk past me, my eyes widened almost painfully. He reached out with his left hand and cupped the right side of my

neck, then bent to press a soft kiss on my lips. He continued on without breaking stride, leaving me too stunned to react. He moved past me toward our room and I followed him, dazed.

He opened the door and paused, waiting for me to catch up. I tried to get him to go in first so I wouldn't have to pass that close to him, but he insisted. I couldn't stop the instinctive movement of my hand toward the stake, and of course he saw it.

"There's no need for your stakes, luv," he told me in a soft voice.

My face froze, but I didn't reply even though the endearment cut me to the bone. Then I saw the layout of the room once more and the daisies on the table and knew I couldn't stay in that room with him. I quickly crossed to the balcony where I leaned my forearms on the rail and looked out at the lights of Paris.

I heard Mac come up behind me. "Would you like to go for a walk?" he asked softly.

"Why?" I demanded without turning around. "So we can get fucked with some more?"

"The voices in your head are a friendly entity," he told me.

"I don't appreciate voices in my head," I replied coldly, "and I don't think that's very friendly."

"You can talk with him," he suggested.

"That's okay," I said wryly. "I'd just as soon he stay the fuck out of my mind."

"He's only trying to help us."

I spun around to see that he was very close to me, too close for comfort. In surprise I took a half step to my left, trying to get away from both him and the things he made me feel, things I hadn't felt since he died nineteen years ago. He was watching me intently, looking down at me almost tenderly. The blank hard stare I'd begun to associate with him was gone.

"What?" I whispered after several minutes of his warm gaze.

"Gustav is only trying to help us be together again, Eliza," he told me softly.

I turned and looked back out over the city. How the fuck could some... thing we'd never met know what was best for us? Know what was in our hearts? Or my heart, anyway. I had no idea what was in Cormac's heart.

Behind me he started to say something, then abruptly stopped and turned back toward the suite. When I heard him walking away, I turned to watch him. He'd only gotten a few steps into the room when he looked back over his shoulder at me. He still had that same tender look on his face, and I wasn't sure what to make of it.

"Who the hell is Gustav?" I demanded.

"The voice in your head."

"Did you actually have a discussion with this Gustav?" I found it much easier to be aggressive about the mind reader than to wonder about Mac's new attitude.

"As a matter of fact," he replied, "I did."

"Did you tell him to stay the fuck out of business that's not his?"

"No, I did not," he said softly. "He has helped me quite a bit."

"Oh, well lets just go see a shrink, shall we?" I bit out sarcastically.

He shook his head slightly. "I don't understand where this anger is coming from, Eliza."

"I'm not angry," I retorted harshly. Fine, so I was angry. "Okay, my mind gets invaded and you don't understand why I'm pissed?"

"He's trying to help us."

Ri-ight. It had been my experience that no one ever 'helped' anyone else without an ulterior motive. "Did we ask for his help?"

"Do you have something against us getting back together?"

He looked so tender, so caring, that I couldn't take it any longer. Before I could even think about it, a stake was flying toward him. It whipped past his head, but he didn't so much as blink. I don't think he understood that I could just have easily pierced his heart with it.

"How dare you?" I shouted at him. "You're a fucking vampire, don't you get it? You can walk the walk, and talk the talk, but you'll never be Mac Brennan again! It doesn't matter if you do remember our past, we'll never get back the life Dougal stole from us."

I could feel tears falling down my face, but I couldn't fight them. I lowered my voice and added, "You're a goddamned leech, and I'm not the same woman you're trying to remember." I spun away, unable to look at him any longer and see the tender expression on his face. I would have walked away, as far as I could have on the balcony anyway, but his voice stopped me.

"But I love you."

His words hit me like a fist to the stomach. I felt all the strength go out of my legs and would have fallen but he was there to catch me before I hit the ground. He turned me around and cradled me against his chest, one arm supporting me and the other smoothing my hair. He held me tenderly, even lovingly as I fought to control my tears.

"I never stopped loving you," he whispered gently. "I only forgot what love was for a time."

I couldn't answer just then. I gulped air into my lungs, trying frantically to stop the sobs that overwhelmed me. Mac picked me up in his arms and carried me into the suite where he sat me down gently on one of the couches.

He crouched at my feet with both of his hands on my legs just below my knees. I bit my lip and studied his face, searching for some sign of the love I remembered from our past. Through my tears I could see it shining on his face when he gave me a small smile.

"I never forgot," I whispered fiercely.

He moved to sit on the couch, turning with a leg tucked under him so that his body faced me. He put his right hand on my leg just above the knee and rested the left behind me on the couch.

I sat looking at his hand, not knowing what to say. I could feel his gaze on my face, but I couldn't bring myself to look at him because I was afraid of what I would say. More than anything I wished for a stake in my hands just so that they had something to do.

Without a word he reached behind my back with his left hand and brought out the other stake I kept in the small of my back. He handed it to me and I took it with a chuckle. He knew me too well, even with only some of his memories returned to him.

I glanced at him, knowing that I'd never stopped loving him. I'd never forgotten what it had been like to lay in his arms, to feel his love all the way to my soul. I knew that there would be no better time to admit that I still loved him, that I did want us to be together again, no matter how much our lives had changed.

I took a breath to tell him all of this, but the sound of his cell phone ringing cut through the room like a knife.

He pulled the phone out a little awkwardly with his left hand, leaving his right on my leg. "Hello?"

I could hear the man on the other end without even trying. "Yeah, I'm trying to reach E—" The voice stopped abruptly, but I'd already recognized it. Why the hell was Glenn calling? "Mac?"

"Yes?" Cormac replied after a brief hesitation.

"Cormac Brennan," Glenn drawled. "I can honestly say that I never thought I'd hear your voice again. Eliza tells me you've changed since the last time I saw you."

"Yes," he said wryly. Somehow I think he actually knew who he was talking to.

"Well, she's in a position to know."

What the hell was that supposed to mean?

Mac leaned forward and looked into my tearstained face. "Yes."

"She's having some difficulty sticking to the agreement, hmm?" Glenn asked. Trust him to cut to the painful truth.

"The agreement?"

"You know," he said patiently. "The whole 'if we're embraced we take care of the problem'?"

"It appears so, yes." Cormac's voice was cooling quickly, and I closed my eyes trying to block out their conversation. It didn't work.

"It's standard in war, Mac," Glenn told him. "Anyone who goes over to the other side is killed as a rule. Cuts down on betrayals that way."

"I have betrayed no one," he replied in a hard voice.

"From what I hear on the street, Eliza's changed as well," Glenn continued. "She won't say what happened, Mac. What do you know about it?"

"To what are you asking, Glenn?" he asked carefully.

"What do you know about her activities the last oh, ten years or so?"

I closed my eyes and hoped that Cormac wouldn't get me killed.

"She's joined the Society," he said after a moment.

"And the reason for that would be?"

I held my breath and bit my lip anxiously waiting Mac's reply.

"Her reasons are her own." His voice had a tone of finality to it, and I think Glenn remembered him enough to know that.

"Is she there?"

"Just a moment," he took his hand from my knee long enough to cover the receiver.

"Glenn would like to speak to you," he told me.

I looked up, trying to pretend surprise. "Glenn?" I tossed the stake onto the table and wiped the tears from my face before I took the phone. "Glenn," I said in greeting as the man beside me returned his hand to my knee.

"Hey," Glenn said softly. "Bobby wanted me to let you know that if you think it should be done, he thinks he should do it."

My heart clenched at the thought of my lover dead, really dead this time. I should have known that Bobbie would feel that way when he learned of Mac's embrace. "I understand."

"Do you think that will be necessary, Eliza?" Glenn asked. "How is he?"

"Not so much different," I told him slowly, avoiding answering him. "Hell, haven't we've all changed in the last twenty years?"

"So I'm hearing on the street, Eliza," he murmured dangerously. "And I don't like what I'm hearing."

This was exactly the last thing I needed. If Glenn thought I was working for the Kindred he'd see me dead just as easily as it was going to be for me to kill Kate. "You never paid much attention to rumor before, what's making you start now?"

He paused for a moment, then said, "You still want to know if Kate had anything to do with the raids?"

"You know I do," I replied without hesitation, although I wasn't sure it was even relevant anymore. She had to die, and I would see to it the first chance I got. Her ghoul coming out of Corrine's apartment building was too much of a coincidence to be trusted. I was still having trouble believing she'd been at the apartment the night of the raid, but the Mac I'd once known would never have lied to me.

"I've still got contacts in Baltimore that I'm waiting to hear back on. I may know something concrete in a few days," Glenn said, interrupting my thoughts.

I stood up, remembering abruptly that if I had heard Glenn while Cormac had been on the phone, he was probably hearing Glenn too. "Thanks, Glenn. I owe you one," I said softly as I walked away from the couch.

"I have contacts in Salem, too, Eliza," he said warningly.

I took a slow deep breath and wondered exactly what he meant by that. "Yeah?"

"I keep hearing Kate's name brought up with yours," he told me. "Talk has it that she's your master."

"Yeah, right," I said dryly. "That's no more true now that it was in Baltimore, Glenn, believe me."

"Why does it sound like you're not telling me everything?"

Damn, was everyone reading my mind tonight? I told him the only thing I could. "I've got someone I'm protecting."

"Cormac?" he asked in disbelief.

"No," I said firmly. "No, someone who means a lot more than that. Someone I'd kill over, Glenn, even him if it came down to it." And I would. I'd do anything to protect our daughter, even that.

Glen gave a low whistle. "You find yourself a new boyfriend without giving me one last chance?"

I laughed wryly at that. We had dated once, not long before Mac had showed up in Baltimore. "Yeah, right," I said, my voice dripping with sarcasm, then added softly. "Not exactly."

"New girlfriend?"

That was it, I didn't want to deal with Glenn anymore. What I wanted was to have Mac hold me in his arms, erase the last twenty years with a kiss and tell me everything would work out in the end. Somehow I didn't think that was going to happen tonight, not after this call.

"What was it you needed, Glenn?" I demanded softly. "What did you call for? For that matter, how the hell did you get my number? I assume you got Cormac's number from my answering machine."

"So its still Cormac, is it?" he murmured. "I thought by now you'd be calling him Mac again."

I closed my eyes, admitting to myself that I had been calling him Mac. Glenn had no idea what I was going through, so I forgave the insult in his voice. "Give it up," I said, suddenly very tired. I ran a hand across my eyes. "What do you need?"

"I was just checking in to see how you were doing," he replied smoothly. "I haven't heard from you in a while, and I've been worried."

"You didn't hear from me in nineteen years," I reminded him coldly. "You heard from me two days ago, and now you're suddenly worried?"

"What can I say?" he asked. "You bring out the protectiveness in me."

"Yeah," I replied sarcastically, not believing it for one second. "Well, I'm busy, so unless you need something specific..."

"Not really," he said. "Just checking in, seeing if you want me to send Bobby up there to Salem."

"There's nothing in Salem for him to do," I told him honestly. Even if I would let Bobby anywhere near Mac, we weren't in Salem.

"All right," he murmured. "You know how to reach me. If you get yourself into trouble, don't hesitate to call."

"If you hear anything more about Kate," I began softly.

"You'll be the first to know," he assured me.

I breathed a silent sigh of relief that he was still willing to help me even though I'd been less than cooperative with him. "Thanks."

"Bye."

I hung up the phone and looked over at Cormac, not really surprised to see that he had the cold expression I was now used to seeing on his face was back. I walked back to hand him his phone, then continued on to stand by the fireplace.

I stared down into the hearth that looked as cold and as empty as I felt. I hadn't realized just how much I'd missed my warm, caring Mac until I'd had him again for those few minutes. I bit the inside of my lip until it bled to stop the tears from starting once again. Whatever chance that Gustav had given us was passed and its loss brought back all of the grief and pain I'd felt when Mac had died nineteen years ago.

SHARP TEETH

THIS SILLY GAME OF LOVE

YOU PLAY, YOU WIN ONLY TO LOSE.

SPENDING MY TIME - ROXETTE

"Would you like to go with Jax and I?" Cormac asked after several minutes of silence. I heard him rise to his feet behind me. "I would like to drive past the address I found."

"If you'd like," I replied without turning.

"If you would like," he told me. "There are no boundaries here as there were in Berlin, other than those of language."

I was silent for a moment, then glanced at him over my shoulder. "How much of the conversation were you overlistening, Mac?" I asked softly.

"Enough."

That one word and his cold expression told me he'd heard it all. I nodded, then crossed the room to pick up the stake I'd thrown from where it had fallen on the floor. After I tucked it into its place at the small of my back, I turned to look at him, my face carefully blank.

"If you want me to go I'm game," I said softly.

"Would you like to go?" he asked.

"Yeah," I told him, glancing sadly around the familiar layout of the room, "I really don't want to sit here."

"I'm sure they have a pool," he suggested. "A hot tub, sauna, take advantage of the facilities."

I smiled grimly. "The problem with that type of thing is that bathing suits don't have any good hiding places, any more than the dress I wore last night."

"That's what beach towels are for."

"If you're in the middle of a pool, beach towels don't do much good," I replied.

"Despite the not breathing part, I don't know many Kindred who know how to swim."

I shrugged. "Well, a stake will kill more than a Kindred." Did he think I'd spent the last ten years in the society telling them 'Sorry, can't kill that bad guy, he's not a vampire'? I've killed every kind of preternatural thing at one time or another.

"Doggie paddle?" he asked as he walked into the bedroom his things had been put in. "There was one in the lobby."

"And I missed it?" I murmured to myself. "How did that happen?"

"You were distracted," he said as he came out with his biker style leather jacket in his hand.

"The point is I don't like to be too far away from stakes," I continued. "You probably remember that."

"They have a whirl pool, hot tub...." he suggested.

"I'll just go with you," I said firmly, despite the feeling I got that he wanted me to stay at the hotel.

"As you wish."

I rolled my eyes at that, so wishing he would stop saying that. "You said there weren't the limits here that there were in Berlin. Does that mean with my accessories as well?"

"We are merely driving past an address or two," he reminded me.

"Is that a yes or a no?" I asked, shooting for a polite tone but not quite hitting it.

"Unless you're going to stake the upholstery in the car," he replied dryly. "We're not getting out of the car this time."

I was glad to hear it, but God only knew what else we might run across. "The crossbow's in the car, so okay."

"Shall we?" He walked toward the door and held it open for me.

"Sure."

We crossed the hall and Cormac knocked on Jax's door. He looked pretty comfortable when he answered the knock, but agreed to come with us.

While we were waiting for him, I took the opportunity to ask Cormac about something that had been bothering me. "You said earlier that you were unable to contact Dougal." I glanced at his face, but his expression gave nothing away. "What, did you lose his phone number?"

"No," he replied patiently. "The ritual." When he realized that I had no idea what he was talking about, he added, "That all Tremere are taught, that allows us to speak with our sire."

I nodded slowly as if I understood. "That must be in the handbook," I said wryly.

"It is the first ritual that all Tremere are taught," he told me.

"Not being Kindred I wouldn't know that," I reminded him.

"Now you know," he said with a small smile.

Back to being his usual annoying self. "Just curious."

"Anything else?" he asked as Jax joined us and we started down the hall.

"Like what?" I fell into step just behind his left shoulder. I'd done it so many times in the last few days it seemed natural to me now.

"Questions? Comments?"

"Not at the moment," I replied sarcastically, "but I'll be sure to let you know if I have any more."

"You do that."

For the second time that night I struck at him without thinking, although this time it was a lot less violent. My hand reached out to hit his shoulder, and he stumbled a little from the slap.

He glanced over his shoulder to look at me. "Thank you for not using the paddle."

I couldn't help it, I had to laugh. Jax even laughed with me, but Cormac just kept walking.

We went down to the car and Jax drove us past the address Cormac had gotten from the chantry in Berlin. It was in a commercial district, but the building had recently been abandoned. The Pinnacle was nearby, and the neighborhood seemed decent enough. A broken sign hung over the doorway that read, 'dy Imports, a Bruckman's Subsidiary.' Cormac seemed to find the building and the sign interesting, but told Jax to drive on.

"How late does the carnival stay open?" he asked Jax.

I closed my eyes, hoping he wouldn't want to go back to that place. I had to admit it had been interesting, but I didn't want anyone else inside my head tonight.

"Twenty-four hours," the ghoul replied.

"We won't need you anymore tonight," Cormac told him. "If you'd like to return to the carnival, feel free." Right at that moment, my stomach made a loud rumbling noise. He turned to look at me and added, "Unless Eliza would like some food."

"There's a McDonalds up there," Jax suggested. "Would you like me to stop?"

I looked out the window, refusing to meet Mac's probing gaze. "Fries would be good."

"Are you a vegetarian, ma'am?" Jax asked me.

"No," I told him, a little surprised at the question.

"Get her a Big Mac and a chocolate shake as well," Cormac instructed. When I shot him an indignant look, he said, "You need to eat. I promised someone."

"And she sounds too much like you half the time anyway," I muttered to myself as Jax pulled into the drive through.

While he was ordering, I asked for a cup of coffee, hoping it would be the normal McDonalds brew.

"Espresso?" Jax asked.

"No, God no," I said fiercely. "That was almost as bad as that stuff Cormac made last night. That was nasty."

Cormac handed me the meal and I started to eat it slowly, but soon realized just how hungry I was. When I saw he was watching me and the smug look on his face, I forced myself to slow down. By the time we reached the hotel, my food was long gone.

We returned to our suite and let Jax get back to his own. We didn't say much of anything to each other, and to avoid the uncomfortable silence I knew would happen I went into my bedroom to unpack. Between searching for Dougal's things and hunting the rogue caitiff, I figured we'd be in Paris at least a few nights.

There were doors to the balcony from my room, and I found myself standing in them more than once, staring out at the lights of Paris. Mentally I cursed Glenn for interrupting us earlier, cursed myself for calling him in the first place. I wasn't quite sure exactly what part of the conversation had pissed Mac off, but something had. The problem was I didn't know how to make things right with him.

I hadn't lied to Glenn; if it came down to it, I'd kill anyone I had to in order to ensure Corrine's safety. I'd lived too long protecting her to do anything else this late in the game. Wasn't the fact that I was going to kill Kate, my own mother, proof enough for him that I'd go to any lengths to keep our daughter safe? Well, I was doing it for another reason as well, so maybe that didn't count.

Of course, it could have been the mention of Bobby. I didn't know if Cormac remembered, but Bobby had been one of the most adamant in the group about killing Kindred, especially after one of them had murdered his brother Paul right before his eyes. Mac had been the only one able to calm him down afterward. Bobby's willingness to put Mac down simply told me that Bobby still remembered him with respect.

Or maybe it was Glenn's comment about me giving him another chance. I hoped that wasn't it. It had been a big joke between the three of us that someday I'd come to my senses and dump Mac to give Glenn a second chance. Mac had never taken it seriously, and I think that Glenn had always known there couldn't be anyone else but Mac for me.

About half an hour before sunrise, Cormac called out to me from the main room. "How's your room?"

It was a room, what was I supposed to say? "There's a bed."

"Are you going to sleep in it this time?"

"Yeah, I thought I might." I walked over to the dresser and fingered the lace doily laying on its surface.

"Imagine that," he drawled. "First time for everything."

"I've slept in a bed before," I told him coldly. Did he really think I was such a loser that I felt more comfortable on the floor?

"I don't remember."

"Nice to know there are some things you don't remember," I murmured to myself.

"I remember the blanket," he replied matter-of-factly, "the rug...."

After a quick glance to make sure he wasn't looking, I threw a stake at the wall near the door. It hit blunt end first as I'd intended and bounced off of the wall to the floor.

"Was that the prerequisite stake, luv?" Mac called out.

I couldn't believe the pain that shot through me at those words. "That was just something falling," I told him in a tight voice as I braced myself on the dresser. The prerequisite stake: that was a phrase I'd never thought I'd hear again.

"Ah, you're temper maybe?"

"Could be," I conceded. "Would you like me to join you and see if it will fall out there?"

"It is not necessary," he assured me.

"Isn't the sun up yet?" It had been a hard night for me, and he sure as hell wasn't making it any easier.

"Almost," he replied. "Goodnight."

I walked back out onto the balcony and stood silently facing the sunrise. Because of the many buildings, I couldn't see the sun come up, but I did watch the sky lighten until it was a bright blue. Finally I went back into the bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed to call down for room service. I wasn't really hungry, but I wanted something. Unfortunately the food I ordered didn't satisfy the craving.

After I'd eaten, I paced the sitting room for a little while, trying not to look at the vase full of daisies. What was I going to do about Mac? Hell, Glenn was right, I *was* back to calling him Mac, even if it was just in my head. It just seemed so natural I hadn't even thought about it. That didn't settle the question, though. Mac was pissed about something either Glenn or I had said on the phone, and the only way to find out what was to ask, something I wasn't sure I wanted to do.

I stood on the balcony for a while watching the city and thinking about everything I had learned about Kindred in the last few nights. None had acted remotely like Kate, although a few had been a little overbearing. While I knew they weren't human, they didn't seem so much like monsters to me anymore.

I knew that part of my attitude change was due to Mac. True, some things about him were different now, aside from the vampirism, but who was I to say that those changes wouldn't have happened if he hadn't been embraced? He was still kind, and gentle, and impatient at times, although he did his best to hide it. And a part of him had always been hard, now it just seemed like that harness took over more often than not.

Had I been wrong to kill vampires for so many years? Had I been wrong to hate them because of Kate and what a few others had done? How many had I killed that were innocent? Well, as innocent as a vampire could be, anyway. How many lives had I taken to avenge a man who hadn't wanted or even needed avenging?

I tried not to think of the other things I'd killed over the years for my contract. Granted, the Tremere didn't require me to kill werewolves or fairies or sorcerers, but the Society did, and to protect Corrine I had done it without hesitation, but certainly not without regrets.

It was a beautiful morning, but I watched the people on the street broodingly. I don't get to sit idle very often; I'm usually too busy killing things for that. It should have felt good to have the sun on my face, but I only felt sorry that Mac would never know that warmth again.

Eventually I realized how very tired I was. I went back into the bedroom and got undressed before crawling into bed. I was too tired to find something to sleep in but not too tired to put a stake under my pillow.

I was sitting with Cormac on the floor of the suite's main room, looking at him intently. I leaned in close to him until our faces were almost touching and put my hand on his cheek in a gentle caress.

"I haven't known peace for twenty years," I whispered softly, pleadingly. "You said it gave you peace, Mac. Show me peace."

He leaned forward slowly, just enough for our lips to meet, giving me time to pull away if that was what I wanted. It wasn't. I closed my eyes and he kissed me gently, at first. Then I moved a little closer and he deepened the kiss. He put his arm slowly around my waist and pulled me even closer to him. I went willingly and ended up sitting on his lap, my legs to one side and my arms around his shoulders.

After a few minutes, he pulled away and looked into my eyes. My breathing was fast, almost panting, and I could feel my heart pounding. His skin was cold, but for once it didn't bother me.

"Are you sure, Elizabeth?" he asked softly.

I jumped at his use of my full name. I hadn't heard it spoken aloud since the last night we'd had together. I close my eyes and remember the nights he'd whispered it into my ear with love. "I'm sure."

He gave me a quick kiss, then gently pulled one of my arms downward until he was holding my wrist. I watched him with wide eyes as he kissed the pulse point. My hand was trembling, but I was determined to go through with this. I had to find out what it had been like for him with Dougal.

He kissed my wrist, and I caught a glimpse of his fangs just before he sank them slowly into my flesh. I expected to feel only pain, but I gasped at the pleasure it gave me. I clutched at his back for a moment with my free hand, then dropped my head to his shoulder, struggling to understand just what he was doing to me.

He drank slowly, as if savoring the taste. The erotic sensations nearly overwhelmed me and without realizing it I nipped at his shoulder. I felt my body shudder all over, and I wanted that moment to last forever.

Too soon he pulled his teeth from my skin. His tongue felt like satin dragging across the wound and the punctures closed as if they'd never existed. I took a deep shuddering breath and raised my head to look at him. His eyes were dark with desire and I smiled. He released my wrist and tangled his hand in my hair, pulling me to him for a passionate kiss.

I could taste my blood in his mouth but it only aroused me more. I moved restlessly, and felt his warm hands on the bare skin of my back. It took a moment for to realize that my blood had given him heat; my life flowed inside of him.

His skin was so soft, and I couldn't touch enough of it. I pulled at his shirt until he stopped kissing me long enough to help me lift it over his head. His hands were warm on my waist, then they moved upward, bringing my shirt with them. The air was cool on my skin and his hands felt like they were on fire as he caressed me.

I moved closer to kiss him and the feel of his skin on my body was so wonderful. I wanted more of him, I had to have more. He shifted carefully to lay me down on the rug before the

fire and I ran my hands along his back. The feel of his weight was familiar to me and I welcomed it just as I had welcomed it when he was human.

A part of me remembered that he was not the man I once knew, but didn't care anymore. I knew now that I loved him, had always loved him. Making love with him felt as natural to me at that moment as it that night had years ago just before the vamps had changed our lives.

"Eliza?"

The sound of Mac calling my name brought me closer to consciousness. I smiled, still lost in the wonderful dream I'd been having.

I opened my eyes and looked toward the sound of his voice. "Mac?" I felt warm all over and wondered what he was doing so far away from the bed.

"Are you awake?"

Was I? The desire I felt for him was too real to be a dream, but something wasn't quite right. "I think so," I told him softly.

"We must be going soon."

"Where?" Wasn't everything we needed right here in this room?

"To the chantry," he explained patiently.

Talk about bad timing. "Why?"

"They are awaiting us."

"Can't they wait?" I asked. I wanted nothing more than to be back in his arms. Anything else could wait or go to hell.

"We were supposed to go last night," he replied, his patience obviously at an end.

I rolled toward the door and he looked away. "Why are you in such a big rush?"

"It is important that we go." His voice seemed rather hard for what we'd just been doing. How could he turn himself off so quickly?

"So we go later," I suggested.

"Do you know where we are Eliza?" he asked suddenly.

"We're in a bedroom," I said, stating what I felt was the obvious. "And you're all the way across the room."

"Do you know what city we're in?"

What, did he think I was the one with amnesia now? "Paris."

"Do you remember why we are here?"

Dougal. Mac's memory. As if I could forget. "Yeah."

"That is why I'm going to the chantry."

"Back to that all work and no play thing," I said, my voice rough with disappointment.

"I don't recall ever having left it," he said as he turned to go.

I sat up and rubbed the last of the sleep from my eyes. I turned and rolled over onto my stomach to reach for the light on the bed stand.

"Are you coming or not?" he asked from the doorway.

"Give me a minute," I said louder. As I heard the door shut, I realized that the blanket had fallen to my waist, leaving me completely exposed. "Hell, he wasn't looking anyway," I told myself as I got out of bed. The cold air on my skin finally made me realize that what I'd thought was reality had only been a dream.

I cursed softly as it occurred to me what Mac most likely thought of me after my pitiful ramblings. Hell, he probably thought I was some kind of... something I definitely wasn't. I couldn't remember the last time I'd even thought about sex, let alone felt the passion I'd felt for him in my dream. Actually, now that I thought about it I could remember the last time I'd felt that way; it was that last night with Mac in Baltimore.

Thinking about that night brought the heat of the dream rushing back to me. I knew if I hadn't woken up, we would have made love in my dream. I wondered what would have happened if Mac had crossed the room tonight and joined me on the bed.

I stalked to the bathroom, angry with myself for allowing the easy life I'd lived the last few days let me wake so slowly, and with Mac for not coming to bed with me.

Now that the desire that had clogged my mind was clearing, I tried to think about the other part of the dream objectively. Would I really feel like that if Mac bit me, or was the passion I'd felt a product of my dreaming mind? If that was what people felt when vamps drank from them, no wonder the fiends had blood dolls lined up just waiting to be the main course.

I splashed water on my face to clear my head and wished for caffeine to wake up my mind. The thought of coffee made me realize I was hungry. It was the first time I'd actually wanted food in a week.

I stopped and looked at myself in the mirror, really looked. I'd lost weight since Mac had come back into my life, weight I couldn't really afford to lose. And despite the long hours of sleep I'd had today, I still looked worn. No wonder Mac hadn't wanted to join me. Who wanted to roll around with a damn scarecrow?

I got dressed and brushed my hair and teeth, then armed myself. When I joined Mac in the sitting room, he was on the phone. The daisies were still on the low table, and I looked at them for a long moment before walking to the balcony doors and looking out into the night.

"Are you ready?" Mac asked when he'd hung up the phone.

"Yes," I said, turning. He opened the door and as I crossed the room I asked, "Think we could stop for food?"

"If you'd like."

"Sure. Isn't there a McDonald's just down the road?"

"Yes," he replied. "They have espressos."

I suppressed a shudder. "No," I said firmly. "Coffee. Their coffee was good." I walked past him into the hall and waited while he knocked at Jax's room.

When the ghoul opened the door, Mac asked if he were ready. Within minutes we were on our way.

"We need to stop at McDonalds," Mac told Jax when we reached the car. "Eliza is hungry." He almost made it sound as if that had never happened before.

While we were waiting for our food, Jax asked where we were going.

"The Sorbone," Mac told him.

"Oh, we're visiting the chantry?" I'd forgotten that Jax had been to Paris before.

"Yes, the Napoleon lot. Ignatius will have someone waiting for us," Mac said.

"Very good." The ghoul turned to get our order and as he handed me my food, I smiled.

"Jax, maybe tomorrow morning we could hit this place up again," I suggested. "Maybe in time to get an egg McMuffin or something. You know, the whole breakfast thing."

"Or we could have it room serviced up," he replied.

"Hey, that's a plan." I took a sip of the coffee closed my eyes at the rich flavor on my tongue.

"Yeah," Jax agreed as he pulled the wrapper from his burger.

Mac made some kind of noise low in his throat. I smiled. "Want some coffee, Mac?" I asked as pleasantly as I could. I wondered if he'd eaten tonight, trying to avoid thinking about my dream.

"No, thank you," he replied firmly.

"Are you sure? It's good coffee. Much better than that shit you made in Berlin."

"The shit I made would do me more good than that," he said cryptically.

I shot him a puzzled look he didn't turn around to see it. I shrugged and began eating.

Jax drove through the busy traffic to the Sorbone, where he pulled into a large parking lot. On one side of the lot, a woman stood under a tree watching as Jax parked the car nearby.

"I wonder if that's the person who's supposed to meet us," he said softly. "She's a ghoul."

Mac shot Jax a questioning look. "I believe so, yes."

"Do you want me to go talk to her?" he asked as he turned off the car.

"Please."

While I watched Jax talking to the woman, I asked, "Do you have one of those handy dandy pocket translators like you had in Germany?"

"Not for French," he replied. "I haven't had occasion to pick one up."

"We're here," I pointed out as Jax approached the car. "I think it's the occasion."

Jax opened the car door for Cormac to get out. "The girl's name is Zoe," he said him as he shut the car door. "She's been sent to meet us and take us to the chantry."

"Very well," Mac said, looking in the woman's direction.

As soon as I realized that Jax was reaching for my door, I opened it. I wasn't a vamp, and I didn't want him to think he had to cater to me as if I were.

"She doesn't speak English," Jax said as we approached Zoe.

He introduced us to her, and as she shook Mac's hand I looked out over the grounds of the university, trying to stay alert for danger. When the woman said something in French, Jax told us that she wanted us to follow her.

She led us through footpaths of the university to an unremarkable building nearby. Inside we went into an elevator where she opened a panel and punched in a code on a keypad. When the elevator started going down, Zoe and Jax turned to face the back wall. After a moment, Mac and I did too.

The back of the elevator opened to reveal a stone corridor that looked very old, but very well taken care of. Tapestries lined the walls, and two ghouls stood at attention across from the elevator. Zoe talked to them for a moment, then led us around a corner and into a small waiting room. A couch and chair lined one wall, and a television and bookcase took up two others. Zoe spoke for a moment before she left us alone.

"We've been asked to wait in here," Jax told us, walking over to sit down in the chair. "Ignatius will be with us shortly."

DISCLOSURES

I KNOW THAT I'M WEAK
BUT GOD HELP ME I NEED THIS
BED OF LIES - MATCHBOX TWENTY

Mac sat down on the couch and I sat beside him, the bookshelf to my left. I noticed that some of the books on the lower shelf were in English before I turned to look toward the table between Mac and Jax.

"Are there any magazines on that table over there?" I asked the man beside me.

He glanced to his right. "Yes."

"Are they in English?"

He reached over, gathered a hand full and tried to hand them to me.

"I didn't need all of them," I told him, holding my hands up to refuse them.

"You asked," he reminded me.

"I didn't say give them to me," I said wryly. "I said 'are there any in English'."

He put them back on the table with an exaggerated motion. "Yes there are."

I shook my head. "Would you hand me one magazine that is in English?" I asked with mock patience. He handed me a celebrity magazine and I flipped through it, making idle comments about some of the articles until Mac grabbed the periodical out of my hands and gave me a different one.

"God only knows why there's a tattoo magazine in English here," I commented as I turned the publication in my hands to better see one of the pictures.

"No, it's not a centerfold," Mac told me.

"The picture is this way," I explained, showing him. "No, it's not a centerfold. Didn't we do the centerfold thing last night? Without the paper?"

Mac exchanged a puzzled look with Jax.

I rolled my eyes. "Carnival? Naked people?"

"Ah," they said in unison.

"Damn, you'd think you'd remember something like that," I told them.

"I'm trying to forget it," Mac replied.

"You're good at that," I muttered, but I don't think he heard me.

"Why would you want to?" Jax asked with a frown.

"Which reminds me," Mac said, turning to me. "You were dreaming this evening when I woke you."

I lifted the magazine a bit higher trying to hide the blush I felt creeping into my cheeks. "Yeah, and?"

He snatched the magazine from my hands and I looked at him in amazement before turning away and leaning forward to look at the bookcase.

"Are you going to answer me?" he asked after a moment.

"Yeah, I was dreaming," I admitted.

"What were you dreaming of?" he inquired. "It seemed rather involved."

My face felt like it was on fire. "Yeah, it was," I answered slowly. "Rather."

"Yes, you can be more vague."

I turned to look past him at Jax. "And I think I'll keep it that way for the moment," I told him.

"You usually do," he replied irritably.

What, did he think I was going to tell all with a fucking puppy sitting here listening? "Well, if we had less company I might get more specific," I shot back at him.

"Jax," Mac said, still looking at me, "plug your ears."

To my surprise, Jax plugged his ears and began to hum softly.

Like that was good enough. "I don't think so."

Mac turned and waived a hand in Jax's direction. The ghoul dropped his hands and started to rise. "I'll just see if we couldn't get some—"

"It's fine, Jax," Mac interrupted him.

"Why are you so interested in what I'm dreaming about?" I demanded softly.

"Just wondering," he said lightly. "It took me a rather long time to awaken you fully."

Jax stood up and walked over to the doorway of the room, giving us a little privacy.

"So have you had any interesting dreams yourself?" I asked, watching the ghoul.

"Several."

Jax moved away from the door and I could hear him talking to someone in French in the hallway.

I took a book from the shelf and began to thumb through it. "Since we're doing dream theory now, what was yours about?"

"What was yours about?" he retorted.

"I asked first."

"No, actually I asked first," he said firmly. "Five minutes ago."

He had. "You tell me and I'll tell you."

"That's not the way it works," he told me.

If I wanted to know what he'd dreamed about, I had to share first. Fair was fair, right? "It was just an interesting dream involving a fireplace and—" And what? Sex? Feeding? Finally I settled on the least of which I was willing to admit. "Fangs."

Once more I wondered what it would be like to have Mac feed from me. I gripped the book tighter to suppress the slight tremor of my hands at the thought of his teeth in my flesh.

"Interesting," he murmured.

For a second I thought he'd read my mind, then I realized that he couldn't have. Or rather I hoped he couldn't have, I'd seen Kindred read minds before, but they'd been elders hundreds of years old. "So what was yours about?"

"I remembered the evening I attempted to teach you how to shoot," he said softly.

I smiled at the memory. "I told you I couldn't shoot a gun."

"I have some new ideas," he told me. "We'll work on it again."

Oh, would we? We'd see about that, although I couldn't resist asking, "Does it involve a fireplace and fangs?"

"No."

We heard Ignatius talking to Jax and the others in the hall, and I fell silent, looking down at the book in my hands. When Cormac stood and tapped me on the leg, I quickly put the book back and stood too.

"Ah, Cormac," Ignatius said in his accented English. "It is good to see you. I'm glad you were able to make it. I trust you ran into no troubles on the way."

"No," he replied, "not at all."

"Very good." The Kindred glanced disdainfully around the room and said, "Ah, this room is so small, let us move into one that is more spacious while we talk."

We followed him back toward the elevator, but instead of turning toward it, we went straight down the hall. We entered a much larger room with a fireplace and more places to sit. Ignatius stood near one particular sitting area and asked us to have a seat. Mac walked forward to sit on the end of a couch, and I followed to sit beside him.

"Can I get something for you?" Ignatius asked Cormac. "A refreshment of some kind?"

As I closed my eyes and wondered if I could watch him drink blood, he politely refused.

"Cocktail?" Ignatius said, looking at me. "Coffee?"

"Coffee, please," I replied.

"Espresso?"

I tried to hide a grimace. "No, thank you. Just regular plain coffee."

"Cream and sugar?" he asked.

Why did the French thing everything had to be smothered to be enjoyed? "No, thank you," I said aloud.

The vampire stepped into the hall and gave instructions to one of the ghouls in the hall. When he returned, he sat down in the chair near Cormac. "How is your information gathering going?"

"It has been slow starting," Mac admitted.

"Oh, I'm sorry," he replied sounding genuine. "Perhaps looking at Dougal's room, there will be something that has been overlooked."

"That is my hope, my lord," Mac told him as the ghoul returned with a tray holding a silver pot and one very old porcelain cup.

I took the cup carefully in my hands and sipped the liquid, very much afraid I would break the delicate thing.

"Remind me to buy you a thermos," Mac murmured to me as Ignatius thanked the ghoul. When we were alone again, he said to the primogen, "I would like to see his room."

"Of course." When he stood, I took one last drink from the cup and followed the men out of the room. Ignatius led us down several hallways, talking softly to Cormac about his sire the entire time. I tried my best to ignore it, not wanting to hear good things about the monster that'd stolen Mac's life from him.

Eventually we turned into a living room of sorts. Along one wall were four doors, each of which led to dormitory like bedrooms. We went into the third bedroom where there was a bed to our left, a desk and chair to our right, and dresser on the far wall. Beside the dresser was a door I assumed led to a bathroom.

"What are we looking for?" I asked Mac when Ignatius finally fell silent.

"You would have no idea," he told me offhandedly, looking around the room.

I tried not to get pissed at his words, but it was hard not to. Just because I hadn't known the vamp didn't mean I couldn't help find his damned spell book. Didn't Cormac realize that I had survived in the Society by knowing where and how to look for things?

Rather than stand next to Ignatius near the door, I moved further into the room to stand blindly looking up at a painting on the wall over the desk. I could hear Cormac behind me looking through things, but I did my best to ignore him until he spoke.

"Ignatius, could you translate this for me? I do not speak French." I turned to see him handing the other vampire an old letter.

After a moment, Ignatius looked up with an odd expression on his face. "I don't believe this has anything to do with your sire, Cormac."

"Would you read it anyway?" he asked.

Ignatius nodded. "'My dearest Helouise. The time I spent with you last eve was most enjoyable.'"

"That is enough, you are correct," Mac admitted. "It has nothing to do with me."

I could hear him opening drawers, and after a few minutes I heard the sound of tape lifting off a hard surface. I glanced over my shoulder to see him straightening with an envelope in his hand. He turned away and opened the envelope. I looked into the mirror on the wall above the dresser and saw him take out several folded pieces of paper, from the middle of which he pulled a charm bracelet.

He studied the charms for a moment before putting the bracelet back into the envelope, then I saw him take something smaller from out of it. When he slipped the item on his finger, I realized it was a man's wedding ring. I leaned back against the wall, not sure what to think. Mac had told me that he'd seen the rings in Dougal's possession, but I really hadn't thought we'd find them.

"I take it you've found something, Cormac?" Ignatius asked from the doorway.

"Yes," he replied.

"Very well then. Are you able to find your way back to the sitting room?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"Well, I have a few matters to see to," Ignatius told him. "If you have any further questions, make your way there and find someone to send for me."

"Thank you, my lord," he said as the primogen left, closing the door behind him.

Mac turned to me and held his hand out, a woman's wedding band in the tips of his fingers. I looked at it for a moment, then reached out and took it, brushing his fingers as I did so. His eyes were warm, but his face was hard, almost as if he wasn't sure how I was going to react.

I looked down at the ring; it matched the engagement ring I'd kept all these years. I lifted the chain from my neck and put the rings together. The chain between them was the only thing that stopped them from fitting perfectly, but I knew that they would. Engraved inside both rings was a single word: Forever.

I sighed; I'd never seen either of the wedding rings before. "Mac," I whispered softly, "they're beautiful."

"I thought so," he replied.

"Can I see yours?" I looked up, half expecting him to refuse.

He held out his hand and I took it gently in mine to study the band on his finger. His hand was cold and I wanted to hold it against my heart to warm it on my skin.

"I don't know what to say," I murmured, searching his face.

"There is nothing to say," he told me.

"There should be something," I said, my heart aching as I looked up at him.

"Perhaps in time." He pulled his hand from mine and turned away a little to start reading the letters he'd taken from the envelope.

Once more I sighed. Last night he'd told me he loved me, had the call from Glenn ruined that? I'd hoped... hell, I'd hoped for so many things, but it looked like I wouldn't get any of them. I turned to lean my forehead against the wall and felt tears slide down my cheeks. I clenched the rings in my hand and the metal dug into my skin.

I tried to hold back the sobs that shook me, but it seemed like the more I tried, the harder they came. Finally I put my hand over my mouth to hide the sound, but I knew that Mac would still hear me. The fact that he didn't say anything or make a move to touch me cut like a knife through the heart.

When I finally got a hold of myself, I turned my head to see him looking at me over his shoulder, still holding an open letter in his hand. I felt wicked stupid for not being able to control myself.

I wanted to say something witty or even cutting to make light of my tears, but I couldn't quite make myself do it. Last night I'd had the perfect opportunity to tell Mac how I'd felt and I'd blown it. Did I really want to spend the rest of my life regretting having been so close to him only to lose him again?

I hesitated so long that he went back to reading the letter in his hand, but that just made it easier for me to say what I knew I had to. I looked down at the floor and spoke in a low voice.

"In Baltimore I knew that if I ever let you get close to me, I'd never be able to live without you. Even back then I tried to stay away from you, but you were so damn persistent. You made me feel things I never wanted to feel. And then you died on me Mac, and I would have too if it hadn't been for Corrine." I glanced up to see if he was listening, and he turned his head to look back at me.

When he didn't say anything, I went on. "When I looked up at Guilty Pleasures and saw you there, it was exactly the same. I tried to stay away from you this time, too, but I couldn't do it. You've always been stronger than me."

"You always had a choice, Eliza," he told me. "Even then."

I shook my head, knowing that wasn't true. "When it comes to you I've never had a choice." I'd fallen in love with Mac the moment I saw him, and even with him being dead for almost twenty years I hadn't been able to get myself back out.

He stood there so close to me, but it felt like we were miles apart. His hands were filled with paper and all I could do was wish that I was in his arms. I wanted to reach out for him and had actually started to before I stopped myself. What if he didn't want me? Then he turned his body back toward me, his face tender. I took a little step forward, wanting, needing to be closer to him.

He put an arm out toward me and moved even closer. That was all I needed from him; in the next instant I was in his arms. I wrapped my arms around his waist and I felt my tears soak into the shoulder of his shirt but couldn't stop myself. I felt like I'd come home at long last.

I felt his lips on my temple. "Is this what you want luv?"

Closing my eyes, I breathed in the smell of his skin. "To be with you?"

"Is that a statement or a question?" he asked.

"Is that what you meant?" God, even now we were arguing. It was just like old times.

"Yes."

I forced myself not to clutch at him. "God, yes," I whispered. In the end, it didn't matter what he was. I would die loving him.

"Then why did you fight me so?"

"I think I fought myself more," I admitted. What would happen to me if he died on me now?

"You knew it was a losing battle," he scolded me softly, "you just said so yourself."

"Didn't do me any good twenty years ago either," I murmured against his chest.

"Most people learn from their mistakes."

The fabric of his shirt hid my smile. "You should know by now I'm not like most people, am I?"

"No one I've ever met," he agreed.

"Not that you can remember," I said with a quiet laugh.

He chuckled a little as well, then his hands moved as if to let me go. I looked up at him, and for a heartbeat our faces were very close together. I closed my eyes and rubbed my temple against his chin. He leaned into the motion and I smiled again.

We held each other for a few more minutes and I soaked up every second of it. Being that close to him after so many years was like heaven. I wanted it to go on forever, but of course nothing good ever does.

His hands slid to my upper arms and he stepped back. I looked up at him, feeling more vulnerable than I'd ever felt before in my life. He stared at me intently for a moment, then cupped a hand on the side of my neck and leaned forward to kiss my forehead. It was nice, but not quite what I wanted.

I pulled him closer so I could reach up and kiss his lips. I closed my eyes, savoring the sensation. I remembered the last time he'd kissed me, really kissed me, on the floor of our apartment. I knew we couldn't recreate our lives, but I hoped we could rebuild something out of the ruins of our past.

We kissed tenderly for what felt like a lifetime, but when I placed the tip of my tongue on his lip, he pulled back abruptly and turned his head away from me.

"Mac?" I asked softly, confused by his reaction.

"Yes?" he replied without looking at me.

"What's wrong?" I didn't understand what had happened, unless I had gone too far when I'd kissed him. Silently I cursed myself.

"This is neither the time nor the place," he said softly, looking at me from the corner of his eye, still not turning to face me.

I nodded and looked away, wondering sadly if the time for us had passed in a city far from where we were. Moving back a little I felt the wall behind me. I stood there with my hands still on his waist and doubted my own judgement. Had I just handed my heart to a man who would leave me a second time to the darkness of my soul?

He sighed and when he let his hands slowly fall away from my arms, I let go too, but I couldn't stop my hands from lingering on his sides. If his being a vampire didn't matter to my heart, then the possibility of losing him again wouldn't stop me now.

I looked down for a moment at the rings still clutched in my hand, wondering what to do with them. Unclasping the chain, I started to put the wedding band on it, and then I stopped. If Mac was going to wear his ring, why couldn't I wear mine? I slipped both rings on my finger and slid the necklace into my pocket.

"I believe those are going to look, how did you put it? Wicked conspicuous when we return to Salem," he cautioned me.

I shot him a level look. "We're not in Salem."

He gave a slight nod. "Touché."

"Would you prefer I not wear them?" I asked softly, wondering why he had given me the wedding band in the first place if he didn't want me to wear it.

"I did not say that," he said firmly, finally turning to look at me. "I did not say that."

I looked down at the rings. "I won't be able to wear them in Salem," I admitted sadly. "There's just no way to explain." I was supposed to be hunting an embraced cousin, not off getting married. Not that wearing rings made us married or anything, but even so, Charity would definitely not approve of the potential bridegroom.

I didn't even want to think of St. Stephen's with the taste of Mac's lips still on my tongue. "Did you find what you were looking for?" I asked.

"I believe I may have," he replied, looking at the letters in his hand.

"So are we done here?" I hoped we were. I wanted the night air around me to cleanse the doubts and fears from my mind.

"I would like to finish reading if I may," he said softly.

I shrugged. "I guess I'll kind of hang looking stupid against the wall," I muttered.

"There are plenty of chairs, dear."

"There is one chair, dear," I said with a smile as he moved back to sit on the edge of the bed. He opened one of the letters and began to read. I sat at the desk and started opening drawers, trying to occupy my mind.

There wasn't a lot in the desk, just some stationery and a few pens. Then at the back of one drawer I found a pair of silver false eyelashes in a case. "Is there something about Dougal that you're not telling me?" I asked slowly.

"Oh," he said, not even looking up, "you found the eyelashes."

I didn't want to ask, but, "Was he like...?"

"No."

I fell silent and watched him from the corner of my eye while he went back to reading his letters. One was edged in black like the one he'd shown me on the plane, but he didn't offer to show this one to me and I didn't ask. A few minutes into reading it, he growled softly, and I looked at him in surprise, but he never glanced up. When he was done, he folded it slowly with deliberate care and picked up the final letter, this one folded a little different than the others ones had been.

As he read it, his face became more and more cold. At one point, he murmured something to himself and glanced up at me.

"Something interesting?" I asked, unnerved by the silence.

"Possibly," he replied as he continued to read. Near the end of the second page he chuckled a little, then looked at me with a slight smile on his face.

"Something funny?" I asked him.

"Even Dougal knew about Kate," he told me. He folded the letter and set it with the others beside him on the bed, then took the book with the secret compartment from his backpack. Within minutes he had the letters tucked safely inside with the ones he'd read on the plane.

"What about Kate?"

"That she changes her looks," he said. "He advises me to kill her the first chance I get."

"Yeah?" Mac would have to stand in line for that, but I wasn't about to give him the satisfaction of saying so. "Well, you know she's not well liked."

"Yes, by anybody," he agreed. "Except Simon."

I shook my head. "Maybe she needs to give blood to get friends?"

"So it would appear."

"Are you done here?" I asked as he stood and looked around the room.

"Almost." He walked back to the dresser and felt under the remaining drawers, then moved to crouch the table by the bed. When he stood he had another manila envelope in his hand. He opened it and pulled out what looked like a locker key from a train or bus station. The oval tag read 'D67' and had something written on it in French.

He held the key for a long moment before pocketing it, looking much like he'd looked when he said he'd seen visions from my engagement ring. I wondered what visions he was getting from the key. At last he threw the envelope in the waste bin and walked over to stand in front of me.

"Shall we?" he asked, holding out his left hand.

I took his hand willingly. "Sure. Be good to get out of here."

He kept my hand while we walked out of the bedroom and through the sitting room into the hall where we could see Jax coming toward us. I thought Mac would let go when the ghoul got closer, but he didn't.

"Ah, there you are," Jax said as he turned to accompany us back toward the elevators. "Ignatius sent word that I could meet you here when you were finished."

Mac took out the key he'd found. "Can you read this for me?" He was all business, back to being Cormac for all that he still held my hand.

Jax looked at the key chain. "That's from the train station. Where did you get this?"

"Dougal left it, I believe for me to find."

The ghoul nodded. "Well, it's probably about a half hour, forty-five minute drive to the station. I'd have to check to make sure, but if I remember correctly it's across the city. Did you want to go there?"

"Yes, as soon as possible."

"Well, give me a couple of minutes so I can make sure that's the station I'm thinking of," he said. "It's been a while since I've been here. Ignatius said to have you go to the library if you needed to speak to him."

"We will go there."

"Okay, I'll meet you there then. You know how to get there?"

"I believe so, yes," Mac replied.

Jax turned off down a side hall and a few minutes later two men dressed like they were ready for a disco revival approached us. One of them was a vamp, and I figured the other one was his puppy. Their clothing was a bit loud, almost effeminate.

The Kindred smiled at Mac. "Cormac, it is good to see you again," he said pleasantly. "It has been some time since you've been in Paris."

"Yes, Lucien," he replied. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, thank you." The vampire glanced at me significantly and added, "I see you've developed a different taste for traveling companions."

"Yes."

"How is your sire?"

"I'm afraid he is passed on these last five years," Mac told him.

"Oh, I'm sorry, he was a good man," Lucien said sadly. "I know that there are quite a few things that I've managed to squeak out of the old man while he was in town, things I hadn't known before."

"Really?" Cormac said, showing his first real interest in the conversation. "Care to share?"

"Perhaps," the other vamp drawled. "I'm sure you learned a secret or two from him as well."

"Secrets as to what?"

"Rituals, of course," Lucien said. "Manipulations of the blood?"

"What would you be interested in?" Cormac asked.

"Why, I'm always looking for information to help in my studies," he answered. "Are there any new developments over in the colonies?"

"None that I am aware of," Mac replied. "The elders tend to keep to themselves."

"Ah." Lucien studied my companion thoughtfully for a moment. "I've been hearing some interesting stories of people traveling to far off places and was wondering if you had heard anything about that."

"Alternate realities and such?"

"Why, yes," he replied, pleased.

"Why, yes I do."

"Ah. And how long did you stay you would be staying in Paris?"

"Not very long, I'm afraid."

"I'm going to have to pick your ear some before you leave." Lucien said firmly. "Do you have plans for this evening?"

Mac shook his head. "Nothing set in stone."

"Well, Yven and I had discussed going to the Pinnacle."

"I was thinking about going there myself."

"Ah, wonderful," Lucien said. "Have you been there?"

"No, I hadn't had occasion to yet," Mac admitted.

"It's only opened in the last few years," Lucien told him. "It's a nice little place. It has some nice quiet little areas, but it also has a nice dance floor too, if you want to release tension that way." At that he glanced at Yven and I looked away wondering exactly what way they normally released tension.

"We were thinking of heading there soon," Lucien added. "Would you like to meet us there later?"

"Yes, I believe we will," Mac replied. "We do have a few stops to make first, but we will join you there."

"Oh, good." The vamp looked too pleased for my comfort, but I was sure Mac knew what he was doing. "We'll see you there then?"

"Ah, what is the appropriate attire?"

Lucien looked down at his clothing, then over at Yven's. "You might want to change," he suggested.

"We will have to," he agreed.

Lucien held his hand out. "We'll see you there."

Mac shook his hand. "Of course."

When we had walked several steps in the opposite direction of the couple, Mac looked down at me. "It appears we will do a bit of shopping."

I glanced up in surprise. "What?"

He shot a look at my clothes. "If we wish to blend in, we need to find something a little more... clubby."

"Clubby?"

"Yes."

I shook my head. "We're not talking about going out and beating someone with a club."

"No, you have the wardrobe for that."

Well, I did. "Shopping. Didn't I just do that earlier this week?" Okay, so I'm not like most women. Shopping just doesn't do much for me; I have so many other responsibilities, people to hunt, things to kill.

"You need something more clubby if we wish to fit in, and not draw any more attention to ourselves," he told me.

Any more attention than we already did. "Okay. Shopping."

"I believe we need to find you a replacement pair of shoes as well," he added.

"Yeah, that would be a good idea," I said, thinking of the dress I'd worn in Berlin, "considering the last ones are still on the floor of an alley."

At that we reached the large doors of the library and went inside. There were a few people sitting at tables, but that wasn't what caught my eye. I stared in awe at the tall bookcases that lined the room. Many of the volumes looked very old, but there were new books among the stacks too.

When I was in grade school, I actually liked going with other kids my age to the library. It was neat to have all that information at your fingertips, even as young as I'd been. Then Linda decided it wasn't feminine for me to be smarter than the boys and wouldn't let me go. I don't remember what she did in the end to stop me from going, maybe I was too young then to do anything about it. Later when I did rebel, I found the boys much more interesting than the books.

I came to the present as we approached Ignatius and a female vampire sitting together near the edge of the seating area. They watched us come closer with interest and it made me very aware that Mac was still holding my hand.

"Cormac," Ignatius said softly. "Did you find everything okay?"

"Yes," he replied. "I found quite a bit of information."

"Good, good." He turned to his companion. "I don't know if you've met Isabel."

"Yes, I have."

She seemed a little confused. "I'm sorry, I'm afraid I can't quite place you. Ignatius mentioned something about a clan member visiting the city. One of Dougal's childer?" When Mac nodded, she added, "Yes, I remember Dougal well."

"I am his middle childe, that I know of," Mac told her.

"Ah, yes," she said thoughtfully. "He did mention something many years ago of another gentleman he'd embraced. And there was a young girl that he spoke of on his last trip to Paris." She glanced at her companion. "Ignatius and I have been speaking of his disappearance. Do you have any idea what became of him?"

"I do not know for sure," Mac answered softly, "but I fear the worst."

No, actually the worst would be if Dougal were still alive and Mac tried to stop me from killing him. That would be *so* not good.

"I assume that you have performed the ritual?" Isabel asked, unaware of my hostility toward the subject of their conversation.

"Several times."

"Well, you have my condolences," she told him sympathetically. "As I said before, Dougal was a good man. To lose him is a great loss to our community."

Or not. Mac seemed to sense my thoughts and squeezed my hand gently, although whether he was trying to placate me or warn me not to say anything I couldn't tell. I looked up at him as innocently as I could manage. Did I mention that I hadn't been innocent in forty years?

"And who do we have here?" Isabelle asked, looking at me.

"This is my traveling companion, Eliza," Mac replied.

"Ah, Miss Dushku," she murmured. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

How in the hell did she know my name? "It's nice to meet you too," I lied with a smile.

"Is this your first trip to Paris?" she asked pleasantly.

"Yes."

"And how do you find our city?"

"Quite interesting." Quite intrusive, but still it wasn't boring.

"Very good," she told me, then looked past me. "Ah, Jax. It is good to see you again. You must give Elvira my regards when you return to Salem. I take it you're acting as interpreter?"

Jax stopped next to Mac and took Isabel's hand, bending to kiss it before replying. "Yes."

"I'm sure if you need anything, Ignatius has given you his number," she said to Cormac. "If there is anything that we here can do to help you find your sire, please don't hesitate to ask."

"Would either of you happen to know where Dougal journeyed when he left here?" Mac asked.

She turned to whisper with Ignatius in French for a moment, then nodded. "It seems to me that before he left he made mention of returning to the States, that he was looking for someone and he had information that was leading him back to...." She paused as if not sure of the word. "Tennessee?"

"Nashville," Ignatius added. "I believe was where he was heading."

"I thank you," Mac said sincerely. "We will take our leave now, thank you for your hospitality."

"Call us if you need anything," Ignatius told him once more.

It took us only a few minutes to find our way back to the elevator. We rode it up to the ground floor and walked across the campus to the car.

ERRANDS

MAKE BELIEVE THAT WE'RE TOGETHER
AND I'M SHELTERED BY YOUR HEART
IT MUST HAVE BEEN LOVE - ROXETTE

Jax turned on the ignition and glanced over at Mac. "I was correct on where the train station is. Did you still want to go there now?"

"Yes," he replied. As Jax pulled out of the parking lot, he said, "We have an invitation to the Pinnacle, if you would like to join us." He seemed a little unsure about asking Jax to come along, but the ghoul didn't seem to notice.

"I've heard of it," Jax replied, "but never been there. I'd like to check it out."

Mac nodded. "The person that invited me hinted that dress was a little more... un-Tremere."

Jax rubbed a hand across his mouth to hide a smile, but I had to laugh.

"I'd heard that it was kind of clubby," the ghoul commented.

"There's that word again," I said to myself, still chuckling.

"I take that you're going to need to stop somewhere?" Jax asked.

"Yes," Mac agreed. "For myself, and for Eliza."

"There is a place that is open later, but it's a little out of the way from where we're going," he said. "We can stop there after we're done at the station if you would like."

"Yes," Mac replied as he took his cell phone from his inside jacket pocket. He dialed a few numbers, and I listened as my daughter picked up the phone on the other end. "Corrine?"

"Cormac," she said, sounding pleased to hear from him. "Hi, how are you doing? How's Eliza?"

"We're both good," he assured her.

"Are you guys getting along well?" There was a cautious note to her voice, as if she didn't think we were. Of course, we hadn't been the last time I'd talked to her.

"Yes."

"Really?" Now she sounded pleasantly surprised. "Anything you want to share?"

"Not right now," Mac told her.

"Why?"

"I'll let Eliza tell you." At that he handed the phone back to me and I took it, resigned to hear the inevitable questions.

"Corrine," I said softly in greeting.

"Eliza," she replied, delighted. "How are you? Is everything going well?"

"Yeah."

"You don't sound as enthusiastic as Cormac did," she told me.

"That's because he has big ears and likes to listen to conversations." I smiled and waited for his reaction.

"I am not listening," Mac said. I had to laugh.

"Okay, I'm liking this," Corrine murmured. "Are you guys are having fun? Where are you?"

"Paris."

"The most romantic city in the world," Mac put in at the same time Corrine said something that I missed.

"What was that?" I asked. "I'm sorry, I was listening to Cormac mumble."

"Well, at least he knows to take you nice places," she repeated.

She really had no idea. "We're in Paris, and we're about to go shopping." She said something in French that I of course didn't understand. "I have no idea, shopping so we can go clubbing."

"You're going clubbing?" Why did she make that sound like something she'd never thought would happen? "Just make sure you don't get anything too freaky, cause you know once you get home you won't be able to wear it anywhere."

I felt unfamiliar weight of the rings on my hand and looked sadly at the back of Mac's head. "Yeah," I said ruefully. "You're exactly right. So has anything unusual been going on lately? Anything strange, anything unusual?"

"No," she said. "Why would you ask?"

"I just want to make sure everything is okay with you." Like I could tell her the truth. "Wondering if any strangers have walked up and introduced themselves on the street," I added.

"No," she said slowly, thinking, "unless you want to count the delivery guy around here."

I was immediately alert. "What delivery guy?"

"I guess someone is finally moving into the empty apartment," she told me, "although it's been kind of quiet over there lately. I have been busy though, I've got classes and stuff like that." She chuckled a little and added, "You'll never believe what I did last night."

I closed my eyes, not sure I wanted to know. "What did you do?"

"I went out with a bunch of my friends to this club," she told me. "Not quite like a club like what you're doing, but a club."

Frantically I tried to think of all the clubs in Salem, and which ones were Kindred hangouts. "What club was that?"

"Jesters."

"Oh, Jesters," I said, hiding a sigh of relief. It was Kindred owned, but Micky George, the owner, made sure the vamps stayed out for the most part. "I wasn't aware it was open." The last time I'd been in the place there had been an intense gunfight, along with more than a few fires. The Sabbath isn't exactly known for its respect for the lives of mortals.

"Yeah, it was the first night it was opened back up," she told me. "Why was it closed?"

"They had an accident, I believe," I said with a wry smile. "A fire or something." Machine gun fire too.

"That sucks," she murmured.

"Yeah, it's a real nice place," I agreed, "but some of it's a little cheesy, that whole Jester's thing actually. I heard that a Jester's wannabe owns it." Micky actually had been a member of the Jester's thirty years ago, before he was turned. The club had a 60's music theme to it. If I had time to enjoy going out on a social basis, that would be one place I'd probably like to hang out at.

"Yeah, I kinda recognized the guy from some of the pictures," she said. "It was just a little too eerie for me."

I didn't like that Micky had been there, but maybe he was keeping an eye on 'the item' for Ford. "Was anyone else there that you recognized or knew?"

"Well, you know, there was a girl there that I kinda recognized," she told me, "but I'm not really sure. I almost want to say that she was at Mother Abigail's Friday night."

"Really?" How the hell was she remembering what happened that night? Then I realized that Zora would have had to leave some of the memories in place in order for Corrine to remember Mac.

"Long hair," she added. "Really pretty."

I got a bad feeling. "Was she with a tall dorky looking guy?"

"I didn't see any dorks," Corrine said, "but I saw a really hot guy with her."

"Dark hair, goatee?"

"Yeah, he was there." She paused for a moment, then said with what sounded like a smile, "My friends were determined to fix me up with some guy, but I wasn't into it."

"Who?" I demanded.

"I don't know, some older guy," she told me.

"How much older?" With Jester's not being a Kindred hang out, I wasn't really worried about him being Kindred, but there were other kinds of vampires out there that didn't drink blood.

"Well, I'm thinking he's in his late forties, early fifties," she said. "Beard, mustache, red hair."

"Did you talk to him?" Damn, did I sound like I was grilling her? I was, but I didn't want it to sound like I was.

"Not really. He went to get up from the table and I tripped and he caught me."

Convenient. "You weren't drinking, were you?" When she didn't reply, I said warningly, "You're not twenty-one."

"Would you quit sounding like my mother?" she said sounding annoyed. "Don't you think I'm a little bit more responsible than that?"

I smiled. "Usually."

"I'm responsible."

She'd been drinking. "You didn't drive home, did you?"

"Well, come now. What do you think?"

Normally she was a good kid. "I think you let someone else drive home. But if I find out you drove...." That's it, now I was sounding like her mother. "When is break coming up for class?"

"Class just started," she reminded me. "It's September."

"It is, isn't it," I muttered to myself. I needed a way to get her out of Salem until I got back, but what was a good way without telling her everything? "How is the situation with Jared going?"

"Good," she replied enthusiastically. "I'm learning from him, I mean it's kind of slow and sometimes he, you know, I'm not the fastest at getting these things and I think maybe I exasperate him a little bit, but, I'm making some progress."

"He never had the most patience," I mumbled, remembering what he'd been like in Baltimore.

"Neither did I," Mac said softly.

"Overlistening again," I told him.

"You're sitting directly behind me," he reminded me.

"What was that?" Corrine asked in my ear.

"I'm just mumbling at Cormac again."

"Oh, you're mumbling at each other," she drawled, sounding way too happy about it. "So is there anything you want to tell me?"

"No, not today," I said firmly. Jax didn't need to know everything that was going on, and for that matter, neither did Corrine. If she knew how close Mac and I were getting, she would be that much more disappointed when the relationship couldn't continue in Salem. "Maybe if you had less distractions, it would be better for your studies," I suggested.

"I do have school," she reminded me. "I have to study."

"Yeah, but—"

"There will come a time," she interrupted. "I'm not going to stress about it. It laid dormant that long, it can wait a little longer."

How could I argue with that logic, short of telling her the truth about Kate and the deliveryman? I thought about calling the Wrights, but I didn't know how far I could trust them, Kate had known them first. "Just keep an eye out because things are getting strange in town."

"Yeah, so I'm beginning to realize," she said wryly.

"You don't want to get into any trouble or anything," I told her. "If you have any problems, just, you know, call Mac's number and we'll deal with it."

"I can take care of myself," she said resentfully. "I'm a big girl."

"I know you can," I soothed, "but sometimes you need help." Sometimes we all did.

"I have friends," she reminded me.

"We have more," Mac commented from the front seat.

"You guys need time to spend with each other," Corrine added.

"Like we can't—" I stopped, knowing that Mac and I couldn't spend time together in Salem. "Well, if there's a problem, just let us know. Not that we necessarily have to come back, we know people in Salem that can take care of it."

"Okay, okay," she said sarcastically. "Geez."

"You said something about a delivery boy, has he been around lately?" I asked softly. I didn't think he would have been if Simon were still being held at the chantry.

"No, he hasn't been back for a few days," she told me.

"Well, if he comes back, don't let him in," I warned her. It was the most I could do. "You know how delivery people can be sometimes."

"Okay, conspiracy theorist," she said fondly. "I can take care of myself. I can lock the door from across the room now," she added.

"And that's just the beginning," Cormac said softly.

I sighed, knowing that I'd have to stop being so overprotective or I'd drive her away from me. "Take care," I told her, wanting to say so much more.

"All right," she promised. "Tell Mac I said bye, stay out of trouble..."

At that, Mac raised a hand over his shoulder and waved.

"...wear a condom," Corrine continued.

"Mac says bye," I replied, before I really heard what she'd said. "What?" That was something I hadn't thought of. Exactly what generation was Mac, anyway? Did we have to worry about something like that?

"I'll talk to you soon," she said in a rush. "Bye." She hung up before I could say anything about her suggestion.

"So what's new with her?" Mac asked as I handed him back his phone.

I shot him a knowing look. "As if you weren't overlistening."

"Who, me?" he asked innocently.

I wasn't paying attention, I was trying to figure out who the older man with the beard was. "I wonder if that's the guy that rolled into town just before the Sabbath pack," I muttered to myself.

"Devin?" Mac asked.

I looked up in surprise. "I didn't catch a name but he was redhead with a beard."

"The hunter type?"

"I don't think so," I told him, remembering what group I'd heard that he'd hooked up with, "unless you want to call the Arcanum hunter type. Why would you think he's a hunter type?"

"I believe he was in the alternate Salem that I told you of," he said.

"That you mentioned in passing and never got back to," I replied.

"He was part of the alternate you's group."

My eyebrows shot up in surprise. "My group?"

"Yes."

Wow, I had a group. "You never did fill me in on that," I reminded him.

"What would you like to know?"

"Everything would be good." What would it have been like to have lived the last twenty years married to Mac?

He shrugged. "Where would you like me to start?"

"How in the hell did you get to the alternate universe, anyway?" That would be a good place.

"A rogue Tremere," he said softly. "Akari. He cast a ritual that switched several of us from this reality to the other and them to us, Christina, Brenda, Rafe, myself, Nina, and Lord Blackwell. Later Angel went to bring us back."

I smiled a little. "Ah, the new guy." He'd rolled into town about the same time the Sabbath had. The Society hadn't taken note of him yet, but Kate usually kept me informed of legitimate Kindred in the city. That way I could help take out the ones the prince didn't want there anyway.

"While we were there," Mac told me, "I encountered several of that reality's us."

"This was a body-swapping thing," I said slowly, thinking of the repercussions of something like that, "so you were there, vampire, and he was here—"

"Mage."

"Interesting." What would have happened if I had come across that Mac? Would I have believed he was from an alternative world, or would I have thought he was my Mac come back to me?

"And with all memories of you, from what I understand," he added.

I looked down at the ring on my hand. "You said they were married?"

"Yes," he told me. "As I said, I encountered the alternate you and several of us, including the alternate Elvira, Akari, and this Devin."

"I'm going to take a big guess and say that the other me didn't like you," I said softly.

"No," he replied calmly.

I shook my head. "Maybe I should clarify; she didn't like you being there and her husband not."

"That is more to the point, yes," he agreed. He shot a glance over his shoulder at me. "But I must say, she got over it much more quickly than you have. Of course that may have

something to do with the fact that aiding me helped to get her husband back and free of the bond."

"Bond?"

"He was bonded to Beth," Mac added.

I have to admit it; he'd lost me. "Who's Beth?"

From the corner of my eye, I saw Jax wince as Mac answered. "That was the prince of the Salem here before Elvira."

I nodded. "That's right, she's only been in power a couple of years. So he was bonded?"

"Yes."

Finally I got it. "He was a ghoul," I said, my voice hard.

"Ah, if such a thing existed in their world," he told me. "The rules were not the same."

Jax cleared his throat and when he had Mac's attention, he said, "We're almost there."

"You knew Beth, didn't you Jax?" Mac asked.

The ghoul looked very uncomfortable as he changed lanes. "Yes I did." He didn't elaborate.

It was about nine-fifteen when we parked in front of the train station. There were a lot of people around when the got out of the car, and I noticed three of them watching us rather intently. One was an older oriental gentleman but the other male was younger, maybe mid twenties. With them was a blond woman, around twenty-five.

"Keep an eye out," Cormac said in a low voice. "I think we might have a problem." I had to agree with him, it didn't look good.

We walked toward the entrance with the three mortals watching us the whole way. Once inside, we looked around for the lockers, hoping to get out of there as quickly as possible. Jax fell back as Mac and I walked across the large room, and I pointed out the lockers I thought we needed to check for the number on the key.

When we reached locker D67, Mac pulled out the key and put it in the lock. It turned easily and he pulled the locker open. Inside was a large old book, but when Mac reached inside for it, he'd barely touched the book when he jerked back.

I put my hand on his arm, concerned. "What is it?"

"I believe there is a ward on the book," he said, rubbing his fingertips.

"There's a ward on it?" I'd heard of wards before but never come across one. There are Tremere wards against almost everything, and I assumed that only the one against ghouls would affect me with my blood. Given Mac's reaction, I didn't really want to find out.

"Would you mind attempting?" Mac asked softly, gesturing into the locker. "I believe it is a ward against vampires."

"You want me to grab the book?" I repeated, surprised although I don't know why. If he couldn't get it, someone else had to. But what if it were warded against ghouls, too?

"Be careful," he advised.

I reached in and touched the book very lightly, then a little more when I felt nothing. When I was sure the book wouldn't zap me, I picked it up and looked under it, but there was nothing else in the locker.

It occurred to me suddenly that Mac couldn't take the book from me and that this might be the only chance I had to look at his sire's spell book. I opened it gently and flipped through some of the pages, but everything was Greek to me. Or Latin maybe, whatever it was I couldn't read it. There were a few pieces of paper tucked inside, and some pictures, but I didn't have a chance to really look at them before Cormac spoke up.

"Eliza, put the book away," he said warningly. "We have company."

I closed the book and looked around for our friends from outside, but I didn't see them. Mac took off his ever-present backpack and opened it, holding it out toward me. Taking care not to touch his hands, I put the book carefully inside. While he was putting the bag back on, I adjusted my jacket slightly so I could get to my weapons easier, just in case.

"Do you see the trio?" he asked me.

"From outside? Where?"

"By the door," he said, "about six feet from Jax."

I couldn't see the door from where I was standing. "You're in my way," I told him as he unbuttoned his jacket. I rose on tiptoe to see around him and saw them just as they saw me. I wiped at an imaginary piece of lint on Mac's shoulder to cover my movements. "So how are we going to play this, just casually walk out of here?"

"Yes." He seemed to think it would be that easy.

I didn't see how that would work if they wanted trouble, but it was worth a try. "Okay."

Mac pulled out his cell phone and dialed a number quickly. "How long have they been there?" he said with no prelude.

"Oh, pretty much after we came in," I could hear Jax answer. "That's why I held back. Are you guys done?"

"Yes," Mac replied, reaching past me to close the locker door. "Do you see any weapons on them?"

"No," the ghoul said. "They're playing it pretty cool."

"When we get half way across the room, go start the car," Mac told him.

"You don't want me to watch your back?"

"In a place like this I prefer not to get into a fire fight," he warned softly.

"All right."

Mac hung the phone up and put it back inside of his jacket before looking pointedly at me. "Fight them if we have to, but only if we have to," he said firmly.

"Too many innocent people," I murmured, looking around.

"My point exactly," he agreed. As he put his arm around me, he took one of the stakes from the small of my back and passed it up to me under my jacket. I put my right hand on my hip and took it from him, then left my hand there as if I was resting it on his.

The woman and the older man were sitting on a bench with the younger man sitting on the back of the bench between them. The men were looking in our general direction checking us out, but the girl was staring at Mac with an intrigued look on her face that I didn't like.

"Maybe next time you'll let me accessorize a little more," I told Mac as I looked for the girl's aura. She was suspicious of Mac, but she also wanted him in the worst way. "Can we stake her on general principle alone?"

He pulled me closer and bent down to whisper against my hair. "Jax is starting the car, if anything happens, run."

When we were halfway across the room, Jax turned and walked toward the door. The trio noticed him leaving, but didn't spare him more than a brief glance as he left the building. A few minutes later Mac and I were in the doorway and I turned to look up at Mac as if to say something to him. I looked back at them from the corner of my eye and saw them get up to follow us.

Jax had the car in front of the doors and Mac led me around it to the passenger's side where he opened the door for me to get in. After he closed the door, he stood there for a moment, looking over the car to where the three strangers were standing near the door staring at us. After a long moment he got in the car and Jax pulled out into traffic.

"It appears I have a friend," Mac murmured softly as Jax pulled away.

"It appears that she would like to be your friend," I agreed hotly. I felt the slow burn of anger in my chest.

"Yes, I got that," he replied.

"Your good friend." I didn't like to admit even to myself that seeing the woman look at Mac that way made me jealous.

He nodded. "I got that as well."

"Your bestest friend," I added bitterly.

Mac turned and looked behind us to see if they were following us, but they weren't. "Not jealous, are we Eliza?"

Jax chuckled a little and I shot him a hard glance before looking at Mac. "Why?" I asked. "Would I have a reason to be?" I almost wished the three had followed us; I could have used a good fight just then to cool my temper.

"Not at all," he replied.

I looked away. "Then I guess I'm not." I'd forgotten just how jealous I could be; I didn't like anyone looking at Mac but me.

He studied my face for a moment, then turned back to face the front of the car. "You're a bad liar, Eliza," he said sternly.

Damned Auspex. Well, two could play that game, I thought as I looked for his aura. It was light, which was to be expected since he was a vamp. And he was calm, too calm for my tastes. And you know, it was good to see that I amused him with my little show of jealousy. Just fucking ducky. I turned to stare broodingly out the window.

"So where are we off to now?" Jax asked into the silence. "Exciting destinations, far off places?"

"Clothes," Mac reminded him.

It took us nearly an hour at the shop Jax found to find clothing that we could live with and still fit into the crowd at the club. I guess I should say that Jax wasn't the problem, he found clothes pretty quickly, but Mac and I had a hard time finding something we would actually wear.

"We'll take these with us and change later," Mac said as we were looking for shoes to replace the ones I'd lost in Berlin. "I don't really want to investigate it wearing...." He held up the clothes and I smiled.

"Although it is kinda break and enterish," I told him.

"No it's not," he said with a frown.

"Well, yours isn't," I agreed. "But if it weren't for the spikes on the boots, mine would be."

We carried the clothing out in garment bags and Jax drove quickly to the warehouse we'd gone past the night before. We parked just down the street and spent a few minutes watching the empty building and the line at the Pinnacle, which was not too far away from Bruckman's.

"Did anyone think to bring a flashlight?" Mac asked softly.

"Why yes, I happen to have one," Jax said, reaching between his seat and the door. He pulled out a very large flashlight and handed it to Mac.

We got out and walked down the alley that ran behind the abandoned building. Its windows were boarded over and it looked like no one had been inside in years. We found a back entrance and Mac turned on the flashlight to study it. With his right hand he loosened one of his guns for a quicker draw, but I bypassed such niceties by pulling my knife. In the darkness I could hear the traffic on the main road, and small animals scurrying around in the trash lining the alley.

After a moment of studying the door, Mac reached out and twisted the knob hard, forcing it open. He shined the flashlight around inside, showing the inside of a large warehouse like room. It was filthy with dirt, rat droppings and cobwebs, but one section of the floor showed recent movement. A desk area lined the wall across from us.

We spent half an hour checking out the building, but Mac was the only one who found anything. He'd been looking through the papers on the desk when he held up what looked like an invoice and murmured something to himself.

I'd been looking through an empty filing cabinet when I heard him and looked over. "What did you find?" I asked as I came to peak over his shoulder. "Does this mean something to you?"

"Earl Hardy was the Kindred that Dougal was hunting," he told me softly. Earl's signature was at the bottom of the invoice.

"Do you think that maybe Earl killed Dougal?" I tried to read his face, but there was very little light.

"Pretty sure of it."

Well, at least now I knew who to thank for doing what I should have done a long damn time ago. "So, Nashville?" I asked aloud.

"It appears that way." He folded the note and put it in his pocket.

"Know anybody in Nashville?" I'd never been there myself.

"No," Mac replied. "But I know some people that have been there."

We found nothing else of interest in our search, so we left the way we came. As we got close to the car I noticed a coffeehouse down the block. When I mentioned it, Mac looked at me funny. Did he think I lived for coffee?

"Why don't we change in there?" I suggested. "There are probably bathrooms."

"Goody," he murmured dryly.

I shook my head as I reached into the car for my garment bag. "You used to like coffee," I told him. When he didn't look convinced, I added, "Really."

We went into the coffeehouse and I went into the women's bathroom to change. As I pulled the outfit out of the bag, I tried to remember why I had agreed to wear it. The black skirt was so short that it came with sewn in undies like a cheerleader's outfit. The tube top was neon orange and it matched the thigh-high stockings that didn't quite reach the bottom of the skirt. I pulled on the knee high black boots and zipped them up, carefully balancing on the four-inch heels.

I put one stake under the waistband at the small of my back, and another in the left boot. Pushing the knife sheath down inside the right boot, I found it was only a little uncomfortable, but still gave me good access to the weapon. My leather jacket went on over everything and made me feel much better, less naked. I pulled my hair up into a fluffy rubber band that matched the tube top.

When I walked out of the bathroom, the men were waiting for me by the door. Mac took one look at me and smirked. I ignored him and asked Jax to get me a cup of coffee.

"Nice boots," Mac said after a few moments.

I glanced at his outfit; gold lame vest over a black turtleneck with gold patchwork pants. He was wearing his usual boots and the leather jacket he'd been wearing all night. "Nice pants," I replied.

"You like those?"

"They're a little louder than my shirt," I told him as Jax rejoined us. I glanced at the ghoul and we added simultaneously, "Not by much."

"There's more to them," Mac pointed out.

"Yeah, but I have the stockings to match," I said with a smile.

"How do you know I don't?" he asked seriously.

We left the coffeehouse and walked down the block to the Pinnacle. The line was very long; apparently this was a hot Paris nightspot.

"Stay here for a second," Jax said softly. "I'll see if we can get inside."

While we stood side by side waiting for him, I kept an eye out for any kind of trouble. I didn't want to be caught unprepared if another hunter like the one in Berlin showed up. After a few minutes I noticed that Mac kept glancing down at my outfit.

"What?" I asked, pulling up at the tube top self-consciously. He just looked down at me and smirked until I pulled my jacket closed. "What?"

He leaned back a little to peer at the back of me, and I pulled down at the edges of the skirt, as if that would help. "What," I demanded, "you don't like my outfit?"

"I never said that," he drawled.

Now that I was feeling wicked stupid in the outfit, Jax came back for us. I grabbed the bottom of the jacket with every intention of zipping it closed, but Mac took my hand to lead me after the ghoul. I held the jacket closed with my other hand and reluctantly followed them into the club.

CLUBBING

AND I KNOW IN MY HEART

THERE IS NO OTHER

ENOUGH OF ME - MELISSA ETHERIDGE

Inside, the Pinnacle was all velvet and chrome. The entry was crowded, with a bench along one wall and a low table covered with pamphlets along another. Heavy blood red velvet curtains separated the entry from the dance floor, and partitioned what looked like seating areas with windows over the dance floor. A ramp led down to the right toward the dance floor, but Jax led us to one of the sitting areas.

"I asked, and the gentlemen you're looking for are in that room," he told Mac as he pointed the way.

Lucien and Yven sat with two women on a black couch to our right, and two overstuffed zebra-striped chairs sat across a low table from them. The far wall was glass and gave us a good view of the dance floor. Lucien greeted us pleasantly and told us to be seated.

Mac led me over to the far chair and sat down in it, then without a word pulled me into his lap and draped an arm over my thighs. To cover my shock, I pulled frantically at my skirt, although it didn't go down very far. I felt like I was on display as his property, and I didn't like that feeling.

Lucien said something in French to the women, and they pouted a little before leaving. Jax pulled the curtains closed behind them and sat down, but a moment later another woman, this one our waitress, opened them up again.

I asked for – you guessed it – coffee, but Mac surprised me by asking for a scotch on the rocks. Jax also asked for a drink.

After several minutes of small talk between the vampires, Lucien asked, "What exactly are your Thaumaturgical studies, young Cormac?"

"Right now I am researching the Movement of the Mind," he answered calmly.

"Yes, lovely little path," Lucien murmured.

"As I have been traveling, I haven't really found anyone to tutor me," Cormac added. "However, since I have decided to pursue that course I have done quite a bit of reading, but have not been able to produce any results."

"I see," he replied with a nod. "Well, concentration is the first key."

The waitress interrupted them with our drinks, which she sat down on the low table. When she left, Lucien floated his drink to him. I watched feeling almost bored; I'd seen far more impressive abilities in my lifetime, and most of them weren't from blood sucking fiends.

"It is something that of course takes time," Lucien added.

"Of course," Mac replied. "Don't all things?"

"All things worthwhile," Lucien said.

At that, Mac squeezed my waist a little, but I found I had to disagree with him.

"No," I said softly, I hoped for Mac's ears alone. "Some things are instantaneous." It had certainly been at once for me; the moment I'd seen Mac across the Memphis, I'd fallen for him hard. As I listened to Lucien and Cormac talk Tremere shop I remembered the first time I'd ever seen Mac.

I'd been waiting tables at The Memphis, a seedy bar in downtown Baltimore. He'd come in with Glenn and when I'd looked across the room and saw him there, the rest of the world faded away. He'd tried to talk me into dating him that night, but I wouldn't.

It wasn't that I didn't want to date him, it was more like I was afraid to. I knew the moment I saw him that dating would never be enough, that if I let him get close to me no one else would ever be good enough. I was right.

Mac had met Bobby that same night, and found out that he was a werewolf. He'd also helped Bobby with his first kill after a vamp attacked us. Funny how things change, isn't it? Now Mac was a vamp and Bobby had offered to kill him.

I set the now empty coffee cup on the low table. By now I realized that no one was going to say anything about my sitting in Mac's lap and had relaxed almost without even realizing it. I knew that Kindred played their little games with their ghouls, and right now we were smack dab in the middle of the playing field.

A few minutes later the DJ put on a slow song and Mac leaned forward to whisper in my ear. "Would you care to dance?"

I looked at him and smiled. "Yes."

He offered his hand to me and I took it, letting him guide me to my feet. "Excuse us, gentlemen," he said to the men on the couch as he stood up. "If you don't mind, we'd like to share a dance."

"Of course," Lucien replied. "Enjoy."

Mac led me by the hand through the crowd to the dance floor. We weaved through the couples until we were well out of sight of the room we'd been sitting in. At last he pulled me into his arms and I went more than willingly. I put my hands on his shoulders and felt his arms go around my waist.

The music was slow and sensual, weaving a web of seduction through the crowded room. It didn't matter that we couldn't understand the words of the song, we were no more immune to its spell than any of the other dozens of people swaying to the music.

I felt like I was dreaming. I'd spent so many years remembering what it was like to be held by this man and believing it could never happen again. Now I was in his arms and it felt like I had stepped into the past.

Gradually Mac's hands moved from the small of my back to my waist, then they traveled slowly down my hips to the outside of my thighs. I looked up and was lost in his eyes when I felt his cold touch on the skin of my leg just below the short skirt. I ran my fingers through the hair at the base of his neck and smiled softly.

Too soon the music ran out and a song with an upbeat tempo began to play. I expected him take me back to the others, but he didn't. Instead, he pulled me up tight against his body. He leaned down as I strained upward to meet his mouth. We kissed gently for a moment, but the kiss deepened quickly. The moment stretched out forever, seconds lasting for what seemed like days.

Someone in the crowd jostled Mac from behind, and he pulled away to stare down at me. I looked back at him, shocked at the passion I'd felt even after the dream I'd had earlier. I was breathing quickly, almost gasping for air. His eyes went to my mouth and I realized I was biting my lip.

"Allow me," he drawled.

"No, you have sharp teeth," I reminded him with a smile.

"Not yet," he said softly.

The Mac I'd seen for so short a time in our hotel room the night before was back and I wanted to cry in relief. I hadn't blown the chance that Gustav had given us after all. Finally I

felt real hope that we could work things out between us, regardless of what our lives were like now. I put my hand on the side of his face and smiled up at him.

When we returned to the room where the others waited for us, Mac sat me on his lap once again. I drank more coffee and listened politely while Mac and Lucien discussed Tremere magic and alternate realities, but my mind was elsewhere.

Some time later, Mac decided it was time for us to leave. He made our excuses to Lucien and Yven, and we followed Jax to the car. While he drove, Mac pulled out his phone and dialed it. Of course I listened, turn about is fair play after all and he was always listening to my phone conversations.

"Brenda," he said when she answered. "I'm just checking in. How are things?"

"Everything's fine over here," she told him. "How are you guys?"

"Good," he replied. "You've been to Nashville before, haven't you?"

"Yeah, a couple of years ago."

"What do you know of a Bruckman's Imports?"

She thought for a moment. "Not a lot more than the fact that the company was involved in Jason's disappearance, I believe. That is one of the places we looked for him."

"There was one here in Paris," he told her. "It appears they've since gone out of business. And the man that Dougal was hunting when I last saw him was in Nashville and received a package, or rather, crates."

"It's still operational, as far as I know," she said. "Still open and doing business. I don't know anyone who's running it specifically, but I know that its Brujah associated."

"Yes," he murmured, "I believe Nashville will be our next stop."

"Well, I know some people in the area," she told him. "If you are planning on traveling tomorrow, I could take an early flight and meet you there."

"I don't believe we're going to be leaving tomorrow," he replied. "Maybe the end of tomorrow night. I would like to spend at least another night in Paris."

Part of me was glad to hear that we would have more time together, but part of me wanted to get back to Salem so I could keep an eye on Corrine.

"I can introduce you to the prince," Brenda offered. "We helped put her there, so I'm sure she'll be receptive."

"That would be appreciated," he said. "What clan controls the city?"

"Gangrel," she told him to my surprise, "but they're not the real leadery type. Bruce came back from there before all the shit went down with the Sabbat and he said that things weren't going really well with them in control, so I don't know how much longer that will work out. Who knows, maybe going down there something will happen to change power again."

"We'll see," Cormac replied coolly. "Thank you, I will speak to you again tomorrow evening. Good night."

"Good night."

He turned the phone off and glanced over his shoulder at me. I pretended to be watching the traffic, resting my head against the back of the seat until we got to the hotel.

When we walked into the lobby, it was after four. Mac was carrying the clothes we'd changed out of to go to the club, and Jax was carrying his own. The large room was nearly deserted, except for a vampire sitting with a woman in one of the conversation areas. They were in deep conversation and didn't seem to notice we were there.

The elevator stopped at the third floor on the way up, and a tall woman got on. She looked vaguely familiar to me, but I couldn't place her. She got off again on the fourth floor, and we continued up to the fifth.

I was wondering what would happen when we got to our room when I heard Mac swear softly. "What?"

"We may have trouble," he told me.

Down the hall I could see the vampire from the lobby at the door of the room just past Jax's. He kissed her neck as she unlocked the door and glanced down the hall at us when she went into the room ahead of him.

Mac nodded in that direction. "But then again, maybe not."

The vamp nodded back and followed the girl into the room.

Mac turned to me. "Do you plan on going out again this evening?"

Where exactly did he think I wanted to go? "No, wasn't planning on it."

He looked at Jax. "I don't plan on going anywhere either. It is still several hours until sunup; you are free to do whatever you want."

"No problem," Jax replied. "I'll be in my room if you need me."

"Weren't you two going to go out for breakfast?" Mac asked me.

"Room service," I told him.

"Very well," he said. "Good night, Jax."

"Good night." Jax unlocked his door and went inside as Mac opened the door of our suite.

He let me in first then followed, making sure the door was locked behind us. The room was still laid out like our apartment in Baltimore, and seeing it after everything that had happened tonight gave me goose bumps.

Mac took off his leather and put it on chair along with the bundle of clothing in his hands. He removed the figure-eight holster and set it down carefully on top. When he took off the lame vest, I wondered when or if he was going to stop undressing. He laid the vest down on top of his guns and stood there looking down at his pants, a bemused look on his face.

He smiled at me. "I'm not sure about the pants," he murmured.

"Oh, but they look so special," I drawled with a smile.

"Don't they just," he said wryly.

"I bet they would be the rage at the chantry," I teased.

"Only with Rafe," he told me, adding, "Cause Rafe is so with it."

"Yeah," I said dryly. "He's with it with Brenda."

"She has more influence over him than just his wardrobe."

Of course she does, she's his master. She has a hold on his mind that can't be broken short of death, that's what you get for drinking a vamp's blood. "Does this come back to the only having friends by blood thing?"

"I'm not sure if the puppy is ghouléd," he murmured. "I mean the canine."

"She has a dog?" I thought all animals hated vampires.

"Yes, well, a dog want to be," he conceded.

"I suppose it's a yip-yip," I said.

"Yes."

I smiled. "She seems the type."

His cell phone rang, and he reached down to pull it from his jacket pocket. "Oh, Brenda will be joining us in Nashville as well," he said as he turned on the phone. "Hello?"

"Cormac?" I heard a female voice say on the other end.

"Ah, Summer," he replied, turning away and walking into his bedroom. He closed the door behind him.

I didn't like hearing that another vamp would be intruding on my time with Mac, let alone that it would be Brenda Thompson. I was also disappointed that I wouldn't be learning anything about the dear Ms. Walker.

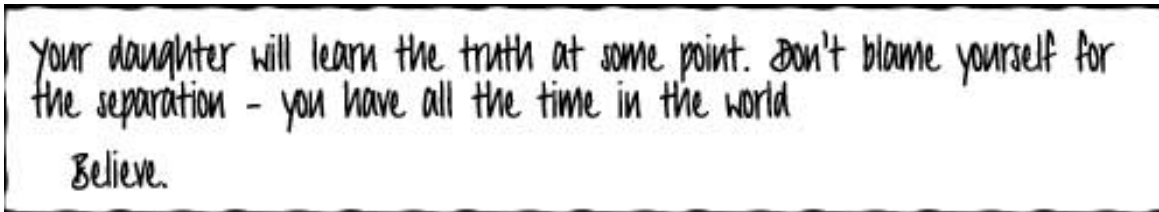
INVESTIGATING

THE NORTHERN LIGHTS AND THE SOUTHERN COMFORT
AND IT DON'T EVEN MATTER IF YOUR VEINS ARE PUNCTURED
BAWITDABA - KID ROCK

I turned to go into my own bedroom, but a noise from the hall caught my attention. When I looked toward the door, I saw a shadow fall across the light from the hallway. It paused, then two envelopes were pushed under the door and the shadow moved away.

I walked over and picked them up. On one was written "Female," and on the other "Male." I held the second one up to the light, but I couldn't see through the thick hotel envelope.

When I didn't hear anything else from the hall, I opened the door very quietly, holding a stake at the ready, but the hall was empty. I closed and locked the door, then opened the envelope and read the note inside.



your daughter will learn the truth at some point. Don't blame yourself for the separation - you have all the time in the world
Believe.

Believe what? That some fucking vamp knew more about me than I'd ever admitted to anyone? I'd never discussed that night with anyone but Mac, and I sure as hell hadn't told him I thought it was my fault. If I had stopped him from joining us, if I hadn't agreed to date him to begin with, if I'd killed Kate when she showed up in town, if I'd been faster, stronger when they attacked us, he would still be alive.

And just what in hell did whoever wrote that know about my daughter? I would have thought Salem was the safest place for her to be, under the watchful eye of the contract's guarantor. After all, if Ford didn't keep her safe it was his undead ass that would pay for it.

I forced myself to stop thinking about things I couldn't do anything about at the moment and put the letter back into the envelope, shoving them both into the inner pocket of my jacket. I tossed the other envelope onto the table and went into the bedroom to change. I had just laid the jacket on the bed when I heard Mac moving around in the other room.

"Luv?"

"Mac?" I called back as I pulled a tank top from the top drawer of the dresser, "did you find the envelope?"

"Yes, where—"

"It was stuck under the door," I said without waiting for him to finish. I stripped off the tube top and slipped the shirt over my head.

"Did you see by whom?"

"No, there was no one in the hallway." I went back into the sitting room to see him meditating over the envelope.

After a moment he reached down and pulled a knife from his boot, then used it to open the envelope. He pulled out the letter and stared down at it for so long that I started to get concerned.

"What is it?" When he didn't answer, I walked over to him. "Mac?" I snapped my fingers close to his ear hoping to get his attention.

"What did your letter say?" he asked without looking up.

I stepped back a little. "Who said I got one?"

"I believe they know a lot about me," he said, looking up without raising his head. "I believe they know a lot about you as well."

Knowing it was useless to argue with him I went back into the bedroom for my letter. I took it from the envelope as I walked back into the sitting room. "Trade?" I suggested, holding the letter out toward Mac. He agreed and we swapped letters.

While you may think not remembering her is bad, there is a greater sin you carry. All that innocent blood on your hands was probably messy.
Interested?

I didn't understand, what innocent blood was on Mac's hands? I would have thought that of the two of us, I was the one responsible for more innocent deaths. Was I wrong? Just how many innocents had Cormac killed since his embrace? "What is this talking about?"

"I'm not sure," he told me. "Did you see which way our mysterious guest went?"

When I shook my head, he folded the letter carefully before setting it down and putting the knife away. He went to the chair and dug a little until he found his guns. He put on the holster and picked up his jacket.

"Planning on going somewhere?" I asked him.

"Yes." Without another word, he turned and walked out the door.

I hurried into the bedroom for my jacket and made sure I still had my stakes and knife as I followed him into the hallway. He was pounding on the door we'd seen the other Kindred go into. Jax opened his door and looked at him, puzzled.

Mac gave up when no one answered and walked into Jax's room with a murmured apology as he passed him. I closed the door to our suite and followed him inside. Jax closed the door behind us and I watched Mac go into the bathroom. I heard him open the window and followed him to see him leaning out, looking toward the Kindred's room.

"Mac, what are you doing?" I demanded.

He ignored me and climbed on the windowsill.

"Mac?" I repeated as he moved outside. "What are you doing?"

He leaned to his left, then straightened and kicked out. I heard glass break and looked at Jax. "What the hell is he doing?"

Jax shrugged. Mac kicked out again and I heard glass falling. He reached over and grabbed the other window, then pulled himself over to it. I leaned outside in time to watch him almost lose his grip.

"What the hell are you doing?" I hissed at him.

"Investigating," he told me.

"Are you trying to fall?" I had visions of watching him plunge five stories to the pavement below. Of course, he probably would have stood up and walked away from it, but that didn't make me any less afraid.

"I'm trying not to," he replied as he swooped into the window.

Damn, he was going to get himself killed going in there by himself. I climbed onto the windowsill and looked out. I reached over and grabbed the other window frame and heard feminine giggling coming from the other room. She was obviously feeling pretty good if the sound of her laughter was any indication.

The boots didn't give very good traction on the sill and I almost fell myself getting across. I followed Mac into the room, balancing lightly on my feet in spite of the four-inch heels. Mac stood in the doorway to the bedroom and I pulled a stake as I walked over to his side, ready to back him up if he needed it.

The room seemed to be a mirror of Jax's room, and the girl lay on the bed on the wall opposite from the bathroom. She was looking confused at Mac. I could see a low dresser under the windows to our left, and a television to our right. Next to the door to the hall was a small desk.

"Where is your companion?" Mac demanded.

She looked around the room, dazed. "He was just here. What do you want?"

"What do you know about me?"

The girl seemed very confused. "What are you talking about?" At that point she must have realized that she was naked with a strange man in her room. She pulled a corner of the blanket over her body and backed against the headboard.

I reached out with my spider-sense, but the only vamp I could feel was Mac. "He's not here," I whispered.

He stepped into the room and walked to the light switch by the door, turning it on. The room was filled with light. Underneath the windows to my left was a low dresser. A television stood between the bathroom and closet doors to my right. The bed lay on the opposite wall, and a desk stood near the door. I put the stake away, knowing I wouldn't need it.

"What are you doing in here?" the girl asked, still very confused. "How did you get in here?" She spoke English, and her accent made her American.

Mac opened the closet door to reveal women's clothes hanging inside. He turned to look at her. "You were dreaming, what were you dreaming of?"

She shook her head. "I was sleeping? This guy that I met in a café down by the Seine, I thought it was real. I don't remember coming back here." She lowered her head into her hands, disoriented.

"What was your companion's name?" Mac demanded.

"I don't know," she told him, shaking her head. "I don't remember."

"He's not here," I repeated firmly, "and she's just a happy meal." I didn't want to hang around for hotel security to show up and take us away.

She looked at me, bewildered. "What are you talking about?"

Mac walked between us and into her line of sight. "Forget," he said firmly, I assumed looking into her eyes.

"Look, I really don't want to spend time in a French prison," I told him. "So, can we get out of here?"

He didn't turn around. "Sleep." When he turned toward the door, I saw that the girl was indeed sleeping.

Damn, never thought of that one before. I could see where it would come in handy.

We went out into the hall and looked down it both ways. To the right we could see the elevator doors, and the fact that one was being held open. Immediately Mac sprinted for them. I followed a little slower; it's hard to run in four-inch spiked heels when you're used to sneakers.

Mac came to a stop in front of the open elevator doors and aimed his gun inside at someone I couldn't see. As the man spoke I realized that Mac's hand was shaking.

"The blood of those shed is not necessarily your fault." As I reached the elevator, I saw that the man inside was the vamp the girl had been with earlier. "This sin should be put behind you," he added in a calm voice as he lowered his hand from the side of the door.

"Who are you?" Mac asked in a low voice. I heard the elevator ding.

"My blood line is unknown to you, young man."

"That's not what I asked." To my amazement, Mac looked terrified. His hand was shaking so badly that I thought he'd drop the gun. It was obvious that the other vampire was doing something to his mind. That pissed me off and I looked inside the elevator.

The bastard glanced at me and though I made sure I didn't meet his eyes, I felt something shift inside of me. Suddenly I realized how strong he seemed, how much in control of the situation. And this monster knew I had a daughter? Fear started to override my anger, one of the few times it had ever done so in my life.

The doors started to close. "There was nothing you could do. Let their souls rest," he said as the doors closed on Mac's arm, and then opened again. The vamp reached out and lowered Mac's arm, brining it out of the way of the door.

"You still haven't answered my question," Mac replied in a shaking voice.

The fiend laughed. "My kind walked this earth long before your blood ever existed," he said harshly. "That is who I am. My kind has lingered in the shadows of existence while your blood seeks to—"

"What is your name?" Mac asked again as the doors began to close. Looking at the terror on his face, I was surprised he could even speak.

"My name is of no importance just as I am not of importance," the stranger replied. "Forget your sin and help her with hers."

As the doors closed, I wondered what the fuck he was talking about. Mac started shaking even harder, and he stumbled backwards toward the opposite wall. I caught his arm and tried to steady him on his feet, but he was quickly loosing control of his body. He was scaring me worse than the other vamp had.

"Mac," I asked, searching his terrified face, "are you okay? Who was that?"

"I don't know," he whispered.

I took the gun from his shaking hand and put it back in the holster. Down the hall, Jax came out of his room, spotted us, and walked toward us.

"What are you guys doing out here?" he asked. When he got close, he saw the look on Mac's face and grabbed his other arm.

"Apparently trying to get arrested," I told him, draping Mac's arm around my shoulders. Jax did the same and together we led him back toward our suite. It took some doing, because he was almost limp in our grasp. Once we got him inside, we sat him down on the couch.

"Are you okay?" I asked urgently. "Come on, Mac, talk to me." When he didn't respond, I looked at Jax. "I don't suppose a brandy would do any good."

He shook his head. "Maybe for you."

I only thought about it for a second. "If he's out of it I don't think I need to be." Would slapping him help?

Jax must have read my mind. He leaned down and tapped Mac's cheek lightly. "Mr. Brennan, are you all right?" When Mac blinked slowly and his eyes seemed to focus, the ghoul added, "Mr. Brennan, are you okay?"

"No," he replied calmly.

"Do you need me to get something?"

I was surprised at his answer. "Scotch on the rocks."

Jax glanced at me, but I gestured toward the bar against the wall and sat down on the couch next to Mac. "Are you okay?"

He didn't answer, just watched Jax move across the room. When Jax came back, he held the glass out to Mac.

"No," he said firmly, "you drink that."

Jax seemed confused. "I don't want this."

Mac looked up at him fiercely. "Don't make me Dominate you."

Jax looked down at Mac for a long moment, then tossed back the glass and drained it.

I was glad to see that Mac seemed more with it, but I still didn't understand. "What the hell happened?"

"I'm not sure yet," he replied. He bent to pull the knife from his boot and looked up to see that Jax was already holding out his hand. A quick movement of the knife against Jax's wrist and the smell of blood filled the air. I could feel my heart pounding as Cormac put his mouth to the wound and drank.

A month ago I would have told you that there was no way I could be that close to a hungry vamp without killing it. A week ago I would have staked any Kindred I saw feeding on general principle alone. A few nights ago I would have been disgusted by Cormac's hunger. Now all I could do was look away and wonder what it would be like to feel Mac's lips on my skin, his teeth in my flesh.

I would have fled from the room and my desire if I could have, but Jax was standing in front of me, blocking me on the couch. The only way out would have been to scramble over the arm, and I didn't want either of them to think I was running from the sight of blood. I took slow carefully breaths and tried to control my racing heart until they were done.

From the corner of my eye I saw Mac first lick the wound closed, then lick the blood from the blade. "Thank you," he told Jax.

"Of course," the ghoul replied, as if giving blood meant nothing to him. Maybe it didn't.

Jax moved back a little as Mac rose unsteadily to his feet. He took off his leather jacket and laid it on the chair, then followed it with his figure-eight. He found his cigarettes and sat down by the fireplace before lighting one up.

"I'm just going to go finish changing," I whispered, feeling the need to be elsewhere, anywhere. I had to get control my emotions out of sight from anyone else. How could I feel this way? The last time I'd seen sex and teeth together in the same room I'd been on the receiving end of some serious pain. How could I have forgotten Luther's punishment so easily?

"Are you all right, Mr. Brennan?" I heard Jax ask as I walked toward the bedroom. "Do you need me anymore?"

"No, thank you Jax," he replied. "You've been more than helpful."

"Of course, sir."

I left the room and closed the door softly behind me before sitting down on the bed and covering my face with my hands. I tried to make myself remember what had happened just before I'd left Burlington with Luther and his 'punishment,' but it seemed like that horror had happened to someone else.

I'd fallen a long way from slayer to blood-doll wannabe in the last few days. How was I supposed to go back to St. Stephen's and kill vampires now? Somehow most of my righteous

anger was gone. Once I took care of Kate, would I have any rage left to kill with? I shook my head and told myself I'd deal with that problem when I came to it.

CONVERSATION

LET IT ALL FALL DOWN AROUND US IF THAT'S MEANT TO BE
RIGHT NOW IF YOU CAN'T LOVE ME BABY - LIE TO ME
LIE TO ME - BON JOVI

I took off my jacket and realized that I had nothing on under the tank top. I pulled on an oversized tee shirt and changed into a pair of jeans, then walked barefoot back into the main room.

Mac was sitting on the floor near the fireplace with a cigarette, staring broodingly into the cold hearth. I didn't want to break his concentration, but I knew I couldn't stay away. I'd never been able to stay away from him. I was beginning to think I never could.

I walked over to him and gestured toward his cigarette. "Got an extra one of those?"

Without a word he handed me up the pack and a lighter. I took out a cigarette and lit it before giving them back to him. "Are we done breaking windows for the evening?"

"Unless a stake goes awry, I believe so," he said softly. "But you have better control than that."

"Better aim than that," I muttered. "Usually, anyway." I found a shallow dish to use as an ashtray and sat it on the low table, then perched on the arm of the couch smoking for the first time in years.

After a few minutes Mac tossed his cigarette into the empty fireplace, then crossed the room to sit in the middle of the couch, one leg tucked underneath him and his body facing me. I put out my cigarette even though I'd only smoked half of it then turned to face him, resting my feet on the couch.

He sighed. "Did you enjoy yourself this evening?"

"Most of the evening," I told him honestly. "I can't say I enjoyed the visitor in the hall." Or seeing Mac in the state he'd been in.

"I don't know that he'll bother us too much anymore."

I wondered how he could be so sure. I'd thought that about Gustav last night and I'd been wrong. "I have no idea. For some reason, we seem to be getting messed with quite well here in Paris. It's not something they put in the tourist books."

He reached out slowly and caressed my ankle lightly, almost absentmindedly, watching my face. After a moment I slid down to sit on the cushion, tucking my leg beneath me with the arm of the couch at my back. Mac's hand slid upward as I did so, ending up on my knee. I covered it with mine as he reached up with his other hand and tucked a stray lock of hair behind my ear.

I glanced at the clock on the wall. "So, it's 4:30," I commented. "You said we're not breaking any more windows tonight."

"No."

"What a disappointment," I said sarcastically, enjoying the feel of his skin beneath my fingertips.

"If you would like to," he offered.

"That's okay. I'm sure we can find something better to do." When he raised an eyebrow at me, I asked, "What?"

"What did you have in mind?"

Like I was going to share. "I don't know that I had anything in mind." I shot for an innocent look, but I don't think it went over very well.

He turned until he was sitting right on the couch and put his arm around me, pulling me closer. I went easily, turning until we were touching from knee to shoulder.

"Did you have something to do in mind until dawn?" I asked. "I suppose going out and watching the sunrise is out of the question." Unless we wanted a barbecue, that is.

He laughed dryly. "No."

"So you have nothing in mind?"

"Just relax," he told me. "It's been a rather eventful evening."

"In more ways than one," I agreed.

"In several ways."

We sat there together in silence for a long time. I thought about how strange it was to just be sitting quietly like this, let alone with Mac. Mostly my life was filled with research, or strategy, when I wasn't with Corrine or out hunting, that is. It felt good to just be with him like that, the two of us. It made me long for the past almost more than I ever had before.

Mac kissed my temple and pulled me even closer. I looked up at him and threaded my arm around his waist.

"It would be even more romantic if the fireplace was lit," he said softly.

I gestured toward the daisies. "But at least we've got the flowers."

"Yes," he agreed. "So will you be taking them with you?"

Why would he ask that? Had he remembered that I used to save the flowers he gave me? "Why would I do that?"

"Nice vase," he murmured.

I smiled. "That would be stealing."

"It would make that apartment of yours a bit livelier," he told me.

"You don't like my apartment?" It was bad, I had to admit, but it wasn't that bad. Was it?

"What's left of it."

"After you ruined the door," I said, shaking my head.

"And the table," he reminded me.

"And the table, and the chair that fell apart after you left," I told him. "There's nothing wrong with the apartment, you sound like Corrine."

"What did you and Corrine talk about?" he asked.

"When?"

"This evening, on the phone."

"Oh, like you weren't listening," I said, poking him in the side.

"Who, me?" he asked innocently.

"You, yes," I replied, not buying it for an instant.

"Why would I do a thing like that?"

"Cause you always do," I chuckled.

"Not always." When I shot him a look that said I didn't believe him, he said, "What? I don't always listen."

I knew him better than that. "Yeah, just when you're anywhere near where I am with the phone."

"Pardon me for being concerned about our daughter," he said huffily.

"Mmm-hmm, and that's the whole reason you listen," I drawled.

"As a matter of fact, yes it is."

I looked at him. "You don't think that if you asked her questions, she would answer?"

"I don't think she would answer me as readily as she would you," he told me.

"You might have a point there," I said with a smile. Corrine seemed to like him well enough, but probably not enough to trust him like that. I hoped there would come a time when she did. "You don't think that if you asked me what she said that I would tell you?"

"There is no need to when I can listen."

"Uh-huh." I didn't think that was the whole story either. He'd always wanted to know everything that was going on.

"It's not like you don't listen in either," he told me.

"I don't always listen," I replied.

"Uh-huh," he said slowly.

"Uh-huh."

"Only when I'm anywhere near you with the phone," he told me.

"Can't I be concerned about you?"

"I'm not the one you can't hear," he reminded me.

"And the point is?" It was hard not to laugh when I knew he was right. "So are we going to sit here and bicker for the next hour and a half?"

"At least you're not throwing stakes at me yet."

"I could," I told him.

"Not at this range," he said.

"I could move back a little," I offered. When he shook his head, I added, "You seem to have a fascination with my stakes."

"They're a vivid part of my memories," he told me.

"Are they?" That was surprising.

"Yes, quite."

"So what exactly is it that you remember?" I asked, looking up at him. "Because you haven't been forthcoming on that."

"What would you like to know?"

I laid my head back down on his shoulder. "What you remember."

"We only have an hour and a half."

Was he remembering that much? "Okay, what you remember about Baltimore."

"Very little outside of meeting Kate and the night of the attack," he admitted. "The mountains and the daisies." At that he leaned forward and took one from the vase. I blushed at the memory as he twirled the stem between his fingers and added, "And trying to teach you to shoot."

I shook my head and smiled. "I told you it wouldn't work."

"As I said, I have a few new ideas."

"If I haven't learned how to shoot a gun in—" How old had I been when I'd picked up a gun for the first time? Twenty? Twenty-five? "—a long damn time, I'm not about to start." Stakes and knives worked well enough for me with a little help from the crossbow. They got the job done.

"I believe we've been approaching it wrong," he told me.

Didn't he think he'd already tried everything when we lived in Baltimore? "Maybe I've had the wrong target."

"I believe I resemble that remark," he murmured.

I shook my head. "Brenda would make a fine target," I suggested.

"Now, now," he cautioned patiently. "She's going to be joining us shortly."

I groaned. "You did say that, didn't you? Why is she joining us?"

"She's been to Nashville."

"So has Elvis," I reminded him. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Elvis isn't Tremere," he said calmly.

"And what does that have to do with it?" I demanded softly. "Do you have to be Tremere to go to Nashville?"

"I don't really know too many other Kindred that would be willing to fly halfway across the country to help us out," he told me, his tone calm and rational.

"We didn't need a Kindred here," I said firmly, "what do we need one there for?"

"We needed Jax here," he replied. "He knew people, he knew places."

"Jax has not been to Nashville?" Jax wasn't so bad. Much, much better than Brenda.

"Brenda has and she was interested in accompanying us," he stated. "I saw no reason to decline."

"I can think of several," I murmured irritably.

"Try not to get into a fight with her while we're there," he said patiently.

I looked up at him. "Afraid I would win," I asked softly, "or afraid I would lose?"

He shook his head slightly. "Just try not to get into a fight."

That didn't answer the question. "Well, I can try, but I've never been one for holding my temper," I told him, just in case he didn't remember. "Ever."

"Do try," he suggested.

"I have been making some progress," I said with a smile. "For example I haven't lost my patience with you."

"Actually you have lost your patience with me," he reminded me.

I chuckled. "Yeah, but I haven't staked you."

"You could try," he murmured.

"Try?" My eyebrows shot up, but he just looked calmly back at me.

"You've thrown a number stakes at me over the past week," he explained.

"And I missed on purpose," I told him.

He studied my face for a long moment. "Did you?"

"Yeah. Would you like me to aim for real?"

He smiled a little. "I'm beginning to doubt you can," he said, then added quickly, "Not in general, mind you. Just me."

"Just you?" I thought about that for a moment. I'd honestly wanted to hit him with the one I'd thrown from the balcony. "You might have a point there."

"Where?" He looked down and felt around on his chest as if expecting to feel a wooden point. I laughed and laid my head on his shoulder.

When I'd sobered, I asked, "So you remember meeting Kate?"

"In Baltimore," he confirmed.

"And you remember the last night in Baltimore."

"Yes."

"And that's all you remember?" I asked softly. He'd forgotten so much of our life together.

"A few nights in between," he said vaguely.

"You don't remember the brownstone?" Glenn and his bunch had lived in a large brownstone not far from my apartment. Mac had lived there too until we'd found the apartment together.

"No."

"Or that bar downtown?" I asked. "The one I got fired from for hitting the customer?"

He looked down at me, intrigued. "No."

I smiled wryly. "Yeah, I did." The guy had suggested something I wasn't sure was physically possible, and I hadn't liked it. My anger management skills had gotten me fired. "Anyway, what was the name of that place?" Then it came to me. "The Memphis Club."

"Speaking of Kate and listening," Mac said suddenly, "do you not believe me that she was there?"

Did I? Or was I still wondering how much Dougal had changed him? I honestly don't know. "Other than the fact that you don't like Kate, you have no reason to lie," I said, avoiding answering him directly.

"Then why are you having Glenn check into it?" He almost sounded hurt that I didn't trust him completely.

"I asked Glenn to check into it before we left Boston," I told him. "If I'm to kill her and not get in trouble for it, I need to have some kind of proof to show your prince," my mouth soured around the word, "that I have a legitimate reason."

"You don't think the memories of a Tremere are enough?"

"I don't know, are they?" I had no idea what would be enough. "I'm not Tremere."

"And I'm not the political type," he replied.

I shrugged. "Better to be safe than sorry," I said softly. "Or dead."

He squeezed me gently in reassurance. "I don't think we have too much to worry about. I don't believe we'll get too much resistance."

"Well, hopefully no one else will do it before we get back." I wanted her to see my face when she died, to know that I was the one who ended her existence.

"Are you savoring that satisfaction already?" he surprised me by asking.

"Yeah. Aren't you?" When he didn't reply, I pulled away a little looked up at him. "Tell me you're not going to like knowing that she's dead, really dead."

"Don't you feel in the slightest a twinge for the one that gave you life?" he asked, searching my face. "Twice?"

"Gee, let me think," I said, pausing dramatically. Then I looked him straight in the eye. "No."

He just watched me, and I didn't like that I couldn't read his face. I looked away.

"If she was in on that then she might have been in on the planning of it, and she has to die," I explained irritably. I hated having to explain this to him, he should be agreeing with me. He despised Kate. "There's no way around it, especially not if she's trying to plan something with Simon and Corrine." If she were trying to hurt my daughter, all the Tremere in the world wouldn't keep me from destroying her.

"On to more pleasant subjects, shall we?" he suggested.

"Please," I agreed. "I was just starting to relax, before you brought her up."

He pulled me close to him again. "Did Corrine say how her studies are going?"

"College or Jared?" I asked. Then I shook my head. "And you were listening, so why are you asking?"

"I told you," he said softly, "I'm not always listening."

When he used that voice I couldn't even pretend to stay irritated with him. "Yeah, well, I can't quite figure out a way to get her out of Salem until we get back."

"Why don't you call the Wrights?" he suggested.

"Because they know Kate." I couldn't take the risk that they might tell her where Corrine was.

"Can't we have Jared take her somewhere?"

I'd thought of that. "What excuse would he give?"

"Training."

"That sounds good, I like that idea." I knew that Mac would come up with something.

"Why don't you call him?"

"I don't have his number," he told me.

That could be a problem. "I don't have his number either. Who would?"

"Summer." He thought for a moment. "Corrine, I think. Glenn."

I looked up at him in surprise. "Glenn would have his number?"

"He has people in Salem, doesn't he?"

"And you don't always listen," I muttered. It hadn't occurred to me that Jared might be one of Glenn's contacts in Salem, although I guess it should have.

"Not always." There was that voice again.

"Why don't you call Summer and get his number," I suggested, "and see what you can do to her out of Salem?"

"Where would we have him take her?" he asked.

"Elsewhere?" If I had a safe place for her, didn't he think I would have suggested it already? "Maine's probably not a good idea, because Kate might find her there, if Kate's looking."

"How far away is elsewhere?"

"I don't care," I told him. "Do you have someplace in mind?"

"Hmm. Whatever became of the cabin in the mountains?"

I looked at him in surprise. "Jane's cabin?"

"Yes."

"I really don't know," I replied honestly. "I didn't really keep in contact with anybody after... what happened. It probably wouldn't be a good idea anyway."

"Why?"

"Jane was Glenn's girlfriend," I said slowly. "Do we really want him to know where Corrine is?"

He looked at me thoughtfully. "I thought Glenn was a good guy?"

"Yeah, well, I thought I was too," I told him sadly. "Good guys don't always do good things." I knew from experience that sometimes good guys do bad things for good reasons. The road to hell, being paved with good intentions, and all that jazz.

"What about Bobby?"

"What about him?" He hadn't said anything about remembering the werewolf who had been like a brother to him.

"For her protection," he explained.

"Bobby is probably wherever Glenn is."

"What do we have against Glenn?" he asked.

So far? "Nothing." I couldn't guarantee we wouldn't have something against him before all was said and done. If Glenn found out the truth about me and what I was doing in Salem there would be trouble for sure.

"Other than he doesn't know what you are," he murmured.

"Or what I do for a living," I reminded him. And more importantly, "Or who I do it for."

"Corrine doesn't either."

"That's true," I admitted, "but Corrine doesn't hunt vampires."

"Why don't we just have Brenda pick her up tomorrow night and bring her to Nashville," he suggested impatiently, "where you can watch her yourself?"

Not a good idea. "I like the idea of having Jared take her elsewhere better." When he looked at me in surprise, I added, "I don't want her around Brenda. I don't trust her, okay?" How could I trust my daughter with her? She was Tremere, and I really hadn't had good experience with the clan. Besides, it would violate the contract.

"I'm sure Summer knows of a place," he said finally.

"I'm sure she does," I murmured resentfully as Mac laid the daisy on my lap and leaned over to reach for his cell phone. I picked up the flower and watched him dial the phone.

"Hello?" a woman said on the other end. It was the same one he'd spoken to earlier when he'd gone into his room.

"Summer," he said pleasantly, watching my face. I tried to keep it carefully blank.

"Cormac?" She seemed surprised to hear from him.

"Yes," he replied. "I have one more favor to ask. Have you already spoken with Jared this evening?"

"No, I was actually on my way over to his house."

"How far away is he?"

"Fifteen minutes," she told him.

"Just call me back when you get there," he said. "I will deliver the message myself and I have a favor to ask both of him and possibly of you. We have someone in Salem that we need to get out of Salem."

What message was he talking about? I didn't like not knowing what was going on here especially if it involved Corrine.

"The girl?"

"Yes."

She hesitated for a moment. "Is there a problem?"

"Possibly. For a few days at the very least."

"Okay," she said slowly, obviously not understanding but still willing to help. "Well, I'll call you when I get there."

Just how close was Mac to this witch, anyway? Not physically, he'd told me he hadn't been physical with anyone since his embrace and I believed that. It was his emotional closeness to her that I wondered about. I tried to drive the thought from my mind but it lingered like a bad smell.

"Okay," Mac replied. "I'll be waiting." He hung up the phone, still watching me.

"So—" I began, but he interrupted me with a smile.

"You were listening."

I laughed in spite myself. "I'm sitting right next to you," I reminded him. "How can I help but listen?"

"You don't buy that when I say it," he told me.

"Why did you think I tried it?"

He shook his head. "One day I'm going to be planning a surprise party for you and you're going to ruin it."

"I don't like surprises." I also wasn't sure I liked him talking like we had a future. We didn't really, we couldn't. The contract and his clan made sure of that.

"I'm not talking about someone jumping out of a cake," he said.

"Things that jump out and surprise me usually end up, you know...." Dead.

"Staked."

"Yeah." Close enough. I rubbed my cheek against his shoulder a little, trying hard not to think about the life I'd be going back to way too soon.

"So what was that you were saying earlier about fangs and a fireplace?" he asked pleasantly.

I tried to play dumb. "What?"

"Fangs and a fireplace," he repeated.

"Fireplace," I said, pointing to it.

"Very good," he replied sarcastically.

"Fangs," I added, pointing at him, then back at the fireplace. "Fireplace."

"Two for two," he murmured with a smile.

"Yeah, they were there."

"Do you care to elaborate?"

Not particularly, but I figured what the hell. If I was serious about wanting to be with him, I had to learn how to share things again. "Well, there was a fire in the fireplace."

"That could be arranged," he told me.

"Do you have that thing where you can, you know, spooky-boo the fire?" I asked. That would have been one cool side effect of his vampirism.

"There's that word again," he muttered to himself.

"What word?" I asked. "Fire?"

"Spooky-boo." He looked down at me and smiled. "No but I have a lighter that would work just as well."

I shrugged. "There was a fire in the fireplace and you had fangs, kinda like you did earlier."

"Mmm-hmm. And you were there?"

"Didn't I say that?" Actually I would have thought it was obvious.

"Not yet."

I was pretty impressed by how well he was keeping his patience with me; I knew I was pushing it a little. "There was fire."

"You said that." Okay, maybe he wasn't keeping it all that well.

"Yeah, I was there," I told him, "with fangs and fire and fireplace."

"And you staked me to what?" he asked calmly.

"I didn't," I replied honestly. Actually, that thought hadn't occurred to me before. You'd think I would have staked him in my dream. That I hadn't even tried to just made me believe I wouldn't be able to if I tried it awake.

"Oh, really?" he said in mock surprise.

I nodded. "I was kinda surprised at that too, but it was a dream, so stranger things have happened. It was actually a pretty interesting dream." I admitted.

"Did it involve philosophy?" he asked.

"No, actually, it didn't," I said with a frown. "Why, did you have a dream involving philosophy?"

"Yes."

"What else was in your dream?" I asked him suspiciously.

"Fangs and a fireplace."

I thought back to what I remembered of the dream. It had been so realistic that it was hard to believe I'd only been dreaming. "Was there peace in your dream?"

"Yes," he murmured.

His voice sent shivers down my spine. "This is odd."

"I believe we have Gustav to thank again," he told me.

"I'm not sure thank would be the word." I didn't like knowing some vampire had invaded my dreams like that, no matter how nice it had been at the time.

"You seemed to be enjoying it when I woke you this evening," he reminded me.

I blushed, knowing that I would have enjoyed it a whole lot more if Mac had joined me in the bed. "So what else was in your dream?"

"What else was in yours?" he asked.

"I told you what was in mine."

He smiled. "And I told you what was in mine."

"Did you tell me everything?" I didn't want to ask if we'd made love in his dream if we hadn't, that would be telling.

"As much as you've told me," he said.

I'd thought he was holding something back. "Do we just want to write it down and compare notes?" I asked impatiently.

"Ah, no."

I looked down at the rings on my hand. "Well, there was blood in my dream," I told him softly. "Was there blood in your dream?"

"Mmm-hmm."

When he didn't elaborate, I glanced up at him. "Now it's your turn."

"That pretty much covers it, Elizabeth," he told me softly.

I closed my eyes and felt blush creep into my cheeks again. "So we can pretty much say that we were having the same dream."

"Or close variations thereof," he agreed.

"Except I didn't dream about philosophy." And he hadn't dreamed about us making love.

"Not a normal subject for you." At that moment, his cell phone rang. He answered it, looking at my face. It was Summer.

"I'm at Jared's," she told him.

"Mmm, good."

"I assumed you wanted to speak with him?"

"Yes, I have that message and all," he said softly.

"Okay, hold on a minute."

While he waited for Jared to come to the phone, I could see him slipping into 'Cormac' mode.

"Hello?"

"Jared." His voice held no warmth; it was almost as if he were a different person.

"Mac," Jared replied. "What can I do for you?"

"I have a simple request and a favor to ask of you."

"Okay."

"It is most imperative that Corrine not be involved in the movement," Cormac said firmly, "in any way, shape or form."

"What movement would that be?" Jared asked innocently.

Cormac's voice went low and hard, showing his anger. "You know damn well what movement I'm talking about, Jared."

I almost laughed at his reply. "Oh, that movement, sorry. Why is it that imperative?"

Other than the fact her father was a vampire and her mother works for his clan? Gee, let me think.

"It is."

"Okay," Jared said slowly, obviously not convinced.

"Let me tell you this, Jared," Cormac replied warningly, "I'm not a threatening man."

"You never were," he agreed.

"I never will be. But know this; I'm holding you responsible."

I suppressed a shiver at the threat behind his simple words and was glad that he wasn't talking to me.

"I understand," Jared replied slowly.

Mac relaxed a little; I hadn't realized how tense he'd gotten. "Thank you. And to that end, I have a favor to ask of you. Corrine needs to be... removed from Salem for a time."

"Removed?"

"Taken somewhere safe," he explained.

"Are we talking safe from your kind, or mine?"

"All of the above," Mac replied. "More specifically, my kind."

"Any preference on where?"

"Not Bar Harbor."

I shook my head; no one had known where I'd disappeared to, Jared would be clueless.

"Bar Harbor?"

"Forget it," he said. "Not Baltimore, either."

"I wouldn't take her to Baltimore," Jared told him firmly.

"I discussed it with Summer previous to her arrival," Mac added. "Perhaps she's come up with a place, her or one of her sisters."

"I'll talk to her and see, but Corrine would have to agree," he said carefully, "unless you want me to take her bodily."

"No, it would do more harm than good."

I was glad to see he at least knew her that well already. Corrine was more likely to dig her heels in if you pushed her too hard. Just like her father.

"As to the other," Jared stated cautiously, "it's easy to want to keep someone out of the movement, but you should know from your own experience that if somebody wants in bad enough, they'll find a way."

I doubted Mac would remember that, but I did. I'd made the mistake of trying to keep Mac out of the movement. It hadn't worked for long once he'd known what we were doing.

"I do understand that," Mac told him. "Do all that you can."

"I will try." He cleared his throat. "Do you want me to let you or Summer know where we go?"

"Yes, I would appreciate knowing."

Jared paused expectantly for a moment, then said, "So you want me to let Summer know and have her call you?"

"Ah, yes," Mac replied. "She has my number."

"I'll let her know then."

"But call me when you've decided," Mac added, "and I will call Corrine. I don't believe she should present too much resistance. We can talk her into almost anything."

We could? He didn't know her as well as I thought if he believed that one.

"All right, we'll call you then."

"Enjoy your evening," Mac told him.

"Yeah," Jared replied ironically.

"What?" That one word sounded so innocent, as if he hadn't just threatened Jared's life or anything.

"I just hadn't planned on doing this tonight, I had other things in mind."

"Well, it need not be your most climactic concern," he said wryly.

"I'll take care of it," Jared assured him.

"Thank you."

"Did you need to talk to Summer again?"

"No, just tell her thank you. She knows how to find me. Good evening." He hung up the phone before Jared had a chance to reply. "Do you approve?" he asked me.

"As long as she gets out of town and is safe, I don't care," I told him honestly. I thought we could count on Jared to take care of her.

"You trust her with two other mages?"

Why did he seem surprised at that? "Do I have a reason not to? Better two mages than two vamps." Much better.

"We've had two vamps looking after her," he reminded me. "One willingly and one quite unwillingly on our part."

"I think she'd be safer with the mages," I said confidently.

"I don't know," he murmured, fighting a smile. "Brenda can be deadly in a firefight. Unless she's aiming at you." To my surprise he burst out laughing.

I frowned at his reaction. "Is she as bad with a gun as I am?" Then I remembered the battle at Jester's a few weeks ago. "Wait, I've seen her in a firefight before, she was pretty good."

"Maybe it was just Christina, then," he said, still laughing.

I shook my head, not understanding the joke. "So when are they supposed to call you back?"

"When they've decided on a plan," he told me, finally getting a hold of himself. "Then you will call Corrine and persuade her."

"I will persuade her?"

"She listens to you better than me."

I smiled wryly. "Yeah, right, she listens to me."

"She said she would do anything for you."

"Yes, but she's a teenager," I reminded him. Didn't he know what teenagers were like? Well, maybe he didn't.

His phone rang again, and again it was Summer.

"That was quick," he murmured.

"Did you want us to drag our feet?"

"No, no, I just thought you had..." he paused to clear his throat, "other things in mind for this evening."

"What kind of things," she asked suspiciously, "and where is your mind?"

"In my skull," he said, straight-faced, "where I've always kept it."

"Are you doing things that are immoral?" she demanded good-naturedly. "What is it that you're doing that would put your mind in such a place?"

"In my skull?"

"Okay, you're in Paris," she murmured, "the most romantic city in the world, with I'm still not sure who yet."

"A traveling companion."

"Uh-huh. Would that be a male or female traveling companion?"

"One of each," he told her.

"Oh, really?" She sounded surprised and I couldn't help but smile. "I never knew that about you, Cormac."

"One of them is the attaché and the other one isn't," he added.

"Okay, anyway—"

He moved the phone a little away from his mouth and said to me, "No, the eyelashes weren't mine either."

I covered my mouth to try and stop my laughter at that comment, but it didn't do much good, Summer heard me.

"Ah, I can figure where your mind is, so I'll keep this brief."

"No, the sun is up soon, at least here."

Like we couldn't do anything in the hour or so we had until dawn.

"There is a safe house of sorts in Boston that Jared will take her to," she said, suddenly serious.

"When was he planning on doing so?"

"It's getting late here," she told him, "so probably in the morning. I don't know how late she stays up or anything. Would you rather we try to get her out of there tonight?"

"No, why don't you give me Jared's number and I will have Eliza—" He closed his eyes and winced at his slip, then continued, "call him."

"Eliza?" Summer was obviously intrigued by my name. She almost sounded as if it meant something to her.

"When Corrine is ready to—"

"Do I know Eliza?" she interrupted.

"No," he said quickly, too quickly.

"Eliza," she murmured slowly. "You know, that's an unusual name. What does Eliza do?"

"You're one to talk, Summer," he drawled in return.

"Well, I just meant that there's not very many girls in town with the name of Eliza. I seem to have heard of one recently." I closed my eyes, knowing what was coming next. "It seems like, um, over in, oh, what's that church...?"

Just what I needed, some witch who knew I was a hunter also knowing that I was tied to Mac in some way. I could almost hear the rumors going around Salem now. How was I supposed to hunt there after this?

"Don't worry about it," Mac said firmly, interrupting her train of thought. "Jared's number please?"

"Okay," she said slowly. "When you get back, you'll have to explain to me why you're with *her*." She started to give him the number, but he wasn't listening.

"I'm still working on the 'why you're with *her*.'"

"Why you're with a hunter who kills all vampires?" she asked simply.

"I did not say she was a hunter who kills all vampires," he told her. "Besides, that is not her. If it were, she would have killed me, wouldn't she? By your own logic, of course."

"Okay," she said slowly. I think she knew she wasn't getting any information from Mac about me because she gave him the number without any more questions.

"Thank you," he told her. "We'll be in touch."

"I just hope you're not in touch with stakes," she murmured.

"So do I. Have a pleasant evening." He hung up the phone without waiting for her reply and placed it in my lap.

I wasn't in the mood to play games about whether or not I'd been listening to his conversation, so I picked it up and dialed Corrine's number. "Okay, Jared, Boston," I murmured as I listened to it ring.

"Hello?"

I winced when I heard her voice, she sounded tired. "Corrine, did I wake you?"

"Eliza?"

"I woke you, didn't I." It wasn't a question, I knew she usually went to bed fairly early and it was midnight in Salem.

She yawned. "It's okay. What's going on?"

"Oh, not a whole lot," I said, stalling. "We went clubbing. Minus the club."

"You went clubbing minus the club."

"Well, no," I said. "We went clubbing but didn't take a club with us. Does that make sense?"

"Too much," Mac murmured.

"It makes the kind of sense that doesn't," she told me. "So did you have fun?"

"Yes, actually," I told her honestly. "Quite a bit."

"That's good."

I smiled at Mac. "You know, I think the best part was the gold lame."

"Gold lame?"

"Vest," I added, "that Mac wore. It matched his pants."

"Oh, my God," she whispered, awed.

"What, you didn't like the thigh high patent leather boots?" Mac asked me with a smile.

"What was that?" Corrine asked.

"Boots," I told her.

Mac raised his voice so that our daughter could hear him quite clearly. "Thigh high, patent leather, shiny boots."

I shook my head and grinned. "Let's not forget the orange stockings, okay?"

"Orange stockings," he repeated agreeably.

"Oh, my God," she said, shocked. She'd rarely seen me in anything but my usual break-and-enterish attire. "I hope you at least took pictures so I can see these later."

"We're bringing the outfits home," Mac said loudly.

"Do you want to talk to her?" I asked, irritated that he'd told her that. Where the hell would I wear that outfit in Salem?

"No, go ahead," he told me.

Corrine yawned in my ear. "Sounds like you guys are getting along good."

"Yeah, so far," I admitted.

Mac distracted me a little by whistling that Irish tune his mother had taught him. He distracted me to the point that I almost didn't hear Corrine's next statement.

"Good. Are you scrumping again?"

At that, Mac's whistle turned into a sputter.

"Excuse me?" I demanded.

"I'm sorry," she said quickly. "I don't know where that came from. I didn't mean to ask that, forget it. But if you want to answer it, go right ahead."

"Corrine Mackenzie Wright," Mac said disapprovingly.

I held the phone out to him. "Say that louder," I told him.

He put the phone to his ear. "Corrine Mackenzie Wright," he repeated in that same tone.

"That's my name," she said cheerfully. "Don't wear it out."

He sighed and handed the phone back to me, whispering, "She's your child."

"What?" Corrine said as I put the phone to my ear.

"He's just mumbling," I told her, slapping his leg.

"At least you didn't use the paddle," he murmured.

I laughed. "You know, it's in the bedroom, I could get it." I laughed again at the image that thought brought to mind.

"I think I'm in the twilight zone," Corrine said slowly. "Who are you and what have you done with my Eliza?"

It took me a minute to control my laughter. "I'm sorry," I said, clearing my throat. "That is not why I called."

She yawned again. "I'm glad that you didn't intend to call me and totally freak me out, okay? That's a good thing."

I chuckled one last time, then brought my humor under control. "I need to ask something of you," I told her seriously. "I need a favor."

"Okay, you take it out of the package—"

That got me laughing again. "No, ah, not," I said firmly. "Let's not go there, please. I need a favor of you; I need you to do something."

"Okay."

"Will you?"

"That depends," she said slowly. "I know you don't have any plants for me to water."

"No pets for you to walk," Mac added.

"No mail probably to pick up, what did you need?"

I crossed my fingers. "I need you go somewhere for me."

"Okay," she said distrustfully.

"But you'll like this," I added quickly. "It's with Jared."

"All right," she began.

I quickly interrupted. "Good, I'm glad, I'll have him call you in the morning."

"You know Jared?"

"He's a friend of a friend," I told her. "Of a friend."

"Okay, I don't think you could stretch that out anymore. What's this about?"

"There's this place in Boston that I'd like you to go to with Jared for a couple of days until we get back in town."

"Why? What's going on?"

"It doesn't matter," I told her, trying to make light of the whole thing. "I just need you to do this for me."

"What's there?" she demanded. "Why do you want me to go there?"

"I think Jared could explain what's there a lot better than me considering I've never been there." That would also get me out of the hot seat.

"So why do you want me to go there? I have class and stuff," she reminded me.

"It's in Boston, you can go to class," I replied. I tried to remember her class schedule, but I'd been so busy since the fall term started that I wasn't sure what it was. "You have class in the day, right? Day class?"

"Well, I've got that one evening class, it's tomorrow night."

Damn. "Jared can go with you," I suggested. I should have known she wouldn't like it.

"What?" she demanded. "I am not a baby, I do not need someone to hold my hand and take me to class."

She might if Kate knew her schedule. "He could carry your books."

"You're starting to sound like Shelly," she said with a sigh.

"Who?" I didn't remember hearing that name before.

"My friend Shelly," she told me. "'You need to have a boyfriend, blah, blah, blah.' Jesus, I just talk to somebody and now you're trying to shack me up or something."

"No, I'm not trying to shack you up," I said firmly. "I'm just trying to... help you study." Like I really expected her to buy that.

She didn't. "How is having some guy going to class with me supposed to help me with my studies?"

How was I supposed to know? "You know, things come up," I said quickly. "It's like that whole, you know the thing where things happen in life and you learn from them when they happen unexpectedly. Maybe he can teach you about, I don't know."

I was rambling and I knew it. I shot a look at the girl's father. "You want to help me here Mac?"

"Because you're totally like bombing," she informed me coolly.

"You said you'd do it anyway," I reminded her, "so I'll have him call."

"I didn't say I would do anything," she stated bluntly. "I want an explanation."

Mac held his hand out for the phone and I gave it to him. "It is not necessarily what is there that we need you to go for, Corrine," he told her. "It's what isn't there."

Yeah, Mac, that made sense. Not.

"And what isn't there?" she asked caustically.

"What we need you to get away from."

"I do not understand what you are talking about," she said stubbornly.

"At the moment that is for the better," he replied.

She sighed. "Okay, look. I'll talk to Jared tomorrow," she conceded reluctantly. "I'm not going to agree with anything until I talk with him because I have things I have to do. There had better be a really good reason, and he'd better explain everything."

"He won't be able to," Mac warned her.

I held my hand out for the phone and he gave it back. I took a deep breath and glanced at Mac before I said anything; I hadn't filled him in on what I'd told Corrine before I left Salem. "Remember the conversation we had at my apartment about black hats and St. Stephen's?"

"Yes."

"It has to do with that," I told her softly. "That's pretty much all I can tell you right now, I can explain it better when we get home."

"Okay, fine," she said crossly, "but I have to go to class."

"You can go to class," I agreed readily. "Just take Jared with you to your night class."

"Yeah, make sure you bring me back a pacifier," she replied, her voice dripping with resentment.

I sighed. "I know you don't like this, but just trust me. Have I ever steered you wrong? Ever?"

"No, I guess not," she said reluctantly. "But that doesn't mean that I can't question."

"I'll explain everything when I get back," I told her, knowing that my explanation wouldn't quite be the full truth.

"And when's that going to be? How long do I have to be incognito for whatever reason?"

"At least a few more days, maybe a week." When she didn't say anything, I decided to try a different angle. "We're in Paris, it's the most romantic city in the world," I reminded her. "You wanted us to have time together, what do you want? Do you want us to come home or do you want us to spend time together?"

"Whatever," she said petulantly, adding under her breath, "Give up my freedom for them scrumping."

I was shocked at her language. "Excuse me?"

"All right, I'll talk to you later," she said louder.

I decided to ignore her earlier comment, for the moment, anyway. For real now, I didn't care what she said as long as she agreed to be elsewhere until we got back. "Okay, Jared will call you in the morning."

"Fine."

"It's for the best, trust me," I repeated. "Now, just go back to bed and don't worry about it."

She yawned again. "Oh, yeah," she said wryly. "I need to learn how to take care of myself."

"Well, Jared will help you on that."

"Bye."

"Bye." I hung up the phone and looked up at Mac.

He shook his head. "Not the least bit impatient, is she?"

"No," I told him. "She's just like her father."

"Hey," he said warningly.

"Which reminds me," I said suddenly, remembering something I'd thought of earlier.

"Okay, stupid question. What generation are you?"

He looked at me suspiciously. "Why?"

"Just—" I wanted to know if birth control would be an issue, but I didn't want to seem like I was assuming we'd have sex at some point. "You don't want to tell me?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Like, really high," I asked, "or kinda middle?" I didn't think he was low generation; he would have thrown his weight around with other Kindred if he were.

"I'm lower generation than Kate," he told me.

I hid a sigh of relief. "Okay. That's all I need to know." Kate was fifteenth generation, or had been when I was a child. A vampire had to be that high in order to have children.

"You haven't seen me up and walking about in the day, have you?"

I hadn't thought about that. "No. I was just curious, don't get offended. Just asking."

He glanced at the clock. "I want to freshen up before I... sleep," he said reluctantly.

I followed his gaze; it was a little over half an hour until dawn. "It's getting late," I agreed, "or early, or something."

He started to get up, but then stopped. He put one hand on the side of my neck and the other under my chin, then tilted my face up and pulled me close for a kiss. I put a hand to the back of his neck and kissed him. It wasn't the earth-shattering kiss we'd shared at The Pinnacle. This kiss was tender and sweet, a reminder to me of everything we had shared in Baltimore. This kiss was better.

He pulled away just enough to speak. "I love you," he whispered, his nose still touching mine.

Tears pricked at my eyes, but I refused to spoil the moment by crying. Did he really love me or did he love the girl he remembered from his past? Did it matter? At least I had this time with him, no matter what happened in the future. I smiled and said the words I'd never said to anyone but Corrine since the night he'd died. "I love you, Mac."

He pressed his forehead to mine for a moment, then stood slowly. "Enjoy breakfast."

I watched as he picked up his leather jacket, his bag and his guns then walked into his bedroom, closing the door softly behind him.

I pulled my knees up to my chest and sat looking at the closed door of his room. I rested my chin on my knees and thought about how much different things were now than what I'd expected them to be when we'd left Boston. I knew that we couldn't go on this way, when we got back to Salem the world would come crashing down on us and our little... whatever it was would be over.

Would this time together be enough for me when all was said and done? It didn't really matter, it was all we had. I smiled sadly and closed my eyes. For years I'd lived off the happiness I'd had with Mac in Baltimore. At least now I'd have more good memories to draw from when the darkness closed in on me at night.

CHANGES

AND SO IT GOES THIS TOO SHALL PASS AWAY. IT CUTS SO STRANGE
THE ONLY THING THAT STAYS THE SAME IS CHANGE
CHANGE - MELISSA ETHERIDGE

When I saw the light creeping around the edges of the curtains, I got up and called Jax to invite him to breakfast. We discussed the menu for a few minutes and he said he'd call down to room service before joining me. We sat at the small table while we waited for the food to arrive.

"How is Cormac doing?" Jax asked.

"Much better," I replied, glancing at the closed bedroom door. "It was nice of you to...."

He shrugged. "That's what I'm here for."

I studied his face from beneath my lashes. "It doesn't bother you?"

"To give blood?" He seemed startled that I'd asked. "You act like you don't know what it's like."

Unconsciously I rubbed at the scars on my neck. When I saw him watching the movement, I dropped my hand to my lap. "I know what it's like," I said softly.

He glanced from my neck to the door of Mac's room. "Cormac doesn't seem the type to hurt someone while feeding."

"No," I said quickly. "He's never— I mean— Damn." I sighed and looked Jax in the eye. "You have to know I'm not his ghoul."

"I've been instructed not to inquire into your background, Miss Dushku," he said carefully. "Or into the identity of your domitor."

The contract; I nodded gratefully. "But I know you're curious," I told him. "Mac is not my domitor, and he's never 'kissed' me. I've never... volunteered to be dinner. Every time I've been bit it has not been fun." I pulled my hair off my neck and showed Jax the scars.

He looked at them for a long moment, then unbuttoned his shirtsleeve and pulled it up to reveal the bend of his elbow. I whistled softly when I saw the scar; whatever had bit him had taken a good chunk from his arm.

"Back in the thirties there was a rebellion among the Brujah," he explained, his voice calm. "In the middle of the deciding battle, one of them knocked me out. When I came to, she was gnawing on my arm. I think she thought I was dead, I don't know. It was horrible. Afterward I healed as best I could so I didn't bleed to death there in the street, which is why I have the scar. If I'd left it, Zora might have been able to lick it shut, but I probably would have died before she found me."

I'd seen wounds like that before, knelt over bodies that hadn't been able to heal before the blood loss killed them. I looked back into Jax eyes, but whatever pain he'd once felt from the wound was gone.

"Zora gave me time to heal," he continued with a smile, "then she came to me and gave me a choice. I could live the rest of my life terrified of the 'kiss,' or I could get back on the horse. It was an easy choice."

"What's it like?" I asked softly.

"It's good," he told me. "It's hard to explain, exactly. Warm, calm, almost a stillness. You can feel your heart beat. A lot of it depends on what you feel for the person who's going the biting. It can be very passionate."

I tried not to blush, remembering the dream I'd had of Mac. The knock at the door was a welcome interruption. I cleared the table as Jax got the tray and wheeled it in.

While we ate we talked about cities we'd been to and things we'd seen. I avoided the subject of Baltimore, and Jax made it a point not to ask any questions about my past. When the food was gone, we looked at each other sleepily.

I smiled. "Ever get used to these hours?"

"I was always a morning person, before," he admitted. "I think it's probably jet lag that has us now. Are you planning on going out today?"

I shook my head. "If anything I might hit up the gift shop."

"Watch your back," he warned me as he stood to leave. "I'd hate to explain to Cormac that something happened to you while I was sleeping."

"I'm used to taking care of myself," I told him. "Years of practice." I locked the door of the suite behind him and turned to look around the room.

Abruptly I remembered that I was supposed to call Jared back. I was dreading the call mostly because I didn't know what Jared would think about me being with Mac now that he was a vampire. I picked up the daisy Mac had given me earlier and sat looking at it while I waited for Jared to pick up the phone.

He answered on the second ring. "Hello?"

"Jared," I said softly, not wanting to wake Mac. "It's Eliza."

"Eliza." He sounded a bit hesitant. "Mac said you'd call. So you're with him in Paris?"

"I am," I answered plainly, almost daring him to say something about it.

"Have you talked to Corrine?"

"I have. She'll be expecting your call in the morning," I told him. "She doesn't want to miss her classes in Boston, but I told her you might have to go with her to her night class."

"What, I'm a babysitter now?" he asked almost indignantly.

"Do you have a problem with helping her?" I asked angrily. "Don't forget you owe me, Jared. I saved your life the night Paul was killed." I'd staked the vamp that had been about to kill Jared, then put pressure on his bleeding leg until Glenn could heal the wound.

"What exactly are we protecting her from?" he demanded.

There was only one thing I could say. "Kate Hepburn."

For a moment there was silence on the line. "I'd heard she was in town," he said softly. "The bitch still giving you problems?"

"Every night of my life," I replied honestly. "Not for long, though. I'll take care of it when I get back."

"You should have taken care of her in Baltimore," he told me, his voice hard.

"I know," I whispered. If I had it was more than likely that things would have turned out so much differently.

"What's Mac like?" he asked suddenly.

"He's Mac, Jared," I answered simply. What else could I say? "Not a lot has changed."

"Other than the body temp and the teeth?"

The venom in his voice didn't deserve an answer. "Are you going to take care of Corrine?"

"She's yours, isn't she." It wasn't a question.

"Does it matter?"

He sighed. "Not really. She's a great girl, Eliza, lots of potential there."

"Is she as strong as Mac was?"

"She could be," he said. "Depends on how the seekings go."

I knew from things Glenn and Mac had told me in Baltimore that mages used what they called seekings to further their knowledge. "I'm glad you're there to help her. From what I can remember, you're the best man I can think of for the job."

"Except Mac," Jared replied, "or Glenn."

"Mac doesn't remember a whole lot," I told him, "and I don't think Glenn would be a good choice under the circumstances."

"Don't you trust him, Eliza?"

Not particularly, but I didn't tell Jared that. "I don't want her to make the same mistakes we did, Jared. I want her to live to a ripe old age surrounded by fat grandchildren. If she hunts, sooner or later she'll die."

"It's been later for you, hasn't it?" His voice was dripping with suspicion.

"I'm good at what I do," I told him. "You should remember that."

"What exactly do you do?"

He probably thought he knew, and I had no problem feeding his fantasy. "Haven't you heard? I joined the Society."

"I had heard that, yes," he drawled. "I have also heard that you and Kate have been close the last few months."

"You heard wrong," I said in a hard voice, but my hands were shaking. "You're one of Glenn's contacts in Salem, aren't you? You've been telling tales."

"I've been passing along information," he confirmed. "I only know what I've been told, Eliza."

"And I'm telling you straight, Jared," I replied harshly. "I'm going to kill that bitch the minute I see her. If I'd known she'd been part of that night I would have killed her years ago. Now you can believe me or not, that's your choice."

"I believe you." He almost sounded relieved.

"You also have to know that I'll kill anyone who gets in the way of that," I told him fiercely, "or even thinks about hurting Corrine."

"Always protective of what's yours," he said with a sigh. "Is Mac yours, Eliza?"

He was asking if I'd kill to protect the vamp that had once been my lover. "Yes, Jared," I stated clearly, "he always has been. Make sure Glenn knows that."

"How can you be sure you're not under some kind of mind trick?" he asked.

"I've been around vamps for longer than you've been alive," I reminded him. "I swear to you I'm not."

He was silent for a moment, as if weighing my words. "Then I hope its not Paris that's turning your brains to mush."

"I'd feel the same no matter where we were," I told him. "The last time I felt like this I was in Baltimore."

"You used to be good at dealing with blood-suckers, Eliza," he said softly. "What happened?"

"I met one that didn't fit the mold," I replied. There was no use lying to him. "Mac isn't like any other vamp I've met."

"I hope for your sake you're right," he murmured. "And for Corrine's."

"Just keep her safe for me," I said. "I'll take care of Mac."

"I'll do my best," he said wryly. "If I don't, I'll have Mac Brennan to answer to, won't I?"

"He'll have to wait in line," I warned him. "If anything happens to Corrine, remember that you'll have to answer to me first." I took a page from Mac's book and hung up before Jared could reply.

With one last glance at the closed door of Mac's room, I went into my bedroom. I took some time to stretch my muscles; I was used to working out every day and I didn't want to lose the flexibility I'd gained over the years. When I was done I changed into pajamas and climbed into bed, setting my mental clock to wake up around four. I wanted to visit the gift shop before Mac got up for the night.

When I got up, I went down to the gift shop and found a gift for Corrine, along with some clothes for me. I knew I should take the money back for my daughter, but a part of me wanted to look good for Mac. It wasn't like she was going to miss the money anyway, I made quite enough of it for her every year doing what I did for her father's clan.

When Mac walked out of his bedroom at sundown I was sitting on the couch reading a magazine wearing tight black pants tucked into the tall boots I'd worn the night before and a tank top. I glanced over my shoulder and saw him standing there in his dress pants and an undershirt and I couldn't help but smile.

"Good morning," he said pleasantly.

I glanced at my watch. "Good evening," I corrected. At his look, I smiled again. "It's like, six. Morning was twelve hours ago," I reminded him.

"Depends on your perception of time," he drawled.

"Sleep well?"

"Like the dead," he replied.

I laughed softly. "I walked right into that one, didn't I?"

"Six foot under," he agreed as he walked around the couch and sat next to me. "What are you reading?"

Turning the magazine so he could see the cover, I said, "Look, this looks like Brenda on the cover." When he sighed, I smiled. "Did you want to look at it? I got a couple more."

"That's okay," he told me. "I have a few things to prepare for and then we'll be off."

I looked up. "Off to...?" He was entirely too close to me, I had a hard time concentrating.

"I need to go back to the chantry and see what I can do about breaking that ward," he reminded me.

"It doesn't bother me any," I said with a smile. "I could turn the pages for you."

"But you don't speak Latin, do you?"

"No," I agreed, "but you could read it over my shoulder." At his serious look, I added, "Don't like that idea, do you?"

In answer he took the magazine from my hands and turned his back to me, then started reading an article in the most annoying monotone voice he could manage. I smiled and put my hand on his shoulder, peeking over to read with him.

"You know," I said after a minute, "I wouldn't actually be able to read out loud because I can't read Latin."

He didn't replied, just kept reading without pause or emotion.

I smiled. "Okay, you've made your point," I told him.

"It's not good to speak Latin in front of the books," he said as he turned to face me and put the magazine on the low table.

"So we're headed to the chantry?" I wanted to get that part over as quickly as possible so we could be alone again. Or as alone as we could be with Jax along.

"Yes, I need to speak with Jax briefly and have him prepare the plane."

"Are we coming back here?" I didn't know if I should finish packing now or later.

"Yes," he said. "Would you care to go to the chantry with me, or would you rather stay here?"

"Oh yeah," I said dryly. "I'd rather stay here doing nothing. I've been sitting here for hours already." I didn't need twelve hours of sleep every day.

"You're in Paris," he began.

"The most romantic city in the world," I added, "and you want me to sit here by myself?"

"Go sightseeing," he suggested.

I looked at him for a long moment. "If you're trying to get rid of me I'll go sightseeing."

"No," he said quickly. "I do not wish you to be bored hanging out with me."

I hadn't found it boring yet. "Are you trying to get rid of me or not?" I asked warily.

"No."

"Cause it sounds like you are," I added.

"I just don't want you resenting the fact that you've been to Paris, the most romantic city in the world, and saw absolutely squat aside from the Pinnacle."

What he didn't realize was that just being in Paris with him was more than enough for me. What did I need to see historical landmarks for? So that I could say I'd been there, done that? I've done a lot more things in my life that were more important than most people did. I could care less if I had the tee shirt to prove it.

I hid a smile. "I saw the Eiffel tower. I was this close to it."

"In the passing lane," he murmured.

"It being the most romantic city in the world," I told him, "you're not supposed to see it alone, unless you're looking for romance."

He looked at me questioningly. "Are you?"

If I were, I'd be out there now, not arguing with him. "Not the last time I checked. Would you like me to?"

"No, just asking," he assured me. "Don't get so defensive, dear."

I shook my head. "It sounds like you want to get rid of me."

"No." He sighed. "We will be flying to Nashville some time this evening, I thought maybe there was something you wanted to see before we left."

Actually... but he'd said he was in a hurry. "Not really," I said aloud. "I wouldn't know where to begin sight seeing anyway."

"I hear the Arc de Triumph is rather breathtaking," he suggested. "The Louvre."

Okay, he was trying to get rid of me. "Fine." I stood up and walked toward the bedroom.

"No," he said. "Maybe we'll come back later."

Like that's going to happen. Did he really think Elvira would let me out again? This was my one and only chance to see Paris, and I sure as hell didn't want to see it alone.

Mac went across the hall while I started throwing the rest of my stuff into the suitcase. A few minutes later he came back and stood in the doorway of my room.

"Jax will not be accompanying us to the chantry," he told me.

I glanced up at him. "You're going to make him sit here?" I asked. "I thought you were going to make me sit here."

"I'm not making anybody do anything," he said irritably as he crossed to his bedroom. "I haven't dominated anybody in at least fifteen hours."

He made it sound like that was a long damn time. I kept packing until I caught a glimpse of him undressing in his room. I straightened to look, but it seemed like he changed all the important things out of sight from the door. When he came out into the sitting room still half dressed, I pointedly looked away.

He was sitting on the couch doing his tie when I joined him. When he stood I put my jacket on and turned toward the door. He put his leather on and reached into his inside pocket for his phone. I bit the inside of my lip to stop from smiling and handed his phone to him.

It took him a minute to check his voice mail, and the only message was from the Christina chick. I'd never met her and hadn't heard very much about her, but I wondered what she was like and why Mac was keeping in such close contact with her.

"Shall we?" he asked when he was done.

"Sure," I replied. "Unless you're going to try and get rid of me again."

"I would never do a thing like that," he said as he opened the door for me.

Ri-ight. I went through the door and waited in the hall while Mac got the keys from Jax. We went down to the car and Mac drove toward the chantry.

He called ahead and it was a good thing he did; both Ignatius and Isabelle were gone for the evening and there was no one available to do ritual that would take the ward from the book. He seemed disappointed, but shrugged and turned to me.

"So where do you want to go?"

I smiled. "Oh, we get to go sightseeing now?"

"Yes, Ignatius and Isabelle are both out of the chantry for what seems like the evening," he told me.

"Bummer." I tried to sound sincere, but I wasn't really upset that we'd have this time together alone. "Didn't you say there was an arc de something or another?"

"Arc de Triumph?"

"Is that a drive through thing?" I asked, hoping for a laugh from him. He smiled instead, but I laughed anyway. "Like the McDonalds arc?"

"That's an arch," he said patiently.

I shook my head. "Forget it," I told him, trying not to laugh. "Maybe it's the food thing you're just not getting."

We visited the Arc, and the Eiffel Tower, doing more this time than gazing at it from across the street. The view from the top was breathtaking, at least for me. Mac didn't actually have any breath to lose. We also stopped for a little while at Notre Dame, but we didn't stay long. I didn't understand how humans could build such a beautiful building to a God that didn't exist, and Mac didn't seem inclined to stay.

During our sightseeing, Mac asked questions about Corrine and I did my best to answer him. There had been so many things I hadn't been there for because of the contract. I avoided all of them, and told him everything that I could about our daughter.

"So have you had any more dreams of fangs and fireplaces?" he asked softly as we walked through the Louvre.

I tried not to look at him. "No, have you?"

"Fangs, but no fireplace."

I glanced at him in surprise. "Fangs?"

"Not mine," he assured me. "The vampire that attacked Bobby in the alleyway."

"Ah, the one that you helped him take care of."

"Yes," he agreed. "And Glenn and Jane and a few of the others."

That was quite a lot to remember. "Wow."

"My first night in Baltimore," he said, then looked questioningly at me. "Or some of it."

"What?" I didn't understand what he wanted me to say. "If you're expecting me to fill in some blanks, you need to tell me what you dreamed."

"The brownstone, the Memphis, the vampire."

"The beheading?"

"Yes."

"The first no I ever told you." I smiled.

"Yes." He looked up at a painting for a moment, then glanced at me. "What was in that box?"

I didn't get it. "What box?"

"I brought Glenn a box from Ireland," he told me.

That was the first I'd heard of it. "What was in it?"

"I don't know." He took my arm and led me toward the next painting.

"Who was it from?" I wanted to ask why I'd never heard of the box before, but chances were he wouldn't remember.

"My father."

"Really? I didn't know your father knew Glenn." Not that I had asked, I guess, but then there were a lot of things the Dreamspeakers hadn't shared with me about their society. I'd lived on the fringes of their group, a part of the family yet separate from it because I didn't have their abilities.

"My father knew Glenn's mother," he told me.

"Oh?" That didn't make sense. "How did your father know Glenn's mother if your father lived in Ireland and Glenn's mother lived in Baltimore?"

"He never really said."

"Or if he did you don't remember," I added.

"Not yet anyway," he agreed.

"Well, maybe you'll remember it," I said softly. "Because I don't remember hearing anything about a box." There were so many things about his life he hadn't told me about, and not wanting him to dig into my past, I hadn't asked.

"What else did you dream about?" I asked a few minutes later.

"The first no," he told me with a smile. "Bobby."

I grinned. "You won him over that night."

"So I remember."

"It's not every day a teenager comes across someone who's willing to help them behead something," I drawled.

"The world would be a lot scarier place if it were," he murmured.

"Or a less scary place if all the beheadings were vampires," I suggested dryly. "I'm not real clear on that."

He looked down at me in reproach. "I resemble that remark."

I tried not to smile. "Yeah, you do, don't you?"

"Quite."

Never in a million years would I have thought I'd say something like this, but, "I guess it would depend on the vampire being beheaded."

"Perhaps we'll start with Kate," he suggested.

"Hey, I like that plan."

"We just need to find the teenager to do it," he added.

"I look like a teenager," I reminded him. "Is that good enough?"

He just grinned and we continued on.

We returned to the hotel several hours later. I would have to say that seeing the most romantic city in the world with someone you love is much better than seeing it alone. Not that I'd been alone my first time through, but you know what I mean.

Mac called Jax and let him know we were almost ready to go while I picked up what little I'd left in the sitting room and took them into the bedroom.

"Have you found anything touristy to take back to Corrine?" he called in to me.

"Yeah, I have," I called back. "It's cute, you have to see it."

I pulled the box from my suitcase and opened it carefully. I eased the snow globe from the box and held it so that he could see it as he came in the room. I touched a switch on the back and the music box played a pretty tune that I didn't know the name of.

"Very nice," he told me.

I repacked it and laid the box gently back in the suitcase as Mac turned to leave. He'd only taken a few steps when he turned and looked at me oddly.

"Do a little shopping today?" He'd apparently seen the empty bags from the gift shop I'd put in the trash bin.

Was that so surprising? I had Brenda's money after all, why not spend it? "Yeah, can't you tell by the pants I have on?" Then I remembered. "Oh, you didn't see what Corrine got me. I just bought a few things in the lobby. I didn't have anything to wear with the boots."

"Besides the skirt," he added with a smile.

I shook my head. "Like I'm going to wear that in public often."

"Often?"

"Ever," I said firmly.

"We'll see," he drawled.

We picked up our things and stopped to get Jax on our way down to the lobby. I stood by our luggage while Jax settled our bill and Mac stepped into one of the shops in the lobby. Soon we were on our way to the airport.

A MATTER OF TRUST

AND THE FEAR HAS LEFT ME NOW

I'M NOT FRIGHTENED ANYMORE

FUMBLING TOWARD ECSTASY - SARAH McLAUCHLAN

After Jax cleared the use of the phone, Mac called Brenda and left a brief message on her voice mail. When he'd hung up, he looked over at me from the other arm of the couch. "Did you get all that?"

"Like there were two sides to the conversation," I mumbled.

"There was a voice mail message," he said.

I shrugged. "It was Brenda, did I care?"

"Yes."

He was right, I had overlistened. "Did you want me to listen?"

"No," he replied knowingly, "but you usually do."

"I'm just following suit," I told him. "You know, you usually do, so I usually do."

He stood and walked toward me. When he reached into his coat it occurred to me that I wasn't the least bit concerned about what he'd pull out. He leaned over and tucked my hair behind my ear with his free hand, then pulled a daisy from his coat and placed it behind my ear. He looked down at me for a moment, then sat down next to me.

I smiled. "So when did you find time to get the daisy?"

"There's always time," he drawled. "Do you not like it?" He leaned forward as if take it back.

"I didn't say I didn't like it," I said as I moved out of his reach and adjusted it behind my ear. "So this is a twelve-hour flight?"

"Yes."

I looked around the cabin and wondered what we were going to do for that long. I knew what I wanted to do and it wouldn't take twelve hours. "Is there a movie on this flight?" There was a big television and a cabinet that looked like it held a hundred or so videodisks.

"This may be our last chance to have any semblance of privacy," he said seriously. "I don't know what accommodations Brenda has prepared, if any."

"If it's anything like the last accommodations she prepared, we'll have a room alone together, again." I could hope, anyway. "Is there something that you wanted to do while we're here alone, together?"

"I was just preparing you," he replied.

"What, for being with a whole bunch of vamps in a chantry?" I asked irritably. "Been there." Hated it.

"For being with Brenda for a few days," he corrected me. "I know that you don't have the most amicable relationship."

Whatever that meant. "For some reason she doesn't like me."

"The feelings not mutual?"

"Oh, of course it is," I said honestly. "You know, it might have something to do with me being cryptic girl."

"Being what?"

Shows how much he hung around teenagers. "Cryptic girl? You know, cryptic comments?"

He shook his head. "And I'll be in the middle of you two."

"You're the one who invited her along," I reminded him.

"Not really," he told me. "She kind of invited herself."

"Did you forget how to say no?" I asked, a little aggravated at the reminder that we had so little time left alone.

Mac made me laugh by pretending that he couldn't say the word.

"Hey," I said smiling, "that could come in handy. What do I want from you?"

He turned to look at me quite seriously. "What do you want from me Elizabeth?"

I raised my eyebrows at him. "What can I get away with?"

"Certainly not staking me," he told me.

"Are you sure?"

"You can try," he drawled.

I laughed. "Didn't we have this discussion?"

"Yes." He pretended to think about what he'd let me get away with. "I don't think I'll let you throw me from the plane."

As if I would. "And get sucked out myself? I don't think so, not a good idea."

"I'm not going to let you fly the plane," he added.

That would be interesting if I knew how to fly. "Jax might."

"Do you want me to go ask him?"

"No, he and I spent enough time together when we had breakfast," I reminded him.

"Yes, how did that go?"

I blinked. Had Mac expected me to behead the ghoul? "Well, we had breakfast. What do you want me to say?"

"Did you eat in silence?" he asked patiently.

"No."

"Whatever did you talk about?"

"Fangs," I told him. When he looked at me expectantly, I added, "Not yours. We just exchanged bite stories."

He smiled. "I have a feeling his were a bit more pleasant."

"Most of them," I agreed. "Somehow I get the feeling that almost everybody's bite stories are more pleasant than mine."

"You just haven't been bitten correctly," he told me.

Was he volunteering? I looked away to hide that question in my eyes. I wasn't quite sure I was ready for the answer.

He leaned forward until he could see my face.

"What?" I asked defensively.

"Oh, nothing," he replied, sitting back. "You have yet to answer my question."

I frowned. "I did answer your question. We talked about fangs and bite stories."

"No, about what you want from me," he explained.

"You didn't answer my question," I reminded him. "What can I get away with?"

"Whatever are you planning on?"

I told him the truth. "Depends on what I can get away with."

"What were you planning on trying to get away with?" he asked, watching me expectantly.

"I don't know that I had anything planned," I said evasively. I turned my face away from him, but I knew that if he wanted to know what I was thinking he didn't have to look in my eyes, he could read my aura.

He leaned forward to see my face, and I looked at him from the corner of my eye. "Tell me what you want, Eliza," he urged.

"Haven't we been through this?" I asked impatiently. "I'm not—"

"No, we haven't," he said firmly.

"—good at telling what I want," I finished quietly. I shook my head; this was no way to get what I wanted and I knew it. I cleared my throat a little and tried not to smile. "I hope we want the same thing, Mac," I said as I turned to look at him.

"That's not what I asked," he said evenly.

I turned on the couch to face him more, hoping that he wanted me the way I wanted him, even a little. I leaned forward slowly, half expecting him to turn away. His lips were soft against mine and it felt like heaven when he kissed me back. He put his hand on the side of my neck and I snuggled into it even as we deepened the kiss.

Eventually my hands found their way to his chest and the buttons of his shirt. I tried to run my hands down his ribs, but his weapons were in the way. Still kissing him, I lifted out first one handgun, then the other and sat them blindly on the low table in front of us. When he added a stake to the pile, his own, I smiled against his lips.

We only paused in our kissing to disarm each other of one weapon or another and by the time we were done it was amazing the number of weapons that had found their way to the low table. I pushed at his shirt and it fell to the couch along with both of his jackets. A moment later, my jacket was also out of the way.

I felt his fingers on my thigh and heard the zipper of my boot slide downward. He leaned forward to push the zipper all the way down and I caught the stake before it fell to the floor. I took the knife from my other boot before he unzipped that one and slid my feet free.

He pulled away enough to whisper, "What does this have to do with fangs or a fireplace?"

"Who said it had anything to do with fangs or a fireplace?" What was I supposed to do, tell him I wanted to relive the dream I'd had the other night? I'd go for the sex part easily enough, but I still wasn't sure about the fangs.

"Just asking," he murmured as he kissed me again.

After a few minutes I couldn't help but notice he wasn't as into the kissing as he'd been so I pulled back and looked into his eyes. "Is there a problem?" I hoped there wasn't, I was enjoying this way too much.

"No." He didn't sound convincing.

"You asked what I wanted and I'm showing you," I said softly. "Is this not what you want?" Had I read him entirely wrong?

"I'm not sure if I'm able to give you what you want," he said hesitantly.

I couldn't stop the downward shift of my eyes. "There doesn't appear to be a problem," I told him meaningfully.

He smiled and caressed my cheek. "You know Jax could come back here and find us at any moment."

"He's flying the plane," I reminded him wryly, "but you have a point."

"Autopilot."

I nodded. "Isn't there a...?"

"Bedroom?"

"Yeah." I hated that my voice sounded breathless, but there it was. "That way. I'm ready."

We stood at the same time, but I grabbed a stake on my way up. When he looked down at it pointedly, I realized what I'd done. "This isn't for you," I told him honestly. "Sorry, habit."

"You have changed," he said as he took my free hand and led me into the bedroom. "I remember stakes before and after, but...." I laughed as he closed the door.

The next few hours were everything I remembered and more. My heated body warmed the temperature of his skin and kept us both warm while we rediscovered each other's bodies and moved together as one. For the first time in a long time I felt loved, even cherished.

Later when we lay together in the afterglow, he held me while my heart slowed to its normal rhythm and the breath slowed in my lungs. Of course, his heart wasn't pounding, or even beating for that matter, and he wasn't breathing at all.

When I could talk again, we whispered words of love to each other like we used to in Baltimore. If I tried really hard I could close my eyes and pretend we were there in the bed we used to share, but deep down I knew we could never have anything like that again.

Lying with my head on his shoulder and his arms around me, I felt more relaxed than I had in years, almost twenty of them to be exact. Silence filled the room and it was warm with love. I tried to commit every second to memory, knowing that we wouldn't be having moments like this when we got back to Salem.

I guess it's a measure of my trust in him that I actually fell asleep in his arms. If I had thought about it, I would have sworn there was not a chance in hell that I'd be able to sleep in the same bed with him, let alone without a stake under my pillow. But I did sleep, and quite well.

My dreams were filled with the life Mac and I might have had if Kate hadn't stepped in and ruined everything, dreams of Corrine and of Mac and I watching together as our daughter grew from a baby to the woman she is today.

Some time later a movement from Mac woke me. He lifted my arm and I felt his lips kiss the tender part of my wrist lingeringly, almost longingly. I shifted a little to look up at him and felt hunger pricking my stomach. I knew he hadn't fed tonight and wondered if he felt hungry too, although his hunger wouldn't be for food. I remembered the dream and felt my heart beat faster.

"Isn't there food in the fridge?" I whispered softly, looking at his mouth and wondering what it would be like to let him bite me.

He laid my hand back down on his chest almost reluctantly. "Yes, are you hungry?"

"Yeah," I admitted, watching his face. "Are you?"

"Not starving."

I figured that. Starving vamps tend to eat anything and any one they can get their fangs into. Hell, I'd been sleeping and before that he'd more than distracted me. If he'd wanted to bite me, he could have done it any time in the last four hours and I would have been caught completely by surprise.

"Does that mean if you bit me you wouldn't take it all?" I asked softly.

"I would not take it all anyway," he replied in the same tone.

I studied his face, wondering just how much I trusted him. Damn, I'd fallen asleep in his arms, didn't that mean I trusted him with my life?

"And you did bring that stake," he reminded me.

Oh yeah, the stake. Somehow I'd forgotten it was even there on the bed stand. "And it's all the way over there."

"Not that you couldn't get to it if you wanted to," he said with a slight smile.

It was on the other side of the bed, but I could probably have gotten it if it came down to that. "And the point is?"

"Exactly."

I turned my wrist a little and looked at the pulse point where he'd kissed it. The dream of his feeding was vivid in my mind and I could almost hear the way that he'd described being fed from. He'd told me that it wouldn't hurt, and I had to trust that he was right, even though I'd never felt anything but pain from a vampire's bite. I looked thoughtfully back into Mac's eyes.

"Maybe you should show me what I've been missing," I suggested softly.

He searched my face. "Are you sure about that?"

How could I be? It's not like I wanted to feel pain after the pleasure we'd just shared. But part of love is trust, isn't it? And blood is the ultimate sign of trust. "As sure as I can be."

He sat up slowly, holding my arm and taking me with him. We sat on the bed facing each other, and I watched as he kissed the pulse point of my wrist once more. My hand was trembling a little, but I honestly can't tell you if it was fear or anticipation that made it shake.

Mac dropped his head a little to the side before pressing a soft kiss against my wrist. Slowly, almost lovingly, I felt him sink his fangs into my flesh. I clutched at the bed with my free hand, surprised at the unexpected pleasure it gave me. I felt him drink just a little and knew he was waiting for my reaction before taking more.

I leaned closer to him and rested my head on his shoulder. I wanted him to continue almost more than I'd wanted to make love with him earlier. He began to drink again and the erotic sensations I felt made my heart pound.

Then I felt it wash over me, the peace I'd asked for in my dream. It was like the world disappeared and with every beat of my heart Mac and I were connected in a way we'd never been connected before. It was calming, like he'd told me it had been for him, but it was also arousing in a way I'd never known was possible to feel.

Too soon he pulled his teeth from my wrist and looked down at the wounds. I watched blood start to ooze from the holes he'd left behind, but before it could trickle down my arm he ran his tongue across my wrist and I felt the punctures close as if they'd never existed.

I took a deep shuddering breath and raised my head to look at him. He was watching me with heat in his eyes. I smiled and kissed him. I could taste my blood in my mouth and knowing that the warmth of his skin came from the blood that I'd given him made me want him all over again.

A moment later my stomach rumbled loud enough to remind me that although Mac had eaten, I hadn't. I pulled back with a hand to my stomach and smiled apologetically. "There's food in the fridge," I told him as I eased off the bed.

"Put some clothes on," he suggested as he stood up and reached for his clothes.

"I think so, yes," I agreed. I certainly didn't want to be running around the plane naked with Jax on board. I threw on the pants and shirt I'd stripped off earlier and went out into the kitchen.

CORRESPONDENCE

WHEN ALL THAT'S LEFT TO DO IS REFLECT ON WHAT'S BEEN DONE
THIS IS WHERE SADNESS BREATHES, THE SADNESS OF EVERYONE
THE DAMN AT OTTER CREEK - LIVE

I heard Mac moving around in the main cabin and from the corner of my eye saw him carrying the things we'd left out there back into the bedroom.

For a small kitchen there was a lot of food stashed. I made a ham sandwich and grabbed a few other things as well. A glance at my watch told me it had been almost eight hours since I'd eaten. Between that and the blood donation, I was starved.

I went back into the bedroom with my hands full and sat the food down on the bed before lying down on my stomach to eat it. Mac was sitting in the only chair in the room with a book on his lap.

"Whatcha reading?" I asked as I started to eat. When he didn't reply, I looked at him a little closer. Once again, he was deep in meditation. I shrugged and went back to eating, keeping an eye on him so I knew when he came out.

A few minutes later he blinked and opened the book. He ran his hand down one of the pages then opened the compartment in the back. He pulled out a letter I thought I recognized; it was the one he'd found last night that was folded a little differently than the others.

I swallowed the food in my mouth, but couldn't swallow my curiosity. "Whatcha reading?"

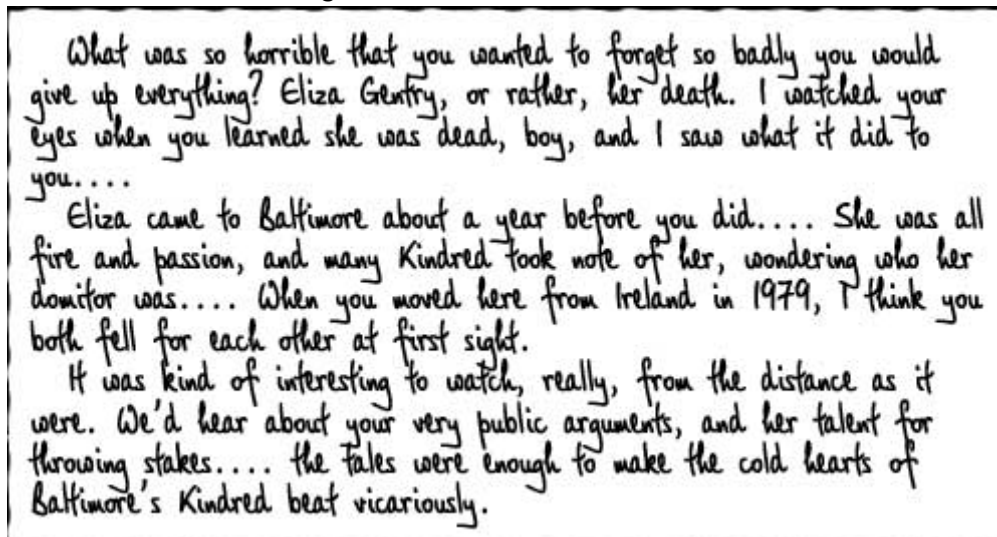
"Dougal's letter to me," he replied, distracted.

"Is that one of the ones you found in the chantry?" I asked him. "Anything interesting?"

He stood up and came over to the bed where he dropped the letter on the blanket in front of me. He bent to kiss my head then went back to his chair. I smiled at the gentle touch, and started to read while I ate. I hadn't read very far when the letter caught my full attention.

Dougal started by asking that Mac not curse his memory after reading the letter. No, I'd have to do that for him. I doubted anything I could say would convince Mac that Dougal was a black hat, or that anything Mac did would convince me that his sire wasn't.

Then the bastard started talking about me, about us.



What was so horrible that you wanted to forget so badly you would give up everything? Eliza Gentry, or rather, her death. I watched your eyes when you learned she was dead, boy, and I saw what it did to you....

Eliza came to Baltimore about a year before you did.... She was all fire and passion, and many Kindred took note of her, wondering who her domitor was.... When you moved here from Ireland in 1979, I think you both fell for each other at first sight.

It was kind of interesting to watch, really, from the distance as it were. We'd hear about your very public arguments, and her talent for throwing stakes.... the tales were enough to make the cold hearts of Baltimore's Kindred beat vicariously.

I sat my sandwich down and picked up the letter to read it better. Had we really been that obvious to everyone in Baltimore? Even the damned vamps?

Then Kate Hepburn came to town. Let me tell you, boy, you will never meet a meaner Tremere, 'cept maybe that Prince in Salem. She had some kind of hold over your girl, but Eliza fought it the whole way. I never did find out what it was she had, but when it wasn't enough to bring the girl around to her way of thinking, Kate talked to the prince.

I could feel my face tighten at reading that and I sat up. Kate hadn't liked not being able to talk me out of hunting, or moving in with Mac. Somehow she'd been convinced that Mac had talked me into joining Glenn, and I hadn't bothered to correct her on it. Maybe I should have. Maybe things would have turned out differently, who could tell.

My stomach clenched painfully as I read his story of what happened the night Mac died.

The way it happened was an accident, boy, I swear it. Valerie drained your girl a little too far.... When you saw she was dead, you begged me to kill you. I couldn't do that, but I could make you forget.... If I'd known the girl was still alive, I never would have done it, boy. I'd have let someone else bring you and her over and you'd have been together all this time.

Ri-right. I figured Dougal knew exactly how things were going to go down before the bloodsuckers even came to our apartment, he just didn't have the balls to admit it. Damn, I was glad he was dead. He'd probably gotten with Kate to make the plans in the first place.

Looking back on it, you might think I'd planned it all along, but that's not the truth, Cormac. The truth is that Kate planned for you to die that night and for Eliza to disappear, and that's exactly what happened. Everyone thought the girl was dead, boy, even I thought so for years. Then one night in the fall of '90 I saw something that changed my mind.

He went on to say that he'd seen me hunting in Maine and asked questions about me of the local Kindred. It was a good thing I hadn't seen Dougal the night he'd spotted me, I would have killed him on sight, and somehow I doubt Mac would have forgiven me for that one. It didn't surprise me that he was blaming the whole thing on Kate. And what, any Tremere who asked got to see the damned contract?

The girl was bound to a blood contract to spy for us, and I knew it went against everything that the two of you ever believed in to do it. I knew Kate was mixed up in it somehow, but I never could find out any of the details. From what I understand, Ford Radek in Salem signed the blood contract himself, so there's no way out for her unless he burns the damn thing himself.

Wait a minute, burn the blood contract? He could do that? Would that break the damned thing? Kate had told me... Ah, but Kate had lied about so many other things, why should I be surprised that she'd lied about this one too?

Dougal swore that if Mac had asked about his past after that he would have come clean, but would he really? He said that I was the only key to Mac getting his memory back and I had to admit that being with me seemed to be doing the trick.

Go to Salem and talk to Radek. He's one of the good ones, and he knows you.... He may not let your girl out of her contract, but I know he'll help you find her if you explain what happened.

One last thing, boy. Don't ever trust Kate Hepburn. I know she changes her looks and name every once in a while, and she's got ways of manipulating things so that she comes out smelling like roses in a field of manure. If you'll still take my advice after everything I just told you, boy, kill her. Make sure you get permission from the prince of whatever city she's in, or from old Radek himself. Don't let your revenge on that bitch lead you to final death, boy, I'm sure that wherever I am, I don't miss you that much.

He sure had Kate down, didn't he? She did always come out looking good, no matter what happened. But why did he think Ford would help Mac find me?

I sat looking down at the page for a long time wondering how much I could trust the vamp who had killed my lover. Mac was sure of him, but was that enough for me? Finally I decided that if I could trust Mac to drink from me, I could trust his judgement on his sire too, at least about this. Kill Kate; sounded like old Dougal and I could agree on one thing after all.

I looked up at Mac, my face still feeling frozen. "Why didn't you show me this last night?" "Why?"

Why not? He wasn't trying to keep it from me, not if he was showing to me tonight. "You don't think I would have wanted to see it?"

"You're seeing it now."

I sat the letter down on the bed with a sigh. "And you asked me if I felt any kind of remorse about wanting to kill her," I said softly. "Why would I?" Did he? Did he like being a vamp so much that he could forgive her for this?

He shrugged. "Just asking."

"This is the kind of information that I wanted Glenn to come up with," I told him.

"We could Xerox him a copy if you'd like," he offered dryly.

I smiled grimly. "I don't think so. Now that we have it in writing from Dougal, I suppose that would be all the proof that your prince needed." I hoped that was the case, anyway.

"Yes."

Good. Now I could kill her and not worry about Corrine. Maybe I could make the Society think it was a kill for them, that would make it that much nicer. "Any other bomb shells in your book?"

He pulled out the remaining letters in the compartment and held them out to me expectantly.

"Are you offering to let me read them?" I asked, surprised.

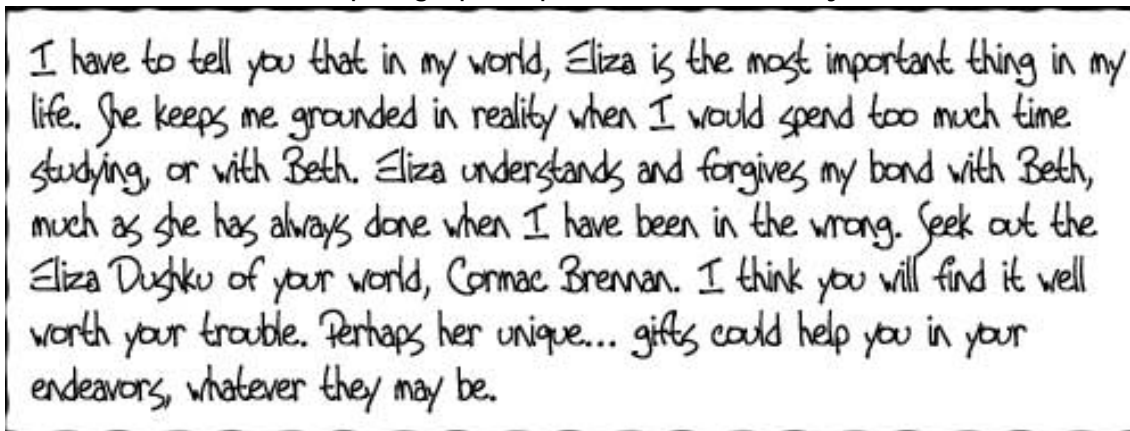
"I can't say that they'll all be interesting or even understandable to you, but...."

This was the best opportunity I'd probably get to find out what was going on in his life without asking straight out. I got up and gave him back the letter from Dougal, then took the others from him and sat back down to read while I ate.

The majority of the letters were between Dougal and Gomi, one of which Mac had already let me read on the way to Berlin. Only one thing in those letters made me pause; *It tears at me to know that I not only ended Cormac's mortal life, but that I completely erased it from his*

mind. Dougal had written those words to Gomi and I was more than happy to know that the fiend hadn't rested completely easy knowing that he'd killed my lover and stolen our life from us.

One other letter confused me a little, mainly because it was addressed to Cormac, but in his own handwriting. It took me a minute to realize that it was from the Mac of the alternate reality he'd told me about. One paragraph in particular stuck in my mind.



I have to tell you that in my world, Eliza is the most important thing in my life. She keeps me grounded in reality when I would spend too much time studying, or with Beth. Eliza understands and forgives my bond with Beth, much as she has always done when I have been in the wrong. Seek out the Eliza Dugku of your world, Cormac Brennan. I think you will find it well worth your trouble. Perhaps her unique... gifts could help you in your endeavors, whatever they may be.

This other Mac proceeded to say that he hoped to finally have children with his Eliza. I had to blink my tears away at that; Corrine would be the only child Mac and I would ever have.

When I was done reading, I looked up to see Mac watching me. I tried to smile. "Quite interesting collection of letters you got going on," I told him. "How did you get the letter from yourself?"

"I'm still not quite sure how that one came across," he admitted. "That whole alternate Salem I was telling you about."

I nodded and looked down at the familiar handwriting on the note. "It's nice to know that somewhere we were together for the last twenty years."

"Well, they weren't quite happy," he told me.

"With Beth in the picture," I agreed. "I can't imagine she would be happy with another woman between them." I know I wouldn't be.

"As I in the letter stated, Beth is no longer in the picture, thanks to me."

I smiled. "I was just going to ask if you had something to do with that." I should have known.

"Of course," he said just as his cell phone rang. He picked it up and answered it. "Hello?" You know I listened.

"Cormac."

"Yes," He replied coolly. "Good evening Brenda."

"How are you?" Her voice was cool too. No love lost there.

"Good."

"I was just returning your call to see how things are going."

"Good," he said. "We are somewhere in the air."

"I am assuming you are on your way to Nashville then," she replied. "Do you know when you will land?"

"Well, let me go ask Jax," he told her as he rose to his feet.

As he left the room, I gathered the remains of my meal and took it into the kitchen. I had rinsed the dishes and made some instant coffee when I heard Mac close the door to the cockpit.

"Oh?" I heard him say coldly.

I peaked around the corner to see him in full Cormac mode.

"I'll tell you when you arrive," I heard Brenda tell him.

"Tell me now, Brenda." He seemed to be running out of patience as he stood in the center of the cabin.

I went back to making the coffee, but continued to listen to his conversation.

"Well, as I told you earlier, there have been some bad policies going on within the city."

"Are we going to have to replace the powers that be?"

Were they talking about the Tremere clan in Nashville, or the city itself? Either way, how could he discuss replacing the bigwigs so calmly?

"I think that sounds like a good idea, yeah." She made it sound like it was entirely Mac's idea, but somehow I got the feeling it wasn't.

"Time for some Tremere control?" he suggested.

"I'm thinking so," she agreed.

"How's Antonio?"

"In Vegas by now," she told him. "He dropped me off on his way through."

"He wouldn't be interested?"

Interested in what?

"Oh, he tends to keep things a little low key. I'm sure we can handle it."

"I'm sure we can," he told her as he walked back into the bedroom and I followed close behind. "I will see you when we land." He hung up the phone then turned to look at me. "No, nobody says goodbye," he told me.

I hid a smile behind my cup. "Didn't I hear Christina say goodbye?"

He shot me a knowing look. "I don't know, did she?"

"Maybe she would have if you would have given her a chance without hanging up on her," I told him, sitting down near the head of the bed and leaning back on the headboard.

"Brenda and I are only slightly more civil toward each other than you two are," he said as he sat back down in the chair.

"And why doesn't Brenda like you?" I thought I knew, but I had to ask.

"Because I'm 'violent'," he said, complete with air quotes.

I laughed. "That would be the same reason that she doesn't like me."

"Yes," he murmured. "Have you heard the stories of her as well?"

"I've actually seen her in action once or twice," I reminded him.

"So have I," he said. "Unimpressed."

"You know, I was though," I admitted. "When we were at the Jesters and that whole shit went down, she held her own. Of course she didn't shoot anyone close to her."

"Ah, that would be her downfall," he drawled.

I sipped my coffee and let the subject of Brenda drop. We'd see her soon enough, there was no use talking about her now. "So did you find out what time we're going to land in Nashville?" I asked him.

"Two o'clock their time."

"What time is their time?" My watch was still on Paris time, I wasn't quite used to this globe hopping lifestyle.

"I haven't the slightest idea."

I watched Mac put his letters away and prepare his weapons. "So we're going into this full battle mode?"

"We may need to replace some people," he told me. "Or just one person."

"And what person would that be?"

"The prince."

I blinked in surprise. I'd expected him to say the Tremere Primogen, but the prince? "Okay, not shooting our sights high, are we?" I asked softly. "Do this often?"

"Yes, Brenda does," he replied.

He continued to put his things away, then glanced at his watch. "We have time," he murmured. He pulled out small book from one of his bags and turned to me. "Care to learn German?"

"You expect me to learn German before we land?" I'd never tried to learn another language, let alone do it in a few hours.

"Just the basics."

I shrugged. "If you want to do that." I could think of other things I'd rather be doing alone with him in a bedroom.

"Well, I'm already prepared."

I sat my coffee cup down on the bedside table. "How does one go about learning a language?"

He sat on the edge of the bed and patted the blanket beside him. I scooted over to him and he handed me the book.

I flipped through it a little. "Looks Greek to me," I murmured.

"Actually, that's German," he told me before reaching over and opening the book to the first page.

It was fun, actually, not at all like I expected it to be. He patiently taught me quite a few of the basics of German; please and thank-you, how to ask where the restrooms were, how to ask for help if I needed it.

I didn't ask him why he was teaching me German. Did he expect me to be going back there any time soon? I don't think he understood the hold his clan had over me, or how rare it was for me to have even a day away from my obligations. It would have been cruel for me to spoil his good mood by reminding him that our time together couldn't last, so I kept quiet and learned what I could.

Some time later, we closed the book and smiled at each other.

"So," he murmured, "how's the wrist?"

"It's fine," I said, trying to keep my voice light. The reminder of his feeding made me want... something, I don't know what. "Not a problem."

"Did I give you what you wanted?" he asked in a low voice that sent tingles up my spine.

"When you bit me, or earlier?" I couldn't help but grin.

"Peace."

I blushed, but didn't look away from his eyes. "Yeah," I whispered. "Yeah, you did."

He stood, saying as he walked away, "Any time you want more...."

Yeah, I knew what vamp to ask. As if I'd ever ask another. I shook my head and opened my suitcase. We had just enough time for me to shower and change before we landed, maybe it would help me stay awake the rest of the night. I'd been up for almost eighteen hours with only an hour or so of sleep while Mac had held me in his arms.

I'd barely undressed and gotten the water turned on in the small bathroom when there was a knock on the door. "What?" I called softly

"Want company?" Mac asked from the other side of the door.

I smiled. "Are you going to wash my back?"

"All those hard to reach places," he told me.

Grinning, I opened the door. "There's not a whole lot of room in here," I warned him.

He glanced at the shower stall. "It will be tight," he agreed as he started to disarm himself, placing his weapons on the floor near the sink. I slipped into the shower to give him room to move and he soon joined me.

I'm sure we would have found other things to do in there than shower, but the water heater on the plane was a small one. Mac wouldn't have minded the cold, but he knew I would, so we agreed to postpone the fun stuff.

When we were done showering and had gone back into the bedroom to dress, I looked down into my open suitcase. "Do I have to limit accessories and where are we staying?" I asked him.

"No, and I don't know," he replied as he bent to pick up my crossbow. He aimed it a few times and seemed to get the feel of it pretty easily.

I grinned and armed myself to the teeth. It felt like the first time that I'd been fully dressed since the plane had landed in Berlin.

Before the plane set down, Mac took the time to call Christina. I sat pretending to read a magazine and listened only because I wanted to know more about the vamp. I just didn't want to ask and be all obvious about it.

"Hello, Christina," he said almost affectionately when she answered the phone.

"Cormac," she replied, her voice warm. "How are things going? Last time I talked to you, you had to go because of a possible problem. How did everything turn out with that? Is everything okay?"

"Yes, nothing terrible came of that situation," he told her.

"Good," she said firmly. "I didn't know if I should be worried. How is everything else going?"

"Good," he assured her. "We're on our way to meet Brenda, as I'm sure you well know."

"Who is in Nashville," she added.

"Yes, we are almost there. I'm rather surprised you weren't accompanying her."

"Well my brother is supposed to be in town tomorrow," she said softly. "He'll be coming to the house at sundown."

"Ah, I quite understand then. How's the rest of the family?"

"Antonio left with Brenda," she told him. "I was kinda sorry to see him go but he has his obligations. Jason and O'Connell are competing." She sounded as if that were a normal thing.

"For...?" he asked with a smile.

"Think about it," she said, her voice even.

"Hmm," he murmured. I got the feeling he knew exactly what they were competing for. "Who's winning?"

"I am." She sounded quite pleased and I wondered exactly who Jason and O'Connell were.

He laughed, actually laughed, and then he put his hand over the mouthpiece. "What was that you said about friends through blood?" he asked me, then added, "Never mind."

I just stared at him, not sure what to make of his humor.

"I figure they'll come out of it in a few weeks, hopefully," she told him. "At least by the time we fly back to Austria."

"Doubtful," he murmured. "Yes, how are the wedding plans going?"

That set her off for a while. I tried not to smile as I listened to him make encouraging noises in the all the right places.

Eventually she realized what she was doing. "I'm sorry, I know you're busy," she said softly. "Everything should be well in place. We're looking at invitations hoping we can get them out soon, not that we're having a lot of people. You were coming, weren't you?"

"I'm planning on it if the prince will let me out," he told her.

"Which prince?" she asked warily.

"Elvira."

"So you're staying in Salem?" She seemed surprised, but then, so was I.

"I'm planning on staying in Salem for a bit," he told her.

Exactly how long was a bit?

"Are you planning on doing something that will make her not want to let you out?" she asked playfully.

"No, but there is going to be a significantly reduced population," he reminded her.

"Me, Jason, Brenda, Frasier," she began.

"Rafe, myself," he finished.

"That still leaves thirteen other Tremere," she told him, "and the ghouls. It shouldn't be a problem."

"It will depend on the prince's mood at that moment," he replied softly. Princes could be a bit temperamental.

"She seems pretty reasonable for the most part," Christina said, adding in a low voice, "except when she burned my cell phone."

"When she what?"

"She burned my cell phone," she repeated.

He smiled. "Are you calling those 900 numbers again, Christina?" It was the first time I'd heard him tease another Kindred.

She laughed. "No, I think it was more to make sure I didn't call Las Vegas," she told him, sobering suddenly. "Or get a call from Las Vegas."

He must have sensed her change of mood and let the subject drop. "So, what do you get for the two undead who have anything?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "It's not like we need a toaster."

"Flame thrower," he suggested.

"That's an idea." She actually sounded interested in that; my kind of girl. If she wasn't a blood sucking fiend, she would have been, anyway.

"Jason would never let you use it," he told her. "He'd be too busy playing with it."

She laughed again. "Good point," she conceded. "Matching guns? I don't know, it's not like you register for weapons somewhere. Or do you? It's not like you register for them at Hudson's or something."

"I don't know," Mac admitted with a smile

"Although I don't know what we'd ask for if we were human," she told him. "Not that I remember all that stuff. Speaking of that, how is your... I know that part of the reason you went off was to spend time with the girl to get your memory back. How's that going?"

"Very well," he replied. "If my experience is any basis, you should be remembering things within the first night."

"Really?"

"Yes they will come, or at least they come to me, as dreams when I sleep, although I have received a few flashes," he said as he shot a glance my way.

I grinned, dropped the magazine, and held open my jacket.

"Put those away," he whispered with a smile.

"So these dreams that are coming back," Christina continued, "are they all about her, or just different stuff? I don't mean to pry, I just want to know what to expect."

"At the moment they are about her," he replied. "Most of them are rather intense memories. And you may not always remember them as memories. It is very hard to explain, but you will remember them as a dream you had rather than an ingrained memory. The spirits touches are helping as well."

"Yes," she said, obviously pleased, "I've finally figured out how to do that."

He grinned. "Cool, ain't it?"

I blinked, very surprised to hear him talk like that. Who was this girl who could make my Mac act this way? Whoever she was, I hated her.

"Yeah, actually it is," she agreed, "so that might help. Like I said, Robert's supposed to be here in the evening, so we'll see how that goes. He's bringing his girlfriend and son, but not necessarily here. I guess they're going to stay in Boston."

"Mmm, I have people there."

"You do?"

"Yes."

When he didn't volunteer anything more, she said, "Well, if you get into trouble in Nashville, and I told Brenda this too, just call us because you know three extra pairs of hands might help."

"I will do that," he replied. "It depends on what exactly your sister is planning on doing."

Gee, he almost sounded like he didn't trust Brenda.

"Knowing Brenda it's hard telling," Christina told him, her voice affectionate. "She tends to always be there with the changing of the guard. I don't know what it is, if it's luck or fate or something."

"I'll try and remember to stand behind her," Mac murmured.

"That's hardly fair," she scolded him. "She didn't mean to shoot me."

"And Lee Harvey Oswald was aiming at Jacky O."

Not that theory again.

"Yeah, whatever. Look just give me a call if you need me."

"I will," he told her. "Enjoy."

"Bye."

"Bye."

"At least you said goodbye this time," I murmured, not looking up from the magazine. He shrugged. "Family and all."

NASHVILLE

YOU KNEW THAT I WAS COMIN' CAUSE YOU HEARD MY NAME
BUT YOU DON'T KNOW MY GAME AND NEVER FELT MY PAIN
DEVIL WITHOUT A CAUSE - KID ROCK

We landed about twenty minutes later. Mac and I quietly gathered our things and piled them near the door.

"Were you expecting a lot of people?" Jax asked when he came out of the cockpit.

"Yes," Mac assured him, picking up most of his luggage and exiting the plane. Jax grabbed his own bag and the rest of Mac's before following him.

When I grabbed my things and stepped off the plane, I saw what he meant. There were at least twenty people standing there, most of them watching the perimeter looking for trouble. Parked nearby were two vans, a large Cadillac, and a Porsche, surrounded by six very large Harley Davidson Motorcycles, the kind Mac used to ride.

I mentally counted off the vampires in the crowd, then turned to Mac. "Did we really need eight vampires and a lot of other things?" I whispered.

He ignored me. "Evening Brenda," he said as she approached with two teen-aged Kindred.

"Cormac," she replied politely, turning to look at the girl next to her. "Faith, this is Cormac Brennan. Cormac, this is Faith Scott."

The girl held her hand out, but Mac lifted his filled hands apologetically. She gestured at a few of the ghouls and right away they came and took our luggage from us. Mac gave his usual warning about the sword before turning to shake hands with Faith.

"How was your flight?" she asked. "Any problems?"

"Nothing to concern yourself with," he said respectfully.

"And how did you find Paris?"

"It truly was the most romantic city in the world," he told her.

"Is this all of your things?" she asked, gesturing toward the ghouls who were taking the luggage to one of the vans.

"Yes."

I watched the crossbow get loaded with the rest of our things and hoped we wouldn't need it any time soon. From the corner of my eye I noticed that Mac was looking longingly at the motorcycles.

"If you'll follow me," the young girl said, "we'll head to the Chantry. We don't want to spend too much time in town, it's not safe. Yet."

"You will explain, of course," Mac murmured.

"Once we get into the van," she agreed, moving toward the vehicles.

Mac put his arm around my waist and led me to the van, where Faith was opening the side door. She noticed where his arm was and looked a little closer at my face as Brenda got into the van. Jax seemed to know some of the other ghouls and the last time I saw him he was headed to the Porsche with a young woman.

A male and female vampire got into the front of the vehicle and Faith climbed into the seat behind Brenda. Mac got in next to her, pulling me with him and draping an arm across the seat behind me. A ghoul shut the door on us and once the other vehicles were loaded, several motorcycles took the lead and we left the airport.

"We've had some problems with the Brujah," Faith explained as we went, "and it's unsafe for a single Tremere or even several Tremere to be alone in Nashville. We'd planned on taking care of this earlier this evening, however it was a trap so we chose not to go."

"A wise choice," Mac agreed.

"Hopefully we can take care of this matter tomorrow evening," she added.

Brenda shifted a little on the seat, making me think she was eager to help.

I noticed as we went through town that it seemed a little run down, like a city on the edge of a long slide downward. I've seen a lot of places like that, lived in them mostly. Actually, Salem was one of the nicest towns I'd ever lived in, other than Bar Harbor.

"I understand that you are looking for information about Dougal Galloway," Faith said after a few minutes.

"Yes," Mac replied. "I have linked the person I believe that killed Dougal to what Brenda has informed me is as it turns out a Brujah friendly organization. Bruckman's?"

"Yes," she murmured dangerously. "We know about Bruckman's. Unfortunately we haven't been able to eliminate Bruckman's, but we know its there."

"Specifically Earl Hardy," he added.

"Yes, I have met Earl," she drawled slowly. "I've seen him a few times."

"In town?"

I could tell by the coldness in his voice that Mac was pissed. He wanted a piece of Earl, there was no doubt about that.

"Yes," she replied, seemingly unaware of the emotions seething beneath Mac's calm face. "This is the one you think killed Dougal?"

"Yes," he answered calmly. "I know he killed Dougal."

She glanced at him. "Can I ask how you know?"

"Auspex," he replied. "I have seen it, or rather, others have seen it and I have seen what they have."

She nodded, apparently familiar with the ability. "Well I don't know if he's in town right now, but given the problems we've had with the Brujah, we'll probably find out."

"He's mine," Mac said, his voice ice hard. "He caused the death of my sire."

She studied him for a moment, then nodded again. "Fair enough."

"I'd like to see a blood hunt called against him," he added.

"If he lives that long," she said softly before changing the subject.

The vamps exchanged pleasantries and introductions while we drove through town, although Mac didn't introduce me. Soon we'd left the city behind, and the driver followed a motorcycle through a very heavy gate that had opened when we approached.

We went almost a mile through thick trees before we came to a big area of cleared land. Sitting in the middle of it was a house on what looked like an artificial hill. A high fence surrounded the house and a few other outbuildings, and when we got closer, this gate opened for us too.

The vehicles pulled around and stopped in front of a long garage. The ghouls piled out of the other cars and one of them stopped to open the doors of the van for us. Some of the servants had our luggage and they carried them toward the back of the house while Faith led us to the front porch.

Parts of the house and fence looked like they had been repaired and painted recently, and once we got inside, it smelled like new paint and fresh wood. Faith and the black Kindred led

Brenda and us into a cozy library and asked us to have a seat. Brenda walked over to an overstuffed chair and waited for Faith and Aviva to sit down before she did.

"Your luggage will be brought up shortly," Faith told us as she sat down. "When it is you will be shown to your rooms."

Mac dropped his hand from my waist and took my hand, pulling me down on the couch opposite them.

Faith watched us sit down and smiled. "So you've been to Europe looking for Dougal?"

"Yes, we've visited the Berlin and the Paris chantries."

"How is Eduardo?" she asked.

For someone who'd never made it to America, he sure knew a lot of vamps here.

"Good."

"It's a shame he won't come visit," she said softly.

"Something about the colonies not being fit for civilized Spaniards."

"Yes, I think that's exactly what he says," she drawled, "though not usually to 'colonists'. Did you spend some time with Jurgen?"

"I did spend a little time with him," he told her.

"And how is the boy?"

It was weird hearing her refer to Jurgen as a boy, he looked like he was a good ten years older than she was. Of course her being a vamp, she didn't show her age.

"Well," Mac replied.

"Did you find everything you were looking for in Europe?" she asked. "I heard you were looking for some of Dougal's things."

"Yes, I believe I found all I'm going to of his," he told her. "I came across his grimoire in Paris."

"Oh, he left it there?" She sounded surprised, I guess Tremere didn't normally just leave their spell books lying around.

"I believe he left it for me to find, but he placed a ward upon it."

"Against...?"

"Kindred."

"That would make it hard to read the book," she admitted with a smile. "Although your friend could help you with that."

I think she was angling for an introduction, but Mac didn't seem to notice.

"I was wondering if you knew the proper ritual to break such a ward," he said seriously. "I am most interested in reading it."

"Of course I do."

"Would you mind?" he asked respectfully.

"Of course not."

Immediately he picked up his bag and opened it in my direction. I glanced at Faith, then reached inside for the book.

"Oh, you wanted it done now," Faith murmured.

"At your convenience," he told her.

"Well, just have the girl put it on the desk," she said dismissively, "and I'll take care of it some time tonight."

"Very well."

I got up and put the book on the desk, then walked back to sit next to Mac again. I could feel Brenda's eyes on me the whole time, but I didn't give her the satisfaction of looking her way.

"You followed Dougal's trail here?" Faith asked.

"Yes." He took the invoice from his bag and half stood to hand it across to her. "I found this at the Bruckman's Imports in France."

She looked at it for a moment. "I wasn't aware that the Paris one was still open," she murmured.

"Its not."

"I wasn't aware it was open in July either," she added, glancing up at him. "I thought it closed down a few years ago. I had heard rumors that Earl was in town in late July, but like I said I don't know if he's still in town." She held the invoice out and Mac half rose again to take it from her.

"I do remember seeing Dougal, though, was it five years ago? Five and a half maybe?" she asked Aviva, who shrugged. "He refused to stay in the chantry. I'm not sure where he stayed."

Mac's fingers closed on my hand. "I don't know where he stayed either, he never contacted me on his way back through."

Faith seemed surprised. "Was that unusual?"

"Yes."

The door opened and a young man stepped in.

"Ah, your room is ready," Faith told us. "If you will go with John-Robert, he will show you to the rooms we have prepared upstairs."

Rooms? I tried not to look disappointed as Mac thanked her and pulled me to my feet. We followed the ghoul upstairs. He opened the door of a very nice bedroom that had Mac's luggage piled on the bed.

"This is your room sir," he said politely. "The young lady will be just down the hall."

"Thank you," Mac replied, stepping inside.

"If you will accompany me," John-Robert said firmly, leading me down the hall. He showed me into a much smaller bedroom where my things were on the bed. I thanked him and he left.

The room was nice, it just wasn't where I wanted to be. I waited until the ghoul's footsteps faded away, then opened the door softly to check the hall. When I saw that it was empty, I slipped out and walked toward Mac's room. I reached up to knock on the mostly closed door, but his voice stopped me.

"Come in luv."

I didn't even want to know how he knew it was me. I went into the room and closed the door behind me.

"How's your room?" he asked.

I looked around at his much nicer accommodations. "Let's just say you got the nicer one."

He glanced at the bed. "I have a large enough bed," he told me.

Was he saying what I thought he was saying? "Large enough for what?" His look told me all I needed to know. "You mean for both of us. I just figured they were going to make me stay down there." I walked over and sat down on the edge of the bed and ran my hand down the bedpost.

"Would you like me to inquire?" He seemed irritated.

"If you think they'll let me stay here, I don't care." But I did care. I didn't want to stay down the hall alone when he was so close.

"I'll ask in a little bit," he told me.

"Okay," I agreed, relieved. "So what are we doing the rest of the night?"

"Probably just settling in," he said. "I imagine you're very tired, aren't you?"

What was his first clue, the bags under my eyes? "Yeah, I'm kinda tired. Coffee would be good."

He held his hand out to me. "Let's go back downstairs and find someone."

"Just find someone," I murmured as I put my hand in his. "Grab the first Tremere we come across by his ear and say 'give me coffee'?"

"If he finds us the kitchen, yes," he replied softly.

I laughed. "I must be tired."

We went downstairs and caught John-Robert coming out of a doorway off the hall.

"Excuse me," Mac said.

"Yes, sir." John-Robert glanced at our hands then looked at Mac expectantly.

"My companion would like a bit of coffee, could you show us to the kitchen?"

He nodded. "Of course sir. Right this way." He opened the door he'd just closed and led us through a storage room of some sort and into a small kitchen. He showed me where the coffee was and took a mug down from the cupboard and poured a cup for me. He took the time to show me where the food was too before he turned to go.

"One more thing," Mac said before John-Robert could leave the room. "My traveling companion and I would prefer to be in the same room."

He didn't seem surprised. "Oh, of course."

"My room is more than ample sized," Mac added. "Would it be a problem at all?"

"Not a problem," he said quickly. "I'll send someone up to move her things."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome," he replied. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"No," Mac assured him. "You've been more than helpful."

"I believe that Faith, Aviva and Brenda are still in the library if you needed them," he told us.

"Perhaps we will join them," Mac murmured as the ghoul left us alone.

I drank the coffee quick, not wanting to make Mac wait for me or carry the cup through the beautiful house. I didn't think Faith would like it if I spilled coffee on her white carpets.

"Shall we go back up or head to the library?" Mac asked, watching me drink.

"Hey, I'm just here for the ride," I reminded him. This was Kindred stuff, his territory.

"We'll stop by the library," he told me. "Care for another cup?"

I finished what was left. "No, this should keep me awake for a couple of hours," I told him. Good thing it wasn't caffeine free, I'd never be able to stay awake. I rinsed the cup and set it down in the empty sink, not sure where else to put it.

We went back to the library to find Brenda and Aviva where we'd left them, talking. Faith was standing by the desk, looking down at the book intently. She didn't seem to notice when we came in, but Aviva did.

"Oh," she said. "How are your rooms?"

"Fine," Mac assured her.

"Did you need anything else?" she asked, as if she'd expected us to stay upstairs the rest of the night. Maybe she had.

"No, we were just checking in," he said. "Seeing if there was anything we could do with what's left of the night."

She looked at him questioningly. "Was there something you wanted to do with what's left of the night?"

"No, no, I just didn't know if there were anything that needed taking care of."

What was he volunteering us for? I didn't like being here, but I knew better than to show it. These Tremere had been nice and helpful, not quite what I expected. This close to home I figured they'd know who I was.

"Not really," Aviva replied. "You could check out the lower levels, I guess. The park or the pool. Brenda was talking about doing some target shooting."

"Is there an arsenal on the grounds?" Mac asked.

"Of course." She made it sound like every good southern house had an arsenal.

"I'm going to re-attempt to teach my traveling companion to shoot properly," he told her.

She glanced at me in surprise. "Re-attempt? She forgot?"

"We encountered some difficulties," he explained.

"What kind of difficulties?"

"She can't do it," he said simply.

"Well then, maybe you should work on other things," she suggested. "You know, maybe knives, or stakes."

I tried hard not to smile.

"She's quite proficient at that, I assure you," Mac replied.

"Is she?" The girl looked at me again, interested this time.

If she wanted, I could show her just how proficient I was with a stake.

"Yes," he told her, then looked down at me. "No."

I tried to look innocent, although I hadn't even said anything. Okay, so I'd been thinking it, but I hadn't said it.

"If you wanted to go with Brenda, she could show you," Aviva said.

At that moment, Faith looked up from the book. "Cormac, a moment please," she called across the room. He let go of my hand and went over to her.

I had to strain to hear their conversation, but I did hear a part of it.

"I understand that your companion tends to be a bit aggressive," Faith said in a low voice.

"I have her well under control," Cormac assured her.

Oh, he did, did he?

"Are you sure about that?" she asked.

At that moment, Brenda stood and walked over to the doorway, and I lost my concentration. I tried to look at her pleasantly although I was irritated that I couldn't hear the rest of Mac and Faith's little chat. "Miss Thompson."

She glanced at me briefly. "Eliza."

By that time, Mac was coming over to stand between us. "Ladies," he said pleasantly before turning to Brenda. "I'd like to look at the arsenal, I'm looking for a rifle."

Brenda nodded. "Faith, I will talk to you later," she called across the room. "Aviva. "

"Brenda," Faith replied, still looking down at the book.

"Have fun," the other vamp told us before she walked across the room to Faith's side

Mac took my hand and we followed Brenda into the hall. Before we reached the stairs, he said, "If you would wait just a moment, Brenda, I would like to retrieve something from upstairs and I need a few words with Eliza."

What'd I do now?

"That's fine," she replied politely. "I have a phone call to make."

"Very well." He led me up the stairs and as soon as we were out of earshot, I looked up at him.

"I didn't do anything," I whispered. "I was nice to her."

"And you're not going to either," he warned me.

Did he expect me to stake her in the middle of the chantry? Just because I wanted to, didn't mean I would. "Who said I was going to?"

"You are allowed free run of the second and main floor," he told me softly. "You are only allowed on the lower levels if accompanied by me."

"Why do I feel like a puppy?" I mumbled to myself.

At top of stairs he stopped and turned to look down at me, his face deadly serious. "I have guaranteed Faith your good behavior on my life," he said sternly. "Don't disappoint me."

I studied his face for a moment, trying to read him. Did he really have that much faith in me? Hell, if I wanted him dead, this would be the way I could do it and not have to kill him myself. He was putting his life in my hands, just as I had put my life in his hands when I'd asked him to bite me. He really trusted me that much. I was touched.

"Gotcha," I said softly, trying to make light of it as we went into the bedroom.

I grabbed the crossbow and a quiver of quarrels from my carryon bag while Mac grabbed a few boxes of regular ammo from his things. We went back downstairs just as Brenda was hanging up her phone.

"The range is downstairs," she said, gesturing toward the left.

She led us down one flight of stairs and through what looked like a large dining room, then down a second flight and into a much larger gathering room of some sort. There were several Kindred in the room and some ghouls. Brenda greeted them and Mac nodded as we walked through and out into the hallway.

LOWER LEVELS

TRUST I SEEK AND I FIND IN YOU
EVERY DAY FOR US SOMETHING NEW
NOTHING ELSE MATTERS - METALLICA

We followed Brenda as she walked briskly down the hall, but at one point something caught Mac's eye and he slowed, pulling me with him. I turned to see what he was looking at, and stopped with him.

Through a window in one of the doors we could see daylight. Not real daylight, but as close to it as I've ever seen. There were real trees and flowers inside the room, and I could see birds flying between the branches.

"Would you like to go inside?" Brenda asked, her voice nicer than I'd ever heard it.

"Maybe later," Mac said regretfully. "It looks wonderful."

"Hmm, it is," she replied with a smile. "Bruce enjoyed it a great deal."

Who the hell is Bruce?

"I haven't seen the daylight since Ramadan," Mac added.

I looked up at him, eyebrows raised. He glanced down with a smile.

"Of course that was artificial as well," he told me before focusing his attention back on Brenda and leading me after her.

I waited in the doorway of a very large room filled with racks and shelves that held every kind of gun I'd ever seen in my life, and quite a few more. Everything was neatly categorized and labeled, and there was enough ammo to start a damned war. From what I could tell, about half of it was either silver or phosphorous.

Mac picked up several smaller rifles and examined them, almost as if looking for something specific. Finally he seemed to find what he was looking for, and grabbed a much larger rifle from another rack. He picked up ammo for both weapons, and met Brenda back at the doorway where she was filling out some kind of form. When she was done, he signed it too, and we were off to the firing range.

The range was set up in a very large room. There were a couple of long lanes set up, and several short ones. Brenda went to one of the shorter ones and began to load her weapon. Mac led me to the longer lanes and handed me a pair of safety glasses that I twirled on my finger until he told me to put them on.

He handed me a set of earmuffs, then put on his own protection. He gestured for me to load the crossbow, and with a simple motion, I did. When he pointed at the target, I turned and fired. Dead center. Man, I love the crossbow.

I looked back at Mac, wondering exactly why we were doing this. I already knew how to shoot a crossbow; hell, I could do it blindfolded if I had to.

"Load it again," he told me. When I had, he added, "Close your eyes."

Well, I said I could do it blindfolded. I closed my eyes.

"Now do the same," he instructed. "Keep your eyes closed."

I wondered if he remembered that I used to practice this shot in Baltimore. Nowadays I don't practice it; I live it. I turned and fired the crossbow at where I knew the target to be then I waited.

He took the bow from my hand and I heard him load it. He put it back in my hand, but it didn't quite feel the same.

"Again," he said quickly.

Trusting him, I fired at the target and was very surprised to hear the sound of a gun going off in my hands. My eyes shot open to see that I was holding the damned rifle he'd picked up, the smaller one. I looked at him questioningly.

"Congratulations," he drawled. "You just fired a gun successfully."

Sure enough, there was a bullet hole on the target an inch or so to the left of the two crossbow quarrels. "Okay, but I can't have my eyes closed when we're in combat," I told him. It wouldn't do to shoot my friends.

He took the gun and pulled back on the bolt to bring another round into the chamber. "Try it with your eyes open."

I took the gun back, but I wasn't sure I could hit the target now that I knew what I was firing.

"Think of it like the crossbow," he told me. "Aim the same—"

"It's not a crossbow," I said stubbornly. "It's louder."

"Think of it as a crossbow—"

"It's louder," I repeated irritably. Wasn't he listening to me? I couldn't do what he wanted me to; guns weren't my weapon of choice for a reason.

"Think of it as a crossbow," he said, his firm voice leaving no room for my protests. "Aim the same, think the same."

Damn, he wasn't going to give up until I did what he wanted. I lifted the gun to my shoulder and fired at the target, but barely caught the edge of the paper target.

"I don't think that would kill it," I told him dryly, not that these regular rounds would kill much more than other hunters or mages.

He took the gun and showed me how to work the bolt. "Keep trying," he ordered me.

I shook my head and turned back to the target. Maybe he was right about this. Maybe we had been going about this wrong. Maybe I could learn to shoot. I imagined that the target was Kate and squeezed the trigger. To my surprise, I hit near the center of the target. Not a killing shot for most things, but it might give me time to fire again.

Still picturing Kate on the receiving end of the bullets, I emptied the gun. When I was done, almost every hole was inside one of the middle two circles on the target.

Mac smiled as he took the gun from me and showed me how to load it. He was obviously proud of himself, and on impulse I reached up to kiss him as he handed the gun back to me.

"Practice," he told me with a grin. "Let me know when you're ready for something else."

What did he have in mind? "Like?"

He reached inside his jacket and pulled out a handgun.

"I remember we tried that and it didn't work," I reminded him.

"But now you have a basic idea," he told me as he put it back away.

While I practiced on the smaller rifle, he picked up the big one. We shot in silence for a while, reloading and emptying the guns into the targets. Eventually, he handed me the big gun.

"What am I supposed to do with this?" I asked him in surprise.

"Try it."

"This is going to kick a little worse, isn't it?" I said warily.

He unbuttoned his shirt and showed me a large bruise on his shoulder. I winced; his would be gone in the morning—ah, evening, but I'd have that thing for a few days. I couldn't afford

to be that sore, and after playing the happy meal earlier, I didn't want to have to waste any blood to heal. Then again, he'd been shooting it for half an hour now; I was just firing it once. Maybe one shot wouldn't bruise me that bad.

I tried to prepare for the recoil, but it still knocked me back a foot. I looked at him. "Ow." He took the rifle back, smiling. "Are you ready for the something else?"

"Sure," I said, although I wasn't. "Maybe I could get Brenda from here."

"Now, now," he scolded, "I won't let that happen." He popped the clip and emptied it on the counter in front of me, then loaded it with other rounds and scooped up the ones he'd emptied. He handed me the gun, then moved behind me, showing me how to hold the gun with his hands over mine.

How the hell was I supposed to concentrate with him this close to me? The touch of his cold skin set mine on fire. I barely listened to most of his explanations, but when he told me to shoot, I did and actually hit the target.

When he told me to continue, and I kept squeezing the trigger slowly, trying to aim between each shot. After a few shots he let go of my hand and stepped away, but I kept firing. Finally the gun clicked empty.

He took the gun and loaded the clip again, then handed it back to me by the barrel. It didn't occur to me until later that he was showing me once again just how much he trusted me by handing me the gun that way. I took the gun and turned back to the target.

When he was finally convinced that I could fire the pistol as easily as the rifle, he told me I could stop. "Now we need to get you one of your own."

I shook my head. "I can't afford one of my own," I told him. "Stakes are cheap."

"Which one did you like better?" he asked, ignoring my comment. "The rifle or handgun?"

"The hand gun," I replied simply. It was a lot easier to hide.

"And it wasn't so hard," he said smugly. "We'll teach Corrine that when we get back."

I looked up at him in surprise. "Teach Corrine to shoot?"

"Mmm-hmm."

"Well I would have taught her," I told him, "but obviously I didn't know how. She's good with a knife."

"Good," he said seriously, "but that may not be enough."

Unfortunately he was right, I'd been hurt more than once. If I wasn't what I am, I'd have been dead ten times over by now. Corrine hadn't inherited my strength or my stamina, and Mac was proof that magic couldn't always save your life.

We went to stand behind Brenda and waited for her to empty her clip.

She turned. "Finished?"

"Yes," Mac replied. "We'll probably take a stroll through the garden."

"All right," she said. "If you can't find your way back up, there will probably be someone around to direct you."

"Thank you," he told her. "If you talk to Christina this evening, tell her I said hello."

She nodded. "I have to call back home just before dawn anyway. Do you want me to put the rifles back for you?"

"No, I'll take care of them, thank you," he replied.

"All right." She turned back to load her clip and we left her alone.

After we returned the guns to the arsenal, we went into the garden. It was like stepping outside on a warm summer day.

There were several good-sized trees that brushed the ceiling of the room, and grass lined the path. A small stream ran through the park, and there were a lot of small animals running around free. We sat the crossbow down by the door and followed the path hand in hand.

"How's your shoulder feel?" he asked softly.

"Sore," I admitted. "I'll get over it."

"A warm bath will take care of that," he told me.

"Is there a bathtub in your room?" Mac, bubbles, and me. Hmm.

"Or shower."

"You didn't look in the bathroom?" But then again, why would he?

When we approached the end of the park, we saw two teenaged girls watching a younger girl play with her puppy. The child seemed very happy, and the dog was too, even though it was wearing some kind of hat.

The teens noticed us and nodded before turning back to the girl. Eventually she saw us too, but she seemed a little surprised and took an obvious second look at us. The puppy took advantage of her distraction and leaped out of her arms, running toward us and barking at Mac. Animals don't usually like vampires, and this one was no exception.

The girl ran after the dog and caught up with him quickly, almost too quickly. I watched her carefully as she walked a little closer and looked up at me. Something about her seemed different, like she wasn't exactly a ghoul, but she wasn't a vamp either. I couldn't put my finger on it.

I blinked and looked at her again. Was it possible that she was...? I didn't even want to think it, but maybe she was like me, half-vamp, half-human.

She smiled knowingly up at me, then grinned at Mac and went running back to the other girls. I breathed a silent sigh of relief and let Mac lead me away from that corner of the park.

"Did you call everyone you were supposed to?" he asked as we walked along the path.

"Yeah, I called Jared," I replied softly, my mind still on the girl.

"And?"

"He picked up Corrine this morning and took her to Boston," I told him. "They called after they got there to give me the number. Corrine is still pissed off, but she'll get over it. Better safe and pissed off than happy in Salem in danger." And if she didn't get over it, at least she'd be alive to carry the grudge.

"How much are we going to tell her?" he asked.

Why did we have to keep going over this? "As little as possible?"

"Do you really believe she'll buy that?"

I looked up at him. "Do you have something in mind that you want to tell her you think she'll believe?"

"You're the one for keeping secrets from her," he reminded me.

"I'm still not sure why that's a bad thing," I murmured.

"As I've said before, knowledge is power," he told me. "She needs to know, at least enough to prepare herself."

Prepare her for what? To be killed when the vamps found out what she knew? Hell, this was a topic we were not going to agree on. "Well, we have, what, an hour and a half till dawn?" I asked, changing the subject. "What are we doing for an hour and a half?"

"Well, we can explore the chantry more," he suggested.

Like I wanted to see every vamp in the place. The fact that I could feel them was bad enough. It was like one of those background noises that can drive you crazy. "Or?"

"We can argue about Corrine knowing."

Anything would be better than that. "Or?"

"Take a dip in the pool."

I hid a smile. "Do you have a bathing suit?"

"Yes."

"I don't." I couldn't remember the last time I'd worn one, but it must have been in Bar Harbor before the contract had changed everything.

"I'm sure Brenda would have something that will fit you," he said.

I chuckled a little at that. I doubted Brenda would loan me anything willingly. "Not. Are there more surprises like the garden here?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "I've never been to Nashville."

We spent the next hour or so strolling hand in hand through the lower levels of the chantry. It was like some self-contained habitrail for vamps and ghouls, I swear. There were rooms devoted entirely to video games, and pinball machines. A large library took up part of the upper basement, and there was another smaller garden on that floor, too. We saw several large classrooms, and computer rooms, and rooms that were like huge living rooms.

We saw quite a few vamps on our stroll, and even more ghouls. To my surprise, no one said anything about the crossbow strung across my back, but then again that might have had something to do with the fact that it wasn't loaded and Mac held the quarrels.

Eventually we found ourselves back on the main floor of the house. The library doors were open a crack, and as Mac moved closer to peek through them, I saw Faith and Brenda standing over Dougal's grimoire. Faith was chanting, and Brenda looked like she was assisting in the ritual. Mac led me away toward the front doors and we walked out onto the veranda.

The night was beautiful. The moon was out and shining brightly, showing quite plainly the fall flowers planted around the house. I could smell autumn in the air, the crisp smell of dying leaves. It was almost unbearably romantic for the home of fiends.

Mac let go of my hand long enough to pull out a cigarette and light it. He offered me one, but I refused. With the price of cigarettes, I couldn't afford to take that habit up again. We sat down on the steps and he put his arm around my waist. I laid my head on his shoulder and tried to relax, although it was hard with my spider sense tingling from all the vamps around us.

"When did you meet Stephen again?" I asked softly.

"It's been about two and a half weeks," he replied.

"How did you meet him?"

"He walked into a bar I was in."

That sounded familiar. "You could start so many stories that way."

"He'd been searching for me for some time."

"How did he find you?"

"He asked around."

"Just asked around?" If it were that simple, why hadn't he found him years ago? Hell, why hadn't I found him years ago? Of course, I hadn't been asking, I'd thought he was dead.

"Yes," he replied. "If you ask the right people you can find anything."

"True enough."

"He passed through town and I believe he ran into a few of the witches I know," Mac explained. "The cairn of his pack is in the redwoods of northern California. I'd been staying in LA for quite some time."

"It's kind of surprising that he didn't find you before then."

"He'd only begun looking for me after my brother was killed."

Hearing that made me sad, though it didn't seem to affect Mac that badly, probably because he didn't remember Angus. "How was he killed?"

"Stephen never got very specific, there was not time," he told me, "but it was in direct relation to what he was."

Garou. "So it was a werewolf thing?"

"Yes. He was killed unjustly as Brother Stephen told me, vengeance was extracted for his death."

Blood for blood. "Was his wife involved in that?" From what I remembered, she was also Garou.

"I do not know," Mac murmured. "Stephen did not mention her."

That seemed strange. "What about the rest of your family?" His parents, his sister.

"Stephen said they are well," he said as he flicked his cigarette out into the darkness.

"You haven't talked to them?" That surprised me. I would have thought that calling them would have been one of the first things he did.

"As I said, I just started remembering them when Stephen came back."

"Where did they think you were?"

"They were informed I had disappeared," he told me.

I frowned. "By who?"

"I do not know for sure," he said, "but given things I know now, a probably guess would be Glenn."

Glenn would have known how to get a hold of them, he'd gone to Galway with Mac before. "It's possible."

"Unless it was you?" he asked, looking at me pointedly.

"Wasn't me," I told him. I'd never spoken to his family, and any number I might have had for them had been lost in the raid. "I didn't really get a hold of anyone at all," I added. "I didn't have any way to." Other than the one call to Glenn, of course, but that had been on a toll free number. I'd stayed as far away from my old life as I could to try and keep Corrine safe.

"Whoever did, they sent what little belongings were salvageable back to my family," he told me.

"Did they?" I thought Kate had taken all salvageable stuff and given them to me on our way to Richmond. I guess this was another thing she lied about.

"Yes, that is how Stephen came into possession of—" he reached into an inside pocket and pulled out picture. "—this."

I looked at the photograph, surprised to see it was of me. "You know, I wondered how he knew me when he walked up to me at Guilty Pleasures."

"He's been carrying this for nineteen years wondering who you were."

"Yeah," I said with a smile. "That's an old picture."

Mac leaned out a bit and held the photograph up, looking between them. "When was this taken?"

"Let me see it." When he handed it to me, I studied it for a moment, remembering. "This was at the brownstone about six months after I met you," I told him with a smile. "Glenn was doing something stupid, and Jane snapped a picture of me looking at him while he was doing it."

"Yes," he murmured, taking the picture back. "Have you spoken with Glenn since...?"

Did he think I'd called him while he was sleeping yesterday? "Not since the last time you listened," I told him honestly.

"Who, me?"

I shook my head and relaxed against his side. We sat in silence for a while, enjoying each other's company and the beautiful fall night. I was ready to fall asleep when Mac spoke.

"Shall we go in and prepare to retire for the evening?" he asked softly. "Or morning, or whatever."

"Sure," I agreed readily enough. I was bone tired. "It's been a long night."

"Yes." He stood and pulled me to my feet, then led me inside.

On the way upstairs, he peeked into the library again, but they hadn't finished the ritual. Once we got into our room, he looked down at me.

"Will you be joining me or sleeping on the floor in the corner?"

I laughed. "I don't know, do you bite in your sleep?" I asked him. I'd heard that some Kindred did and I was a little leery of testing that theory.

"I don't know," he replied thoughtfully. "No one ever slept with me."

"Gee, that sounds safe," I muttered to myself.

"I don't know if I snore, either," he added.

I shot him a dry look. "You don't snore cause you don't breathe," I reminded him.

"Ah," he drawled, smiling, "you caught that irony right away."

"Kinda hard to miss, Mac." I looked around the room, debating. Well, no guts, no glory. "I'll just sleep with a stake under my pillow," I told him finally.

"The door locks, I'm sure," he said softly.

That made me safe from the other vamps in the house, sort of, but what about him? "And?"

"What do you need a stake for?"

"In case you decide to bite in your sleep," I replied quite seriously.

He rolled his eyes. "Whatever, dear."

Whatever my ass, I didn't make it a habit to get that close to vamps without somebody dying, and I sure as hell didn't want it to be me here today. If I staked Mac, all I'd have to do is pull it out and he'd be right as rain. If he drained me in his sleep, I'd be dead.

Mac rummaged through his bags for a moment then muttered something to himself. He pulled out a handgun and a hand full of shells, then turned to me.

"What, do you keep an arsenal in your suitcase?" I moved a little closer hoping to see what else was inside.

"I have several bags," he said, holding the handgun out for me.

"Is this for me?" I asked, surprised.

"Well, I'm out of holsters," he began, then stopped. "No wait, no I'm not." He took a few things from the bag and sat them down gently on the bed, then dumped a surprisingly large pile of weapons onto the bedspread.

I sat down nearby and started rummaging in the pile. There were several very sharp knives that if I'm not mistaken were silver laced. I had a few of those myself, they worked well on werewolves. There were also several handguns, and almost a dozen things that looked like torture implements.

"Now where did you pick all these up at?" I asked, holding a knife up to catch the light.

"The alternate Salem."

I glanced at his face, but he seemed quite serious. "They just let you walk out with all their weapons?"

He shrugged. "I killed most of them, they didn't say much after that."

Hard to argue with that kind of logic. He gestured for me to take what I liked so I grabbed another knife and several other sharp objects. The rest of the things he scooped back into the bag and placed the other things in on top of them.

"Are you going to shower?" he asked.

I didn't think I could stand up that long. "No, I'll wait. I'm tired," I told him. I grabbed a few things from my suitcase and went into the bathroom where I brushed my teeth and changed into a nightgown Corrine had bought despite my protest that I wouldn't wear it. It was long and white, with very thin shoulder straps.

When I went back into the bedroom, Mac was already in the bed waiting for me. He was still wearing his slacks and undershirt, making me feel really underdressed. I walked self-consciously over to the bed feeling strange in the nightgown; I'd never worn anything like it in my life.

I turned out the light and climbed into the bed. Mac moved his arm so I could put my head on his shoulder and he put his arm around me. His skin was cool, but I was getting used to that. I covered both of us with the blanket and hoped that my body heat would soon warm him.

"Are you sure you're going to be able to can handle this luv?" he asked me softly.

"We'll find out, won't we?" I hoped I could handle it. If I couldn't now was the best time to find out.

"I suppose so," he murmured. "Goodnight." That quickly he was gone.

I laid there in the darkness for a long time, waiting. I didn't know what I'd expected, but when it didn't happen, I relaxed. His arm was strong around me, holding me tight against him, but I didn't mind. I snuggled a little closer to his side and closed my eyes. Soon, I slept.

I was standing by the fireplace in our old apartment in Baltimore, looking down at Mac and I lying on the floor. The scene was frozen, as if time had stopped.

"Let's go over this once more," I heard a voice say.

I looked over to the kitchen doorway and saw the woman standing there. She was about my height, but very beautiful, with long dark hair and pale clear skin. I didn't think she was a vampire, but then again, this was a dream, wasn't it?

"Do we have to?" I asked, somehow knowing what the answer would be.

"You know we do," she replied calmly. "If you'd been faster, he would have survived. Maybe this time you'll remember something that will tell us who did this."

This time? Then I realized that she was always with me when I had this dream, making me go over those events, searching my memory for something that would tell her who planned the attack on the apartment.

"We don't have to, I know who did this," I shot back, irritated at this woman who had been invading my dreams for years. "Kate Hepburn planned it with the prince, and Dougal embraced him."

"What?" she demanded.

I looked around the room and changed the dream scene to the lobby of the hotel in Paris. Mac and I were standing by the desk, frozen in the middle of our argument about Kate.

"My God," she whispered. "Mac. He looks so alive."

"He's dead," I replied coldly. "He's Kindred. Just listen." We watched.

The other me frowned. "Dougal's dead," she said, counting off on her fingers. "The bitch that bit me is dead, and the really ugly one is dead. I only remember one other one."

"The one that I staked, yes," Mac murmured.

She looked up at him suspiciously. "You're remembering quite a bit for having amnesia, aren't you?"

"As I said," he replied, returning her even look, "my memory is coming back."

"So who else was there?"

"Your mother."

"What are you talking about?" she demanded.

"Kate was there," he repeated.

The scene froze again and I turned back to the woman. "Then there's the letter." I changed the dream to the plane where I'd sat on the bed reading Dougal's letter.

The woman glanced at Mac, then went over to where I was sitting on the bed and read the letter in my hands. After a moment, she looked up at me.

"Who is she?" the woman asked.

"A vampire," I told her. "Tremere. My mother."

"She has to die," she said firmly.

"She will," I promised her. "The minute I see her."

She seemed satisfied with that. "Who embraced him?" she asked softly, almost as if she already knew the answer to her question.

"Dougal Galloway," I stated, my voice coldly bitter. "I don't know exactly what happened, but Mac said it was the hardest decision of his life."

"And his last, it would seem." She took one last look at Mac and waived her hand, bringing us back to the apartment the night of the raid.

A glance showed that the Kindred Mac had staked was lying on the ground at his feet and Dougal was standing in front of him. I was across the room shoving the fireplace poker through the stomach of the Nosferatu.

"Let's see what he remembers," the girl said, and the scene started to move.

"We can do this the easy way, Cormac," Dougal said softly. "Just agree to this and neither of you will be hurt."

That seemed to piss Mac off. "I have not changed my mind," he says calmly, watching the vampire. At a sound across the room, Mac spun to see the dream me laying at the base of the wall near the doorway into the kitchen. She was stunned, and the ugly vamp started to come after her.

"Leave her alone!" Mac shouted. One of the large plants in the room slammed into the ugly vamp. He fell back a step and brushed himself off as Dougal grabbed Mac from behind.

"Eliza!" he yelled. I moved to help him, but the woman laid a hand on my arm.

"This is a dream," she reminded me. "His memory."

"How did you do this?" I demanded.

She didn't answer me and I turned to see Mac hanging limp in Dougal's arms.

The other me almost got away until Valerie grabbed her. I guess I'd never realized how close I'd been to escaping until that moment. I watched Mac's face as she drained me, the heartbreak and horror written there plain as day. Even though I knew this had happened a long time ago, I still wanted to cry at his pain.

When Dougal lifted his head from Mac's neck, my lover was too weak to move. In the dim firelight I saw that his face was wet with tears as Dougal laid him down on the couch and walked over to where the other vamp was still holding my body. "Is she dead?" he asked, his voice hard.

"Yeah," Valerie replied in a frightened voice.

Dougal took my body gently from Valerie and laid me down on the floor. That surprised me, for some reason I wouldn't have thought that he'd have that much respect for the dead. Then he stood and hit Valerie hard, sending her flying across the room. "The girl wasn't supposed to die, you fool," he growled harshly. "It wasn't supposed to happen like this!"

"Her blood was strong," she cried, wiping the blood from the side of her face. "I got carried away."

Dougal gave her a dangerous look that almost frightened me, even though I knew he was dead. "Leave," he ordered her sternly. "If I see your face again I'll destroy you."

Valerie took off as Dougal bent to check my pulse. When he stood up, I could tell that he really thought I was dead and didn't like it. He walked slowly back to the couch.

"Eliza," Mac whispered, his voice low and agonized.

"I'm sorry, boy," Dougal told him crouching at his side. I believe he actually meant it. "It wasn't supposed to happen like that, she wasn't supposed to die."

"Kill me," Mac begged.

"I can't do that, boy. Things weren't supposed to happen this way, I swear." Damn, in the dim light it looked like Dougal was trying not to cry.

"Kill me," Mac pleaded again.

Dougal shook his head. "I can't. I know that you loved her, boy, and I'm sorry that she died." He bent to whisper something in his ear that I couldn't hear.

The woman beside me cursed softly and the scene froze for a moment, then changed a little before moving again.

Dougal shook his head. "I can't. I know that you loved her, boy, and I'm sorry that she died." He bent to whisper in Mac's ear. "I can make you forget the pain of losing her," I heard him say.

"Yes," my lover whispered, closing his eyes. "Forget."

We watched Dougal call for fire, then burn the tattoo from Mac's arm. The room filled with the smell of burning flesh and it made me want to throw up. Dougal slit his wrist and poured his own blood over the wound, healing it into the scar Mac now wears on his arm.

He bent to bite Mac again, and once more the woman had to grab my arm to stop me from interfering. We watched as Dougal fed Mac from his wrist, and I looked away when Mac took a hold of Dougal's arm to feed better.

Actually, looking away brought Kate right into my line of sight. She bent to feel my pulse, and the room faded to darkness.

I blinked in the blackness, not liking it at all. A moment's concentration brought us to the room I was sleeping in with Mac.

The woman looked for a long moment at the bed where Mac and I lay. "How can you do that?" she asked softly.

"Do what?" I said, following her gaze. "Sleep with the man I love?"

"He's a vampire," she hissed fiercely.

I laughed painfully. "Don't you think I can feel that every second I'm with him?" I demanded in a voice hard. "I know he's a vampire, but I love him."

"And true love conquers all?" she asked, still looking at the bed.

"No," I replied truthfully. "It can't. But at least we'll have tonight."

At that she finally looked at me. "Will it be enough?"

"It will have to be," I whispered, tears filling my eyes. "It's all we have."

She nodded thoughtfully. "Sleep, Eliza," she told me. "Sleep and dream no more."

I did, and this time I didn't have to reach for Mac in my sleep, his arms held me against him the whole time I slept.

TREMERE

DON'T BELIEVE WHAT YOU HEAR, DON'T BELIEVE WHAT YOU SEE
IF YOU CLOSE YOUR EYES YOU CAN FEEL THE ENEMY
ACROBAT - U2

I woke to the realization that I was sleeping against something hard and cold. Mac. Maybe an electric blanket would be a good investment.

He wasn't breathing, wasn't moving at all, and there was no heartbeat in his chest. Could I handle this? I guess I had, hadn't I? So far, anyway. And it wasn't like we'd have much chance to sleep together like this when we got back to Salem and the real world.

I laid there for a while and let myself think about the last few days. I'd come a long way from wanting him destroyed to sleeping on his dead shoulder. But I knew that I needed to be with him like I'd never needed anything else.

Finally my bladder told me I had to get up. Mac's arm didn't move at first when I tried to sit up, but after a moment he let me go and rolled over, never really coming awake. I blew out the breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding and blinked when I realized that my hand had been reaching for the stake I'd left under the pillow I hadn't slept on.

I took a deep breath to calm myself down. He hadn't bit me and I hadn't staked him, that was all that mattered. As soon as my heart stopped pounding so hard, I went into the bathroom.

The shower stall was large and clean, something I'm not used to as a rule. Not that the where I normally shower isn't clean, but broken tile and stains don't do much for the setting when you're trying to relax. I stood under the hot water for a long time, something else I'm not used to. My shoulder felt much better, and I wasn't having any bad side effects from sleeping with a corpse.

I closed my eyes at that thought. He wasn't a damned corpse, he was Mac, one time fiancé, undead lover, father of my child, love of my life. Remember those terms? If I loved him enough to sleep with him, to let him sink his fangs in me, then I loved him enough to forgive what he now was.

Once I was dressed, I went downstairs to the kitchen we'd found the night before. There was lunchmeat in the refrigerator, and chips in the cupboard. I started a pot of coffee then poured a large glass of juice and sat down to eat.

A few minutes later a male ghoul came to the doorway and looked around the room. He looked a little out of it, as if he'd just woken up. He was wearing a gun.

"Hey," he said sleepily.

I sat the juice glass back down without taking a drink. "Hey." I made a mental inventory of my weapons, silently cursing my decision to leave my jacket upstairs. I'd chosen not to wear the knife, thinking it would be better to roam around the house unarmed. Well, almost unarmed. The tee shirt I'd thrown on covered the stake I'd stashed at my back, but just barely.

"Mind if I join you?" he asked.

"Not at all." Unless of course, he was here to shoot me, then he'd just have to leave.

He walked over to the refrigerator and poured himself a glass of juice before sitting down at the small table with me. When he didn't make any threatening moves, I picked up my sandwich with my left hand and slowly started eating again.

"I'm Jake," he offered.

"Eliza." He kept both of his hands where I could see them, and I was careful to do the same.

"You're here with Cormac Brennan?"

I watched him take a drink from his glass and wondered if I was going to have to kill him. "Yeah."

He looked at me closely, then sighed. "You seem a little tense."

"I don't normally eat breakfast with strangers carrying guns," I said softly. "Or is it standard issue for house ghouls here?"

"Not usually," he admitted.

"You my babysitter?" I asked dryly.

"Today." He shrugged. "Faith said that you're a bit aggressive."

I smiled grimly. "I've been known to be."

"Do you plan on being aggressive today?"

They were afraid of me. I wanted to laugh, but I just smiled instead. "Not today," I told him softly. "Today I just want to eat and go outside for a little while."

He nodded and relaxed a little bit. "I didn't think you'd be trouble, but you know how the masters are."

"Yes," I told him. I did know.

Jake got himself something to eat and I drank a large cup of coffee before he led me outside. A dozen ghouls were playing volleyball, while half that many were working out nearby. I spent some time watching them before Jake suggested I join them. I knew that he just wanted to see what I could do, but I needed the exercise.

An hour or so later I was tired and sore, but I felt better than I had since... well since Mac and I had made love. A few of the girls went inside and came out a little while later with a huge lunch that they set up in the gazebo. After I'd eaten again, I decided to go back to our room.

"Are you planning on coming down again before sundown?" Jake asked me.

I decided to take pity on him, he looked like he needed a nap. "No, Jake," I told him. "I'll stay put until M-Cormac gets up." It was only a couple of hours until then anyway.

He nodded, but followed me up the stairs and made sure I went into the room. I showered again and changed into something more suited to the night and darkness, not sure exactly what we'd be doing when Mac woke.

Sundown found me sitting on the windowless window seat with one of the magazines I'd picked up in Paris on my lap. I'd been trying to read it, but sorry to say I'm more of an action person than a reader. I had a small lamp on that threw shadows across the room.

I knew the sun had gone down when Mac sat up on the bed. I smiled at him.

"Good morning," he said, swinging his feet down to the floor.

"Good evening," I corrected him softly. When he gave me a reproachful look, I just laughed. "The sun is down, it's evening," I reminded him.

He stood up. "How did you sleep?"

I shrugged, not wanting to get into my nightmares with him. "Okay. I'm not going to ask how you slept, I know it was like the dead."

He looked down and ran his hand across his chest. "I see you didn't have to stake me, I guess I don't bite in my sleep."

"You didn't last night," I told him, "or yesterday, or today or—"

"See," he said, smiling, "now I've got you doing it."

"Yes you do," I said with a laugh. "You didn't bite and I didn't stake. See how that works? We all get along." I watched him walk over to our luggage and asked, "So what's on the agenda? Princely visit?"

He opened one of his bags and pulled out some clothing. "I believe they were going to take care of the Brujah first. That is the gist I got from Faith."

"Okay." I was quiet as I watched him dress in less formal clothes than what I was used to seeing him in, but he still armed himself in his usual manner. A knife for each boot, his figure eights, and his biker leather jacket. "No suit tonight?"

"No," he replied. "We're hunting tonight. I've ruined far too many suits with unexpected head shots ever since Nina stopped doing my laundry."

I didn't like the sound of that, but tried to keep the irritation out of my voice. "Who is Nina, by the way?"

"Nina is a friend of mine in LA," he explained.

"Who does your laundry?"

He sighed. "Private joke."

Lovely. "So she's just a friend in LA?"

"Yes, she looks like someone I know but I don't remember who." He pulled out his wallet and walked over to me, handing me a picture of a beautiful Hispanic woman.

"She's pretty," I told him.

"Mmm-Hmm." He kept looking at me expectantly.

"What, you're asking if I know someone who looks like her?" I looked at the picture again. "She kinda sorta looks familiar, but...." I thought maybe I'd seen a picture of this girl once, a long time ago, but I really didn't know anyone who looked like that.

"That's how I feel," he agreed, taking back the picture and putting it away.

"You know, we only knew each other for a year in Baltimore," I reminded him. "It could have been someone in Ireland."

"Could be," he said, "although Stephen didn't say anything about it."

"Did you ask him?"

"No."

"There you go." How was he supposed to know if he didn't ask?

"Sorry," he said dryly. "I was killing a rogue Gangrel, then we threw a Nosferatu through a wall, I killed quite a few members of the conclave, high ranking members, then the Sabbat pack."

I shook my head in wonder. "Okay, I remember the Sabbat pack."

"It was a very eventful four days," he said with a grim smile.

"Is this what you do all the time?" I asked softly, looking up at him. "Cause it sounds like my life." Death and darkness everywhere.

"It's becoming more and more recurrent," he told me. "It seems like every week something comes up. You know how Garou are."

I raised my eyebrows. "Hard to kill?" I asked, not knowing exactly what he meant. "Big nails? Sharp teeth?"

"Ferocious is the word I was going for," he murmured.

"Been there, recently." Didn't have the tee shirt, though, I'd thrown that away.

"Yes," he said, turning back to me, "how's the scar?"

I pulled the shirt off of my shoulder to show him. "It's fine." I picked up the gun from the seat beside me and held it up. "You want to show me how this goes on?" I'd thought about trying it myself, but I knew it would be more fun if he showed me.

"Well, where would you prefer to carry it?"

How was I supposed to know? I'd never carried a gun before. "On me?"

"Unfortunately, I don't have a shoulder harness," he told me. "You can carry it at the small of your back, but that may interfere with your stakes. You can carry it at your side, for a straight draw—"

"Which could interfere with the knife," I finished.

"You can wear it on your left side for a cross draw," he suggested, then drew one of his guns to show me what he meant.

Looked good to me. "Okay, we'll try that."

He walked over and pulled me to my feet, watching my eyes. He undid my belt slowly, then the button of my jeans. I grinned as he pulled the zipper downward and stopped.

"Would you care for it in, or out?" he asked, taking the holstered gun from my hand.

"Which is the better draw?" I replied, my voice a little husky.

"Out is a little more noticeable," he told me. "In is a little more uncomfortable."

"Stakes are a little noticeable too," I murmured, "that's why I have a big jacket."

"Well, never mind then." He handed me back the gun long enough to zip up and button my pants again. I tried not to look disappointed as he strung the holster on my belt and adjusted it on my hip. He refastened my belt, then drew the gun and holstered it again.

He went over the draw with me to make sure I knew it worked, then turned around to walk away. "Anything else?"

Well, I had an idea, but this probably wasn't the best time for it. "No."

"Got enough stakes?"

"Yeah," I replied. Two were at their usual place at my back and I had one in each jacket pocket and at each ankle. Should be enough. "Depending on how many we come across." Plus there was the silver knife and the gun.

"Given the rest of our entourage, I don't know that you'll get close enough to use stakes."

"We'll see," I drawled. "Don't spoil my fun already." I looked forward to being able to kill vamps again.

"Let me rephrase," he said firmly, turning to look at me pointedly. "Given the firepower of myself and the rest of the entourage, don't try and get close enough to use a stake."

"Stakes throw well, too," I reminded him, "depending on the balance."

"Yes," he murmured thoughtfully. I wondered what he was thinking.

He held his hand out and we went downstairs where we met up with Brenda and Faith outside of the library.

"Good evening ladies," he said politely.

"Cormac," Brenda murmured.

"Cormac," Faith echoed a bit more pleasantly. "Sleep well?"

They both ignored me, and I liked it that way.

"Yes," Mac replied, "and yourself?"

Faith smiled. "Like the dead. Are you ready for the evening? Anything you need? A little refreshment?" I knew she meant blood.

"No," he assured her. "I'm fine."

"I wanted to tell you that the book is ready for you, it's in the library," she added.

His eyes darted to the closed library doors. "Thank you," he said, taking a half step in that direction.

She saw his movement and hid a grin. "We had some intel on the Brujah and if there's no further delays, we can head out."

"Just a moment," Mac murmured, letting go of my hand and literally running into the library.

I would have laughed at his eagerness, but I was feeling a little uncomfortable there in the hall with two vamps and more on their way up to meet us. Brenda shot a glance at me then turned to Faith just as Mac rejoined us and took my hand again.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"The cemetery," Faith replied. Beyond her I could see a group of nearly a dozen Kindred come up from the lower levels.

"The one on Fourth Avenue?" Brenda sounded like she'd been to that particular cemetery before and didn't have happy thoughts about it.

"Yes, at Oak Street," Faith replied. She glanced at the pack behind her and turned toward the door. "Shall we?"

"We shall," Brenda agreed.

There were ghouls waiting for us outside. The vans and the Cadillac were pulled into the drive, along with quite a few motorcycles. I caught Mac looking longingly at them and remembered that he'd had one when we lived in Baltimore.

"Do you have a motorcycle?" I asked him softly.

"In LA," he replied.

"Is it a Harley?" The one he'd had in Baltimore had been. The ones here were too.

"No."

"Don't tell me you're riding a crotch rocket," I drawled.

"No, but it's a little smaller than a Harley," he explained.

After everyone had loaded into the vehicles and we were on our way, Faith glanced around at everyone in our vehicle.

"The particular Brujah we are after tonight are supposed to be living in one of the mausoleums at the cemetery," she told us. "They expected us last night, which is why we decided not to show up. Kinda rude of us but..."

"Bummer," Brenda murmured.

"They'll get over it," Mac added.

"About the time they die," she agreed, "but that's okay. There will be at least ten of them."

Mac leaned forward to talk to Brenda. "Rafe didn't give you my gun back, did he?"

She glanced back at him questioningly. "No."

He seemed disappointed and I couldn't stop myself from commenting. "Giving guns away all the time?" I asked dryly. "And don't you have enough guns?"

"It would have been quite helpful at this particular moment," he said softly, "but it looked better on Rafe."

Looked better? "Okay, whatever."

He sat back and crossed one leg over the other. While he played with his boot heel, I made sure I could recognize all the vamps in the van with us. It wouldn't do for me to kill one on accident thinking they were Brujah.

It didn't take us long to get into Nashville, and soon the driver pulled down a side road that ran beside a large cemetery and cut his lights. When he reached the end of the cemetery, he turned down an alleyway and parked.

We all got out quickly and quietly. The cemetery had few lights and the moon was hiding. The darkness worked both for and against us, hiding us from our enemies, but hiding them from us too. We entered the graveyard through an access gate and as soon as we were through the party split up into three groups. One group went left, another went right, while the rest of us headed right for the mausoleum.

Faith and her ghoul led us, followed closely by Brenda, Nick, Lilah, Mac and me. Mac pulled his guns and made sure the safeties were off while I pulled the stakes from my jacket pockets.

As we headed toward the mausoleum Mac pointed ahead and to our right. "There's movement on the other side of the road," he whispered.

Nick peered in that direction. "I don't see it."

"I do," I said softly.

"I can't see for sure what it is," Mac told me.

"Something moving, a few of them." At least three of them, maybe more near one of the crypts on the other side of the drive that cut through the grounds.

"Can you sense what they are?" Mac asked me very softly.

"They're Kindred," I told him, "and there's a lot more here than just those three."

"Where?"

I thought for a moment, trying to isolate all those signals coming at me. "At least four in the mausoleum, and a few more on the other side of the cemetery."

He turned and passed the information along to Nick, although I'm not sure how he told him he knew, exactly. I followed him when he passed Brenda to move down the left side of the mausoleum. I could hear something moving near the front of the building and see some of our party over near the fence moving forward.

There was a light on the corner of the building and I didn't like the idea of us walking into it. "Don't you think we should take out that light before we get into it?" I hissed at Mac.

"I plan on it when I get up there," he told me. "Do you have something else in mind?"

Gee, I wonder. "Throw something at it? Knock it out?"

"A bit wicked conspicuous," he reminded me.

I glanced at the Tremere moving toward the other Kindred I could feel. "It's going to be wicked conspicuous in a minute really quick here anyway."

We stepped into the light and heard gunfire on other side of the mausoleum. Soon it was followed by gunfire from our left. As we reached the corner of the building, we could hear something moving along the front.

More importantly, I could feel something moving. "There's one real close just around the corner, Mac," I told him very quietly.

He nodded, then stepped around the corner to fire and stepped back. That brought the attention of the vamps to our right down on us, and they started firing. Luckily, they were bad shots.

Cursing softly, I decided not to wait for Mac to do something about the light. I threw the stake in my right hand and a moment later we were wrapped in darkness. I shifted the stake in my left hand to my right and scanned the darkness around us.

Mac stepped out and fired again, returning quickly to my side. Brenda moved toward the back of the building away from us and I could sense the things she was going after. Mac stepped out again, but didn't come back this time after firing.

I retrieved the fallen stake and peeked around the corner. Mac was firing at a vamp behind a tree about ten yards away, and another vamp was lying on the ground on fire. Gotta love phosphorous rounds.

Mac fired at another vamp that'd been hiding behind a tombstone and got him square in the chest. I could feel one just inside the mausoleum, but I didn't have a shot at it. Suddenly I heard a shot from behind me and when I spun to look I heard another from the front of the building. A quick look behind showed that Brenda had that situation under control, so I looked back at Mac.

He was standing further away then he had been, and firing at the front of the building. Unfortunately, he was standing in the line of fire between me and the vamp behind the tree, so I couldn't do anything when the vamp fired at him, hitting him in the leg. His leg went out from under him and he fell to the ground.

Fuck. A closer look showed that he didn't look that hurt, and at least now he was out of my way. I hurled the stake in my right hand and quickly readied the other for the throw, but there was no need. The vamp by the tree fell like a sinker to the ground.

Mac's gun went off again and from the corner of my eye I saw the headless body of the vamp in the doorway fall to the ground. I glanced around, but the Tremere seemed to have everything else under control, except for some gunfire on the other side of the mausoleum. I ran over to my lover and knelt beside him.

"Mac," I whispered urgently. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," he replied, rolling to his left and looking behind me for trouble. Did he really think I'd be stupid enough to leave cover if it wasn't clear? He could heal a hell of a lot more easily than I could, and the fact that there was no wound on his leg from the shot that had knocked him down was clear proof of that.

Mac walked over to the vamp I'd staked and, placing the barrel of a gun at his temple, blew his head off. Blood and gray matter splattered everywhere, and when some landed on me, I groaned.

While I was glad to see he felt fine, he could have been a little more careful. "Point blank tends to splatter, Mac," I reminded him dryly, wiping at the gore on my arm.

He bent and pulled the stake from the heart of the body and handed it to me. I kept it in my hand, hoping I wouldn't have to put it away before I could clean it off.

Mac spent several minutes walking around the cemetery looking at the Brujah bodies, looking for Earl Hardy. I walked with him, keeping an eye out for any vamps the Tremere might have missed. Most of the Tremere had gathered by the mausoleum by then, and I could tell that the rest of the graveyard was safe, from vampires, anyway.

When Mac realized that the fiend he was looking for wasn't there, he holstered his weapon. Somewhere along the way I'd found a body with clean enough clothing that I could wipe the stake off on and now I put it away too. Mac put his arm around my waist and led me back to the mausoleum.

"Well, that took care of that," Faith said as we walked up to the group. Then she got a good look at Mac. "Did you bring other clothes?" she asked him. "You know you need to see the prince."

"At the chantry," he replied.

She shrugged. "I guess we go back there then." She turned toward the vehicles, and we all followed her. Mac fell into step beside Brenda.

"I thought we were replacing the prince as well," he murmured softly.

"At some point I'm sure," she assured him.

He sighed dramatically. "All dressed up and no one to decapitate."

I shot him a startled look. "Didn't you already decapitate some people?" Not that vamps were people, but I wasn't going to say that to the undead man who had his arm around me. "Two vamps are nothing, you're looking for more?"

"I'm looking for Earl," he reminded me.

"What does Earl look like?" I asked, never having gotten a description of the vamp Mac was hunting for.

"He has a head," he said as we got into one of the vans.

"Once you get changed," Faith told him as we pulled out onto the main street, "we'll go see the prince. She's supposed to be at the Iron tonight." She shot a pointed look Brenda. "Of course you'll be coming as well."

"Of course," she replied.

I looked out the window and let the conversation flow around me. There was a camaraderie between these Kindred, even between Mac and Brenda, that seemed to transcend their differences. I knew it was their clan that held them together, and I wondered how other less structured clans managed to get along. Kate had answered my questions about the Kindred freely over the last ten years, but still she could only give me answers to the questions I knew to ask.

When we arrived at the chantry, I followed Mac upstairs and we both changed to something more appropriate for meeting the prince. Soon we were on our way back to town in the Cadillac, with Nick driving and Faith in the seat beside him.

Mac made sure to sit between Brenda and I. I don't know what he thought we'd do to each other with the damn primogen in the car, but he didn't seem to want to find out.

As we drove past the Iron, Mac zoned again. By now I was used to him spacing, so it didn't bother me when he hadn't come out of it by the time Nick parked the car. Everyone else got out, but I stayed put, waiting for Mac to come out of it. Finally he did.

"Welcome back," I told him dryly.

"Do you see that bike over there?" he asked.

I followed his gaze and saw a large motorcycle parked across and down the street. "It seems a little familiar," I murmured. I could barely make out the blue paint over the white, but I could see that it had large saddlebags over the back wheel. The bike resembled the 1961 Harley Davidson motorcycle Mac had owned in Baltimore.

"It's my bike," he told me firmly. "The one Glenn and I brought back from Ireland. I remembered it just now. The only question is, who brought it here?"

We got out of the car and walked over to the others.

"Nice of you to join us," Faith drawled.

Mac apologized and we went inside. The Iron was a teen hangout, but there were some older people among the crowd. I could feel a few vamps in the room but it was hard to tell exactly who in the crush of people. There were more somewhere beneath us. Faith led us toward the back of the club and down a flight of stairs.

In an antechamber of some sort were two vampires standing guard. One wore a suit, and I figured he was either Ventrue or Tremere, although he looked too old to fit in at the chantry. The other looked Brujah. Brenda knew the first one, and Faith introduced him as Nez Smith.

When Nez asked about Micky, I realized that they'd been in the same band in the sixties, the Jesters. What, was every member of that group a vamp now?

Our visit with the prince was short and strange. She didn't seem like she wanted to be there, and acted like she could care less that Brenda and Mac were in town. I was a little surprised that Faith called her by name, but no one else in the room reacted, so I guess it was the norm. Within minutes, we were headed back upstairs.

THE IRON

FAITH HAS BEEN BROKEN TEARS MUST BE CRIED
LET'S DO SOME LIVING AFTER WE DIE
WILD HORSES - THE ROLLING STONES

Once we were on the main floor, I scanned the crowd while Mac talked to the vamps we'd come with. Mac and Brenda wanted to stay at the club, and Faith agreed to have a ghoul bring a car in for us to use.

Brenda excused herself and headed into the crowd. I glanced upward and thought I caught a glimpse of a familiar face. I think Mac saw it too because he led me toward the stairs after Brenda. When we reached the top, I looked across the room to see Bobby and Glenn sitting at a table with a young teenaged couple.

"Damn," I whispered.

"What?" Mac asked.

"In the corner," I said, gesturing in their direction.

He followed my gaze. "Interesting."

"I'm not sure it's safe for you to be up here," I told him.

"I'll go downstairs."

That was too easy. If only he would be so reasonable more often. He leaned down and kissed me on the cheek, then turned and went down the steps.

I followed Brenda across the floor, a little surprised that she seemed to be heading to the same table. The young girl said something to the boy and rose to her feet to greet Brenda. They stepped a little away from the table with the boy and began talking.

That's when Glenn and Bobby looked up and saw me. I guess they hadn't expected me, cause they looked surprised. They both got up and met me a little ways from the table, out of the hearing range of Brenda and her friends.

"Eliza," Glenn said softly.

"Glenn," I murmured, my body tense, ready for a fight I didn't want. "Bobby."

Bobby grinned at me. "Been a while, Eliza. How's life?"

I shrugged. "It has its ups and downs," I replied then looked at Glenn. "What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you."

"You knew I'd be here?" I demanded.

"I knew Mac would have to visit the prince sometime," he told me. "She's here, he'd have to be too. Bobby's been watching the floor."

So it had been him I'd seen earlier. "What do you want?"

"Kate knew all about the raids, Eliza," he said in a hard voice.

I nodded. "I know. I found some information that proves it."

"From what my source says," he continued, "Kate practically planned the entire thing herself. I hear she went into a rage when she thought you were dead. It took two days for you to come around and when you did, the two of you disappeared. Dougal was already gone with Mac, otherwise she probably would have killed them both."

"She won't be a problem much longer," I told him calmly. "As soon as I see her, she dies." I was getting damned tired of saying that, I wanted to move on to the actual doing part.

"Is that right?" he drawled. "I have to ask, Eliza. Did you have something to do with the raids? Did you know that your friends were going to die that night? Jane? Your lover?"

I wanted to hit him but I didn't think that would be a good idea here. I wasn't sure how long I could avoid trouble if Glenn pushed me far enough. "If I had known what was going to happen don't you think I would have done something, anything to stop it?" When his eyes didn't change, I sighed and added, "But there's no way I can convince you of that now, is there, Glenn?"

"There is one way, Eliza," he told me softly.

"And what would that be?" I knew I wouldn't like it, whatever it was he was thinking about.

"Kill him," Bobby said calmly.

I was right, I didn't like it. "No."

"Kill him like I killed Jane," Glenn urged me softly. "Do you think that was easy for me? Do you think I enjoyed hearing her screams?"

"No," I repeated, stronger this time. My fists balled with the effort it took not to strike out at either of them.

"Then let us kill him," Bobby said. He seemed too calm about this, something was up, I just didn't know what.

"Damn it, I won't watch him die again!" I was getting angry, but I was afraid, too, afraid that they'd find out Mac was here and hurt him. I couldn't let that happen. "I listened to you before about Mac and you were wrong," I told Glenn. "You're wrong this time, too. He is still Mac where it counts, I know he is. I can feel it."

Glenn looked at me for a long minute. "Why, Eliza?" he growled harshly. "Is he still that good in bed? Or is it the girl in Salem? Is she his or did you find someone else to fuck when he died?"

I wanted to kill him at that, but I felt a shiver run down my arms and for a moment I couldn't think. I shook my head to clear it. "You stay away from her, Glenn, or I swear I'll kill you myself." Magic, he was using magic against me. I fought to keep my control; I hate it when they use shit like that against me.

"How can you be so sure about him?" he asked softly. "I know you have doubts about him, Eliza. There are things he hasn't told you, things you haven't even asked him about."

"How would you know?"

The same way I know that he's getting his memory back. The same way I know what you really are, I heard his voice say in my mind. *Dhampyr are supposed to hunt the undead, not fuck them. And speaking of the undead...*

I'd been feeling the presence of vamps since we walked into the place, but now I felt one coming closer from behind me. I turned to look and of course it was Mac. I knew he'd agreed to go downstairs too easily. What the hell was he doing?

Ask him about blood bonds, Glenn suggested. *His and yours.*

I took a step back from the mage who was invading my mind. "Are you planning on turning me in to the Kindred Cops?" I asked coldly. One word from Glenn to any Kindred and I was as good as dead. "No matter what you do to me, you have to know that I'll protect him with my life. He's mine."

Bobby smiled and crossed his arms almost like he'd expected me to say that.

Do you think I'd have the heart to see you stuck in a lab for the rest of your unnaturally long life? he asked as if I knew the answer.

Do you still have a heart, Glenn? I replied harshly in my head, almost hoping he couldn't hear it. *Or did the vamps kill it when they killed your mother?*

At that moment, Mac reached us. "Glenn, Bobby," he greeted them.

"I hear you've been remembering things," Glen said softly. Bobby just stood there, watching us, not saying a word.

"Yes," Mac replied but didn't offer any details. Not that Glenn needed any, he sounded like he'd been reading our minds.

I stepped closer to Mac and took his hand, making no effort to hide the movement. Glenn saw it, as I intended. *He's mine*, I told him fiercely.

And you protect what's yours, he whispered in my mind.

Always.

Out loud, Glenn asked Mac what he was doing in Nashville.

"Hunting."

Glenn smiled. "Funny, that's what we're doing here."

"Who are you hunting?" Mac asked before I could.

"Things with teeth." To someone who didn't know him, Glenn seemed very calm, but I could see that his calm was a thin layer covering what had always been an explosive anger. He'd always hated all things Kindred.

"Lots of things have teeth," Mac replied.

"Fair enough," Glenn said, nodding. "Who are you hunting?" I noticed that he hadn't said exactly who or what he was looking for.

"The man who killed my sire," Mac told him.

He didn't seem surprised to hear that Dougal was dead. "Planning on being here long?"

"No longer than necessary."

"Good thing," Glenn murmured.

"And yourself?"

"No longer than necessary."

"It's a good thing," Mac said firmly.

I didn't know how much longer I could take this tension between them. I hated seeing it, they'd never been like this with each other. Hell, they'd been the best of friends once upon a time.

Leaning closer to Mac I whispered, "I don't think it's a good idea for us to stick around."

"Whatever would make you think that," he asked wryly.

Could it possibly be the hostility I could just about feel coming from Glenn in waves?

"The car hasn't arrived yet," he reminded me, a smile playing on his lips, "and I haven't the keys to my motorcycle."

Glenn smiled too, but this one seemed almost genuine. "Oh, you saw that, did you?" Somehow I got the feeling that he'd wanted Mac to see the bike.

"Yes. Glad to see she's still running after all these years."

Slowly, carefully Glenn put his hand in his pants pocket then pulled out a key chain with one key on it. He tossed it to Mac, who caught it in his left hand.

"Runs like a dream," Glenn told him smoothly. "Always did. Good to see you remember it."

"Seeing it jarred my memory a bit," Mac admitted.

"Good to see something finally did," came the dry reply. "You spent quite a bit of time in la-la land, didn't you?"

"I've been lots of places, Glenn," he drawled.

"Lots of elsewhere places." What exactly did Glenn know about Mac's life?

"Those too," Mac agreed.

Glenn studied his face for a moment, as if thinking about something. "So you're hunting your sire's killer," he said finally. "Somebody finally staked the old guy?"

Mac's hand tightened ever so slightly on mine. "So I assume."

"About time."

"Oh?" He seemed surprised. "Were you on the waiting list?"

"I was in that line," Glenn admitted.

"Along with many others, I understand," he murmured, glancing down at me.

I didn't say anything, there was no reason for me to. Mac knew exactly how I felt about Dougal; I'm glad he's dead so I don't have to destroy him myself.

"I thought she was on that list too," Glenn replied, looking pointedly at our hands. "Now I'm not so sure."

"Her feelings for me are much different from her feelings toward my sire," Mac informed him.

"Her feelings for you," Glenn said softly, "are much different from what I thought they would be at this point in her life, and your... unlife."

"Now as much as they ever were, Glenn," Mac said in a hard voice, "our feelings for one another are none of your damn business."

Damn, I didn't want them to get into this. If Glenn knew what buttons to push and wanted to cause problems, I knew he'd push it to the limit. Didn't either one of them remember that they'd once been friends? More than friends?

Glenn clutched at his heart dramatically. "Oh, that just hurt so much," he murmured dryly.

"It wasn't meant to hurt," Mac replied calmly.

"So, you hanging around? Can I buy you a drink?"

What, did he think we could be bosom buddies after the thinly veiled threats and accusations here? And was Glenn planning on opening a vein for his old friend?

Mac suppressed a smile as if he were thinking along the same lines. "No, thank you."

Glenn nodded. "Maybe we'll see you around."

"If you're lucky," Mac told him. He looked around for Brenda and propelled me in her direction.

"And you're not," I heard Glenn say warningly.

Mac and I walked over to where Brenda was talking to the two teens that were sitting with Glenn and Bobby earlier. As we approached them, I looked up at Mac.

"Are you sure it's a good idea for us to stick around here?" I asked him.

"We're leaving shortly," he told me softly.

"Good."

When the girl noticed us standing there, she stopped talking and looked at us. Brenda turned her attention to us, a cold expression on her face.

"We won't be needing the car," Mac told her. "We've acquired another mode of transportation."

Somehow I didn't think she was disappointed. "So you won't be needing me."

"We'll be leaving shortly," he added.

"Okay."

"Good evening," Mac said politely. As he led me toward the door, I heard the blond talk to Brenda.

"Who's the new vamp and the puppy?" she asked.

I stiffened; I wasn't a fucking ghoul and it bothered me that the girl thought I was. It shouldn't have mattered, really. She didn't know me, didn't anything about me except what she obviously saw in my aura, but it still hurt.

"They are here on... his business," Brenda replied coldly. I guess I hadn't realized just how much antagonism was between the two of them. I wondered why Elvira had agreed to allow Brenda to come to Nashville to 'help' Mac. Did she want him dead?

"Good evening, gentlemen," Mac said as we passed the table where Bobby and Glenn had sat back down.

"Evening, Mac," Bobby drawled, the first words he'd spoken to the man who was once his friend.

I had to see how deep your feelings were for each other, Eliza, I heard Glenn say with some remorse in my head as we walked away. *I knew you once, and I don't think you could love him if you didn't believe he was the same Mac we once knew.*

I tried to tell you, I replied, still not knowing if he could hear me.

Still, ask him about blood bonds, he added. *Tell him if he likes I can break that one for him before it gets to be a problem he can't handle.*

Do me a favor, Glenn, I asked.

Anything.

Stay the fuck out of my mind. I'd had enough of mind games by then. I didn't want to have to worry about what I was thinking.

You break my heart, Eliza, he replied dryly. *And here I thought you loved me.*

I love Mac. I deliberately replayed kissing Mac on the plane in my mind. By the time I got to the part where I had pulled the first handgun from its holster, I knew that Glenn was gone.

"Well, that went well," Mac murmured when we reached the bottom of the stairs.

I had to agree. "Nobody died."

"Yet."

"The night is still young," I reminded him. I wouldn't feel safe until we got back to the chantry. Man, did it seem weird to think that way. Speaking of weird, "Did something seem weird to you when we were talking to them? I mean besides the mind talk."

"Well, since I don't remember them I have nothing to base it on," he told me.

He had a point. "So what are we doing now?"

"Well, we are in a club." He grabbed my waist and swung me around, pulling me up against his body.

"But we're not dressed clubby," I said with a smile. "And I don't have a club."

"But we can still have fun," he said. "Besides after the boys up there calm down a bit, I'd like to go back and talk to them."

I looked up at him in surprise. "Do you really think that's a good idea?"

"Glenn assured me he wouldn't stake me here," he said.

Another surprise. "Did he?"

"Yes," he replied. "But you said they were acting strange. How so?" He pulled me into a little alcove and looked down at me.

I glanced around and saw that no one was close enough to overhear our conversation. "Usually Bobby is a bit more outgoing, and Glenn used to be a lot friendlier. Of course, you didn't use to be—" A vamp, but I wasn't going to say it. "What you are and I didn't used to work for the Society."

"Yes, I would imagine some things would take some getting used to." He looked casually out over the crowd but I think that maybe he was waiting for me to make my usual biting comment about his body temperature. If that were the case, he'd be waiting a while.

"I think you can get used to anything given the right motivation and time," I told him softly.

He smiled down at me. "Glad to hear you say that."

I squeezed his hand and smiled back at him. "So you want to do what while we wait for them to calm down?"

He took me in his arms and spun me around again. "Dance." He seemed more lighthearted than I'd seen him yet.

I put my hand on his shoulder to catch my balance. "Dance floor's over there," I told him.

"Was the woman Brenda was talking to one of our old friends as well?" he asked as he led me toward the dance floor where the band was driving out a song with a hard rhythm.

"I have no idea who she was," I said roughly, "but I didn't like her." I wasn't looking forward to dancing to this music, but maybe it would change by the time we got to the floor.

"Because she knows Brenda or something else?"

I glanced upward toward the balcony and saw the girl in question looking over the rail at me, still talking to Brenda. "She called me a puppy," I reminded him irately. "I'm not a puppy."

"Do you care what she thinks of you?" Thankfully the music changed to a slower song and Mac pulled me into his arms. I put one arm around his waist and the other on his shoulder. We danced to the slow beat of the music.

"No," I told him, "but I don't like her thinking I'm a puppy."

"It's your aura luv," he said softly, rubbing his chin against my hair.

"Thanks," I said dryly.

"Don't worry about it," he replied in the same tone, making me smile.

"So, Mac," I murmured, remembering Glenn's suggestion, "what's a blood bond?"

"Don't you know?" he asked, sounding surprised. "And who brought it up?"

"How the hell am I supposed to know?" I asked him irritably. "I'm not Kindred. And Glenn mentioned it, more or less."

"More or less?" He stopped moving and looked down at me questioningly.

"The mind thing, you know." I looked up at him, finding it hard to believe that Glenn hadn't been talking to Mac's mind too. "Wasn't he doing it to you too?"

"Yes," he admitted. "What did he say?"

"He told me to ask you about them," I said. "What is it?"

"Remember the way Linda acted around Kate?" he asked softly as he started to move again. "And the way she was when Kate wasn't around?"

"Like I could forget." Linda's addiction was ingrained in my mind no matter how hard I tried to forget it.

"That was a blood bond," he said. "Not your typical one, but one more or less. Brenda and Rafe are more normal."

"How do you break it?" I tucked my face into the curve of his neck, trying to clear my mind of childhood memories.

"Become fully bound to another," he explained, pulling me closer, "be embraced, kill the one you are bound to."

"No other way?" Unless Glenn planned on killing someone, none of those ways sounded like something he could help with.

"I have heard spending time away from the one you are bound to weakens it."

"How do you get blood bonded?" Knowledge is power, according to Mac, and I sure as hell didn't want that happening to me.

"If a mortal drinks a Kindred's blood," he said close to my ear, "or a Kindred drinks another Kindred's blood. Three times and you are fully bound."

It sounded disgusting and I looked up at Mac warily. "Why would Glenn tell me to ask about your blood bonds and mine?"

"I was just going to ask you the same thing," he told me.

His face was so close I had a hard time concentrating. "I have no idea," I told him impatiently. "Sounds like blood bonds are a Kindred thing, and you're in charge of those. I don't drink blood, let alone Kindred." Glenn had talked as if Mac had a blood bond. "Who's blood have you been drinking?"

"Yours," he whispered with a sly grin. He pulled me closer again and I closed my eyes. "He may be talking about your..." he paused to clear his throat, then continued, "Kate's blood. Given what you were born with and what you have been fed."

"Would that cause a blood bond?" I asked, hoping it wouldn't. I didn't want anything coming between me and her final death. "Cause you may have noticed that I don't particularly like her. Could you get a blood bond from me given what I am?" That was a thought.

"I have heard of people who are immune to the effects of the bond," he murmured. "I don't think I can be bonded to you, at least not by blood."

I smiled against the fabric of his shirt and lightly touched the skin on his neck. "Glenn said something about knowing a way to break a blood bond, but he didn't say what." My voice sounded odd to me, preoccupied. Dancing with Mac had always distracted me, but for some reason tonight it was worse.

"I told you all the ways I know of," he said softly. "But if Glenn knows some, it could be I don't remember them. Why don't we go ask him?"

I looked up at him in surprise. "Are you sure about that?"

"He seems to want us to think he knows a lot. Lets go find out."

I studied his face for a long moment, trying to figure out just what he thought that would accomplish. Finally I shrugged. "Just remember that you heal a lot better than I do, and that there are a lot of innocent people here."

"Always," he told me, "but don't let him 'mind speak' to you. If he has something to say, let him say it aloud."

Ri-ight. "Like I can stop him. I'm not a damn mage, what am I supposed to do?"

"Punch him if he doesn't get the hint," he suggested, grinning. "Or throw a stake."

I smiled a little at the thought, but the smile didn't last. "You and Glenn used to be really close, Mac," I told him, "almost like brothers. I'd hate to have to kill him and have you remember that later." I didn't think he'd be able to forgive himself if that happened, or me.

He pulled me closer and hugged me. "So would I," he whispered against my hair. A moment later he pulled back. "Shall we?"

"Okay." For Mac I'd do anything. Or rather, anything that didn't risk Corrine.

The music faded away and was replaced by a driving temp as we walked off the dance floor. Brenda and her friend were gone, but I saw Faith and Nick talking to another vamp in one of the conversations areas of the room as we walked up the stairs.

When we reached the top, we could see that Glenn and Bobby were alone. They saw us coming, and they seemed to have been expecting us to come back.

Couldn't stay away? Glenn asked in my mind.

I didn't answer, just thought about how good Mac's arms had felt around me when we were dancing.

"Hello," Mac said when we got to the table. "Does the offer still stand?"

Glenn raised his eyebrows and Bobby smiled, but neither of them replied.

"Out loud if you please, Glenn," Mac told him firmly, pulling out a chair for me to sit down in, then sitting beside me.

"If you insist," Glenn conceded. "What's your poison?"

"Scotch on the rocks."

When Glenn asked me what I wanted, I tried very hard not to smile but couldn't help glancing at Mac. "Coffee."

The mage called the waitress over and told her what we wanted. When she'd gone after it, Mac looked at him and grinned. I could almost believe we were back in Baltimore at the Memphis having a drink after a successful hunt. Almost.

"Now then," Mac said pleasantly, "have we all calmed down a bit?"

"Were you nervous?" Glenn asked, watching him carefully.

If anything, Mac's grin got bigger. "Should I have been?"

"Depends, Mac," he drawled. "Eliza thinks you're not a black hat. Are you?"

Mac sat back and looked at him. "Who is to say? You, Glenn?"

Glenn shook his head. "I'm not generally the judge, just the executioner," he told him. "It's damned hard for a vamp to be a good guy." He said vamp the way I usually said it, like it was a vile thing.

"But possible, yes," Mac replied. "Ask Eliza if I have acted like a black hat."

When Glenn looked pointedly at me, I returned his look with a level one of my own. "I've already told you what I think, Glenn," I said firmly.

"Yes, you have," he replied smoothly. "But is he just making you think he's your Mac? I'm finding it hard to believe you'd let him bite you any other way."

Son of a bitch. How had he known that? Fucking mind reader.

Does the truth hurt, Eliza? his voice asked in my head.

I felt my shoulders start to knot from the tension there, and when Mac reached over to take my hand I tried not to clutch at it. Time to fight fire with fire.

"I've already told you what I think," I repeated, struggling to keep my voice calm. In my mind I thought about what it had felt like when Mac had sunk his fangs into my wrist, the peace and desire that had connected me to Mac on the most basic level I've ever felt.

"You have," Glenn said abruptly, turning away. "Who exactly are you hunting, Mac. Maybe we can help. We have contacts here."

Mac's voice was very hard and cold. "Earl Hardy."

"Don't like him very much, do you?" he asked, almost amused. "I'd think you'd be glad the vamp who turned you was gone."

Bobby shifted a little uncomfortably on his seat. He shot a glance at Glenn, then settled down, but Mac had noticed his movements.

"Dougal was my friend," he said softly, "my teacher, my confidant for nineteen years, Glenn." Mac turned to Bobby. "You've known each other for a little over that time. If someone were to kill him," at that he nodded toward Glenn, "how would you feel?"

The Garou growled low in his throat before he caught himself. "I'm sure I wouldn't like it much," he admitted.

Mac turned back to Glenn looking all justified. I closed my eyes for a moment, wondering why I'd never thought of Mac's loss that way. Just because he was a vamp didn't mean Mac hadn't cared about him.

"Point taken," Glenn conceded. "What are your leads on Earl?"

"He is Brujah," Mac told him. "I have a receipt from Bruckman's Imports in Paris with an end destination of Nashville signed by Earl on July fifteenth of this year."

Glenn nodded as if Bruckman's sounded familiar to him. "There've been problems with that place for a long time. I hadn't heard that he was back in town, though."

"Does everyone know this guy?" I whispered to Mac.

Glenn heard me and smiled dryly. "Yeah, he's real popular."

The waitress returned and sat our drinks in front of us on the table before leaving us once more alone.

"Do you know where he is?" Mac demanded as soon as she walked away, even more serious than he'd been before.

"As I said," Glenn murmured, "I hadn't heard he was back in town. Last time I heard he was someone saw him down by the cave James had going on in a park down town. Of course, James is dead, but some of the Brujah still hang there." He smiled again and looked at Mac. "I heard there was an... incident with the Brujah earlier tonight. Were you there?"

"Yes," Mac said dismissively. "Where exactly is this cave?"

"Down at Shelby Park." I didn't quite like the smile he gave us. "We can show you if you'd like."

"If you promise to behave," Mac said warningly.

Glenn tried to look hurt. "It's not me you need to watch out for," he said with mock sternness. "Eliza was always more likely to stake than me."

I rolled my eyes; Glenn had always hated vamps more than I had, but he was right, I'd always been the first to leap into combat with the Kindred when the time came.

"I don't care what happens to the rest of them down there," Mac said coldly, leaning closer to the table, "but Earl is mine."

The hard tone of Mac's voice didn't seem to bother Glenn. "Hmm, that's a word that's been used a few times tonight." He took some money from his pocket and threw it on the table. "Shall we?" he asked as he stood.

Mac looked up at him questioningly. "Who has used it?"

"Mine'?" he asked, looking surprised. "Eliza has, several times."

When he turned to look at me with a raised eyebrow, the smirk on his face made me want to punch Glenn. I tried to look innocent, but did I mention—yeah, I guess I did.

We followed the others downstairs, but as we started for the door, Mac saw Faith.

"Just a moment," he said to Glenn before looking down at me.

Like I wanted to go talk to the vamps. "Go ahead," I told him.

"Be good," he cautioned me before he walked away.

I glanced warily at the men he'd left me with, almost regretting that I'd stayed behind.

"Afraid of us, Eliza?" Bobby asked.

"Should I be?" I studied him closely for first time tonight.

He was older, of course, somewhere around thirty-four if I remembered correctly. He wore jeans and a tank top with a red jacket and red felt cowboy hat that covered his long blond hair that he wore in dreadlocks. His taste in clothes hadn't changed much, but now he apparently had the means to dress the way he'd wanted to when he was younger.

"Have you done anything you need to be afraid of us learning about?" he drawled, his voice deep with caution.

"I've done what I've had to do," I told him coldly. "Nothing more, nothing less."

He knows what you've done, Glenn told me silently, and why you did it. Why didn't you come to me? I would have helped you.

I looked at Glenn sadly. *I never expected to live this long,* I replied quite honestly. *As long as Corrine is safe, I don't care what happens to me.*

I would have helped you, he repeated as Mac started back toward us.

I didn't need you, I told him. I wasn't trying to be cruel, but Glenn would never have been able to replace Mac. No one ever had, and no one ever would.

We stood in uncomfortable silence until Mac joined us and took my hand.

"Shall we?" he asked.

"Of course, let's go," Glenn replied.

As we went outside, I wondered how Glenn could act so calm. But I guess it didn't matter, did it? If I'd asked Glenn for help, maybe I could have raised Corrine myself, maybe I could have stayed away from Kate and never signed the blood contract that constantly ate at my soul. Then again, maybe Kate would have found us and killed us all.

We walked down the block to where Mac's bike was parked next to two other motorcycles. Mac buttoned his jacked one handed as we went, then stood looking down at his bike for a long moment before glancing at the other ones parked there.

At last he looked at Glenn who was standing next to his bike waiting patiently. "How long has my bike been sitting here?"

"About an hour and half," he replied with a smile. "You don't think we didn't expect you?"

"Who brought it?" Mac asked suspiciously. "Just curious."

Glenn grinned. "That would be telling."

"Yes it would," Mac agreed. "Now who brought it?"

"That would be telling," he repeated, getting on his bike and picking up his helmet. "Can't give away all my secrets."

"Yet," Mac murmured.

"Ever," Glenn corrected as he put the helmet on.

Mac handed me one of the helmets that hung from the handlebars then put the other one on and adjusted the bomber glasses that I remembered from Baltimore.

I smiled. "I thought they burned this type of helmet twenty years ago?" I murmured to myself, noticing that Bobby wasn't putting on a helmet.

One by one they started the bikes and we followed the others away from the Iron and into the night.

THE CAVE

DAMNED IF YOU LOVE ME, DAMNED IF YOU DON'T
IT'S GETTING HARDER HOLDING ON BUT I CAN'T LET YOU GO
DAMNED - BON JOVI

Glenn led us through the streets of Nashville to a park near the river. He drove slowly toward the back of the park and stopped near a set of railroad tracks that ran through it. Mac pulled up beside him and turned his bike off. The sound of his cell phone ringing cut through the sudden silence like a knife.

I got off the bike and stepped away, watching Mac take off his helmet and answer the phone. It was that girl again, Christina. I really had to ask him what exactly their relationship was, it seemed like she was calling him every time I turned around.

"You're probably going to be mad at me," she told him, worry and guilt coloring her voice.

"Oh?" Mac asked, his voice hard.

"I can't find her," she said in a rush.

"Who?"

"The girl," she replied a little impatiently. "She like, disappeared this morning."

Corrine, she was talking about Corrine.

"Yes," Mac murmured, apparently having realized that too. He got off the bike and moved a few feet away from it.

"I can't find her," Christina repeated. She almost sounded frantic, making me wonder again how close she was to my lover. "Any ideas?"

"She has been taken to a safe house," Mac assured her calmly.

"When?"

"This morning."

There was silence on the line for a long moment. "Nice of you to let me know," she drawled finally.

"I asked my contact to let Brenda know," Mac told her awkwardly, "before I remembered Brenda would be here and...." He stopped and shook his head. "I'm sorry, Christina."

"As long as she's safe and you know where she is, I guess it's not a problem," she murmured softly. "I was just a little worried."

"I apologize for that, Christina," he said sincerely. "Things have been a little hectic the last few days."

"Yeah? How's everything going?"

"Good, now," he told her. "More normal, for us."

"The girl hasn't staked you yet?"

Why did everyone think I was going to stake him? I wasn't that aggressive, was I? I leaned against the bike and waited to see what he would say.

"No," he replied softly, turning to smile at me.

"You don't sound like you're worried she will," the girl said slowly.

"Not unless I do something to provoke it," he murmured. When I smiled at him, he said, "Say 'hi' to the girl, Christina."

"What?"

He shook his head. "Never mind."

"You're in Nashville?" she asked. "Have you seen Brenda?"

"Yes, several times."

"She's okay?" Christina sounded worried about the other vamp. "She hasn't called home tonight."

"Well, we were dealing with the Brujah this evening, then visiting with the prince."

"The Brujah?" she asked slowly. "You weren't at that cemetery down on Oak and Fourth, were you?"

How did she know that? I thought Mac didn't know that many people who'd been to Nashville.

"Yes."

"Really?" She didn't sound surprised. "God I hate that place."

"What went down there?" Mac asked slowly. "I got the feeling that Brenda knew it as well."

"Well, Brenda, me, Lena," she paused for a moment, and when she continued I could almost feel the sorrow in her voice, "and Luke all got shot there as well as shooting numerous bad guys."

I wondered who Luke was to upset the girl like that, usually when she talked to Mac she was bright and happy.

"Tonight we did the shooting," he told her.

"Good, I had a feeling we missed a few when we were there before."

"About ten," Mac murmured. "We didn't miss any. Now we're down at one of the parks following more of them."

"Which park is that?"

"Shelby Park."

She chuckled. "What are you doing, following our footsteps? Well I guess backward cause we were at the park first, then at the cemetery."

"Searching for Earl Hardy," he told her, looking off into the woods.

"You think he's at the park?" By the tone of her voice, Mac had explained that Earl had killed their sire.

"Someone does," he replied, glancing at Glenn who was talking quietly with Bobby a few yards away.

"Who?"

"An old friend," he told her with a smile, "from before my accident."

"Yeah, well, just don't slip on any fangs tonight," she warned him.

"Only one other of us in the group has fangs," he said, "and he has claws too."

"So I'm assuming you don't need any help."

"Not at the moment," he assured her. "Is Simon still under wraps?"

"Yeah," she told him. "He's not talking too much, but he's under wraps. I'm surprised, you'd think Dominate would work a little better than that." She seemed to realize she was in danger of rambling and stopped herself. "Well I don't want to keep you, I was just concerned that I couldn't find the girl, thought I'd call. I've been looking for her since sundown."

"Yes, she's with another old friend," he informed her.

"Would that be the Jared that Brenda knows?" she asked slowly.

"Brenda knows him?" Mac asked in a hard voice.

"You didn't know Brenda knew him?" Christina seemed surprised. "He's with that whole coven thing."

"Oh," he said, obviously offended by the mention of Brenda. "The Mother thing."

"Yeah, that whole thing," she said. "Would that be him? Cause he was seen going into her apartment building and no one came out."

Mac chuckled softly. "That would be Jared."

"Like I said, I don't mean to keep you," she repeated.

"Well, thank you for your concern," he told her. "Once again I apologize."

"No problem, as long as she's safe."

"If I see Brenda I'll tell her to call you. Good evening."

"Okay," she replied. "Good night, Cormac."

As he hung up the phone, Mac looked at me. "I said good bye."

"She's the only one you say goodbye to," I said with a smile. From the corner of my eye I saw Glenn and Bobby walking toward us.

"She's my sister," he reminded me. "What do you want? I say goodbye to you, not that I call you much anymore."

I shook my head. "Okay, the last two times I talked to you on the phone you hung up on me."

"And Corrine," he added thoughtfully.

"Okay, you say goodbye to Corrine," I admitted.

"Can we get on with this?" Glenn asked impatiently. "Stop with the bickering, let's go. You guys haven't changed."

"Good to hear you say that," Mac murmured.

Glenn shook his head. "Well, besides the teeth and the body temperature," he corrected himself, his voice sober.

"I always had teeth," Mac replied.

"They just weren't that sharp."

Glenn started off across the railroad tracks and into the woods. We followed him, Bobby falling behind us to watch the rear. Mac reached inside his jacket with both hands and readied his guns for a quicker draw. If he'd asked, I would have told him there weren't any vamps close enough for him to be concerned about, but he didn't ask. And it wasn't like there couldn't have been something else lurking in the darkness that I couldn't feel.

We walked for several hundred feet through the trees until we got to a grouping of boulders that stood over my head. Glenn walked between two of them and into the mouth of a natural underground tunnel. He held up his hand and a small ball of light appeared in front of him, moving with him to light our way.

"Do you... sense anybody?" Mac asked softly as we followed Glenn deeper into the earth. "Besides me?"

I thought for a moment and realized that I did. They were probably on the edge of my sensory range, but then being underground could be messing with me. "Yeah, I do," I whispered. "A couple, but I don't know how close."

"Very well," he murmured.

The tunnel angled downward, and the more we walked, the more water I could hear dripping. There must have been a hot spring somewhere down there because it kept getting warmer the longer we walked. Soon I was sweating, but I didn't want to take my jacket off. I

couldn't afford to replace it and I didn't want to lose it fighting the bad guys, so I just dealt with the heat.

I noticed that Glenn took his coat off, and in the dim light I saw the Superman tattoo high on his right arm. Looking at it made me sad remembering how the four of us, Mac, Glenn, Jane and I, had gone into the tattoo parlor together after a particularly successful hunt. Glenn had chosen the Superman, Mac had gotten something Celtic and Jane had gone for a rose. I'd picked a simple design that nowadays people call 'tribal'. I pushed the memories away and concentrated on the task at hand.

Eventually we could hear people talking somewhere ahead of us and Mac pulled his guns. Glenn had been letting the light dim as we got closer to the voices, and soon he let it fade altogether. We stopped in the tunnel and listened.

At first we just heard two distinct voices, but then more spoke up. They were talking about taking a job and how much money they'd make killing someone. It sounded like they were hit men, but I could feel that only two of them were Kindred.

During their conversation they called each other by name, and when one said the name 'Earl', Mac growled low in his throat. I heard two very quiet clicks and knew that he'd taken the safeties off his pistols. I pulled the gun he'd given me, although I wasn't sure how well I could use it. I knew the Kindred were still about a hundred feet away from us or I would have pulled my stakes.

Suddenly we heard a man call Earl's name from what sounded like the other end of the cave the hit men were in. Mac stepped into the cave and I followed without hesitation. Maybe I should have hesitated.

The moment I stepped into the room and was overcome with emotions that came out of nowhere. It seemed like all the hopelessness and despair I'd ever felt when Mac died shot through me in that one instant. I fell to my knees and emptied my stomach onto the dirt floor of the cavern.

On the edge of my mind I heard gunfire echo through the cave, but I was caught in the desolation and torment that overwhelmed me. The only thing I could do was gasp for air and try not to choke on my own vomit.

It took me a few minutes, but I was finally able to shake the sensations running through my mind. I looked up and saw that one of the vampires had a gun aimed directly at Mac. I reached over and grabbed a handful of his coat and yanked just as the gun went off. I pulled him out of the way, but not all the way out. The bullet still hit him in the thigh and exploded fire.

Mac ignored the wound and shot at the Kindred, who fell burning to the floor. Glenn was still fighting with one of the humans when Mac fired at the only other bad guy that was standing.

I could see my gun lying on the floor next to me where I'd dropped it when I'd fallen to my knees. I picked it up and shot the guy too, and he also fell burning to the floor.

The fire on Mac's leg went out as he started limping across the cave. About that time, Bobby reached the Kindred Glenn was fighting with and helped him finish the fiend. I stumbled to my feet as Mac holstered one of his guns and followed him as quickly as I could.

The cave was a large one, at least a hundred feet long by fifty feet wide. There were pillars set in the dirt along the walls that from the soot stains on the ceiling had once held lanterns or torches. At the other end of the cave was a large throne and a cage, the door of which was ripped off and lying on the floor. Chains hung from the ceiling, some of them still holding bodies, or parts of bodies.

I could still feel the desolation inside of me, but now I realized that it was the cave that was making me feel that way. I wondered why no one else had been affected like I had been, but I suppose it didn't really matter. Maybe only women could feel it. I holstered my gun and hugged myself, fighting not to be sick again.

Glenn and Bobby stood near five bodies lying on the floor around a battery-powered lantern that threw shadows across the room. By the time we got near them, Bobby was making sure the last of them was dead and Glenn had put out the fire on the Kindred who'd shot my lover.

Mac viciously kicked the gun away from the vamp and I figured I could assume the guy was Earl. He holstered his other gun and bent to disarm him, then touched the blood on his coat for a moment before straightening and looking around.

Glenn glanced at the wound on Mac's leg. "Are you alright brother?"

Mac looked at him, past him really, and I could tell he'd spaced out again. I looked away, remembering that they'd often called each other brother when we lived in Baltimore. They'd even gone so far as performing ritual that bound them as blood brothers. Maybe that was the bond Glenn had been talking about at the Iron.

"I'm fine, brother," Mac said softly.

Glenn nodded and looked down at Earl.

"Why don't you get Eliza out of here?" Mac told him as he pulled out his cell phone. "Things are going to get... messy."

"What do you mean get me out of here?" I demanded, ignoring Bobby who had shifted back to human form and come up beside me. "I don't need to go anywhere."

Mac finished dialing and turned to look at me as he put the phone to his ear. "Go," he said sternly.

Fuck that. I didn't answer, just gave him a level look that told him I wasn't leaving.

"Fine," he bit out angrily. "I warned you."

Before I could say anything, Faith answered her phone. The connection wasn't the best, but they managed. Once Mac identified himself, she asked what he needed.

"I've caught Earl," he told her, his voice hard and cold. "As the prince gives a shit, I'm asking you. May I drain him?"

There was a long minute of static before she replied. "Do you know what that entails? The consequences?"

I didn't understand what she was talking about, unless she meant the blood bond. Why would Mac willingly bond himself to the black hat that had killed Dougal?

"I know of the veins in my aura, yes," he replied, his voice coldly calm.

"If you're willing to live with that, it would be justice," she told him.

"Then I have your permission?"

Faith said something unintelligible from the static and Mac had to ask her to repeat it. "You have it," she told him.

"Thank you," he said quickly. "Good evening." He didn't wait for her to reply before he hung the phone up and put it away. He glanced at me, then looked at Bobby. "Get her out of here," he told him firmly. "Take her back to the bikes."

I looked at him, surprised. "No," I told him bluntly, "I'm not leaving."

"Come on, Eliza," Bobby said kindly.

I didn't want kindness, I wanted to stay with Mac. "You're out of your mind," I told them all. I wasn't leaving my lover alone with Glenn, I still wasn't sure that the mage wouldn't destroy him at the first chance he got.

From the corner of my eye I saw Glenn nod and my eyes widened. I turned, but I wasn't quick enough. Bobby was back in big furry form and he grabbed both of my wrists, holding them in one of his own. He bent and lifted me across his shoulders before I could blink.

"I'm not a piece of meat!" I yelled loudly in his ear. "Put me down, you big son of a bitch!"

He ignored me and started walking toward the cave entrance.

I twisted my head to look back at the others. "Mac," I pleaded, "don't do this, make him put me down!" Didn't he trust me? What was the big deal about him drinking from another vampire? And why wasn't he worried about getting a blood bond from it?

Mac wasn't paying attention. He'd taken his jackets off and I saw him pull out his stake and hand it to Glenn. Damn, did he want to die in this horrible cave? I struggled against the hold Bobby had on me, but he was way too strong and I was still nauseous.

"Let me go, you werewolf bastard!" I shouted in his ear. "Put me down or I'll make you regret the day you were born." I concentrated on making myself stronger and pulled against his grip, but he was still unmovable. I didn't like the way it made me feel helpless and vulnerable. I hadn't felt that way in a long time.

"Chill out, Eliza," he growled back at me as we left the cave and entered the passageway.

When we got out of the cave, I felt the despair that had been hounding me fall away. I had to be insane for wanting to go back in there, but I knew I had to. The last thing I saw was Mac kneeling beside Earl's body and Glenn standing nearby with a stake in his hand.

"If Glenn hurts him, I'll kill you both," I swore, still trying to get away.

Bobby's grip tightened painfully on my wrists and legs. "You've had quite a bit of practice killing Garou in the last few years, haven't you?"

For the first time I was afraid for my own safety. How could I have forgotten how much had changed in the last twenty years? Would Bobby kill me to avenge the Garou I'd murdered?

"Just let me down, Bobby," I said, trying to keep my voice calm and reasonable. "Let me go so I can make sure nobody does anything stupid."

"That's why I'm taking you out of there," he told me firmly, no hint of menace in his voice. "You don't want to see what Mac's gonna do."

I didn't understand. "He's just drinking from him, I've seen that before, Bobby. He bit me, remember?"

"This is different."

"How is it different?" When he didn't answer, I started struggling again. Something was wrong, something none of them wanted me to know about. I couldn't just leave Mac there with Glenn, I couldn't. "It's dangerous, isn't it? Damn it, let me go!"

He won't be hurt, Eliza, I heard Glenn say in my head. *He doesn't want to see you hurt if something goes wrong.*

"It's my choice," I yelled, not caring who heard me. "You think I can't handle it? I'm not a fucking puppy, let me down!"

No matter what I said or how hard I fought, Bobby wouldn't let me go. We left the tunnel and he carried me through the woods back to the bikes.

"You can let me go now," I told him calmly when he still didn't put me down.

"I think I'll wait," he told me. "You'd probably go running after them."

"I wouldn't," I lied. "I'd stay right here until they came."

He laughed softly, his voice sounding like sandpaper on stone. "You're a bad liar, Eliza," he chuckled.

I started struggling again, but he was still too strong. I had to get to Mac; I had to make sure Glenn didn't hurt him. I made myself even stronger and felt his hold start to give. I twisted and for a moment he lost his grip. I slid to the ground, falling hard on my back.

I rolled away from his hands and darted to my feet, but that fast he was on me. I kicked backwards and my foot contacted powerfully against his ribs. I swear I heard at least one break from the impact, but he grabbed my leg and pulled me backwards. In a heartbeat he had my arms pinned to my side and my body held tightly against his.

Cursing loudly and twisting in his grip, I managed to jam my elbow against the broken ribs when we heard Mac call out that it was okay to let me go. Bobby quickly moved his hands and I was running through the trees toward his voice. He'd sounded okay, but what if he'd killed Glenn? What if it was a trick Glenn had used to make me think Mac was alive?

As I got closer, I realized that I could feel a vampire moving through the trees toward me. I slowed to a walk before Mac came into sight and once he did I stopped, glancing at Glenn only long enough to see that he was alive.

I stared at Mac for a long moment, not sure if I wanted to hug him and make sure he was all right, or hurt him for making me leave him alone with a man who could easily have killed him. The smile he tried to hide both pissed me off and assured me he wasn't hurt, other than the wound on his leg.

And did Mac plan on making decisions for me like that all the time? If he did, we sure as hell didn't have much of a future. Not that we had one anyway, did we? Without a word I turned and walked back toward the bikes. I could hear them following me, talking.

"Oh, yeah," Glenn drawled, "she looked real happy."

"I think she's taking it rather well," Mac told him.

"She didn't throw anything, at us anyway."

"Yet."

"She's got a little bit better hold on her temper now than she used to."

At that I started walking faster; I really didn't want to hear their opinion of me. When I got to the road, I walked over to stand by Mac's bike and turned my back to Bobby who was once again in human form and had changed his bloody clothing. Without even thinking about it, I crossed my arms and started tapping my foot impatiently.

I could feel Mac coming closer so I wasn't surprised when he put his arm around my waist from behind. I didn't let myself relax, though; he had to know that I wouldn't tolerate him doing that to me again. I'm more than old enough to make my own decisions, I don't need anyone to make them for me.

"It was for the better, luv," he told me softly.

Was it? "That wasn't fair," I said angrily.

"Fair or not," he replied firmly, "it was for the best."

What was he, my daddy now? I'd never known my father and I sure as hell didn't need a stand-in for him now. "Mmm-hmm, in your opinion."

"Yes, in my opinion."

"You don't own me," I bit out harshly. "I can make my own decisions."

"So can I," he said as he dropped his hand from my waist and walked around to stand in front of me, "and I decided that I didn't want you to see that."

Whatever it was, it must have been horrible. Was I really ready to see exactly what Mac was capable of? Not knowing what he'd done to Earl had to be much worse than watching it, didn't it? I sighed and looked away, knowing that he was probably right, but not quite willing to admit it.

"Shall we get out of here?" he asked.

"And go where?" I was still mad, but I knew I'd get over it.

"Elsewhere."

I rolled my eyes and groaned. "Oh God, not another carnival."

"Ah, no," he assured me.

"Where have you been taking her?" Glenn asked slowly.

"Berlin, Paris," Mac replied.

"Carnivals?" Glenn sounded like he'd been to one.

Mac gave a rueful chuckle. "Not by choice, I assure you."

I looked over to see that Glenn had put his hand on Bobby's side where I'd kicked him. After a moment he moved away, and Bobby seemed to feel much better. I felt bad that I'd hurt him, but he shouldn't have treated me like that.

"So, where we going, Mac?" I asked, looking up at him.

"The night is young," he began.

"And none of us are," I reminded him.

"What is there to do in Nashville?" At that he looked at Glenn.

"Nashville," the mage drawled, "the music capital of America? There's lots of stuff to see and do. The Grand Old Opera...."

"At 11:00 at night?" Mac asked.

"Good point. Well, you've seen the cemetery," he murmured. "There's a few hotels with bars, and a lot of bars are open this late. The Iron."

"Lets go find something quiet and working class," Mac suggested. "Or noisy and working class, as I remember."

Glenn smiled. "Like the Memphis."

He nodded. "This would be the night for it."

"Well, all right," Glenn agreed. "Lets go find somewhere to be."

Mac took off his backpack and opened one of the saddlebags on the side of the bike. He opened it but instead of putting the pack inside, he pulled out a small bag and an envelope. I was shocked to recognize the bag, it was Mac's, a sort of medicine bag he'd always kept close to him. How the hell could Glenn have gotten it?

"This was all I could salvage from the apartment," Glenn said softly. I looked up to see that he'd moved closer and was now standing next to Mac. "When we got there, there was only one v-Kindred there and we killed it."

"That was the staked one," Mac murmured as he opened the bag and looked inside.

Glenn seemed a little surprised. "Yeah, there was a little bit of blood on its shirt. I took the stuff and your bike to your family." He studied his friend's face for a long moment, then smiled. "You didn't think I'd kept it all these years, did you?"

"The bike?" Mac asked, looking up at him.

"Yeah."

Mac glanced at Glenn's bike and smiled a little. "I wouldn't blame you if you did, it's a classic."

Glenn rolled his eyes. "You were always saying that about that bike. It's not the only classic in the world," he told Mac.

"It's an antique, like me," Mac replied dryly. He opened the envelope and looked at the pictures he found inside.

I'd seen almost all of them before, they were pictures of his family in Ireland. One was a little different though, newer. It was of his sister, but she looked a lot more mature than the pictures I remembered of her. And something about her face tickled the back of my mind, as if I'd seen her somewhere.

"Who let her wear that?" Mac asked wryly.

Glenn looked down at the picture. "She actually looked quite nice in that."

Mac glanced up at him. "That's my sister you're talking about," he reminded him.

"And your point is?" Glenn replied trying not to smile.

"Sharp," Mac told him.

Glenn shrugged. "Pretty much no one tells her what to wear and what not to wear," he said calmly, glancing at the picture again. "And I actually think she looked really good in that outfit."

"I guess I'd have to see the rest of it," Mac drawled.

"There's not a whole lot more."

Mac looked at his friend. "Glenn, are you and Sprite an... item?"

"An item?" He shook his head. "I wouldn't put it that way."

"Then how would you put it?"

"I wouldn't call it 'item'," he murmured, smiling. "Close."

"Fling?" Mac asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I wouldn't say that," Glenn said firmly. "Not where she could hear me."

"Wrong direction?"

"Completely." He crossed his arms and stood waiting patiently for Mac's next question, which wasn't long in coming.

"Couple?"

"You could say that," he murmured.

Mac looked pointedly at Glenn's left hand, which just happened to be in plain view. For the first time I noticed that he was wearing a simple gold wedding band.

"What?" Glenn asked, trying to hide a smile. He followed Mac's look and held up his hand. "Oh, did I mention...?"

"No, you didn't," Mac replied dryly.

"Oh, well, I must have missed that while you were killing the other vamp," he said in the same tone of voice.

Mac sighed and shook his head. "At least she's in good hands." With one last glance at a picture of him and Angus, Mac slid the pictures back in the envelope and everything into his backpack before storing it in the saddlebag.

"Or I am," Glenn said softly, "one of the two."

"And when did this occur?"

I was interested in knowing that too. I guess I hadn't really thought about Mac's family much after he died, I'd been too busy trying to survive to worry about people I'd never met.

"About eight years ago," Glenn told him, "although we were an 'item' before that."

"And you didn't invite me?" Mac asked, smiling.

"You were quite busy eight years ago," he said seriously.

"I was around."

"And you probably would have brought a guest that most likely would have been destroyed," Glenn added. He almost sounded like he'd known where Mac had been all those years. "I didn't think it was a good idea to invite y'all. How was Houston?"

"Hot and dry," Mac replied, putting on his helmet, "unless it rained. Then it was hot and wet."

Glenn nodded and pointedly ignored the questioning look I gave him. "So, you ready to ride?"

"Yes," Mac told him. As Glenn started to turn away, Mac added, "Any children?"

Glenn stopped and turned back. "No. I can't convince her to settle down that much."

"Working on it?"

He sighed. "I'm of two minds," he said quietly. He looked Mac straight in the eye and added, "It's kind of hard to raise a family when you're out killing Kindred."

"Then stop killing," Mac told him coolly.

Glenn didn't answer, just turned and went to his bike.

"It's just a suggestion," Mac murmured as he got on his own bike.

I put on my helmet and climbed on behind him only because I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of seeing me ride with anyone else. I made sure to keep my distance from him though, and held on to the sides of his waist rather than putting my arms around him like I had before. When Glenn took off, Mac popped the clutch, probably trying to make me hold on better. I just tightened my grip and gritted my teeth.

After a few moments, he leaned back. "Did you know about that?" he asked over the wind whipping by.

I leaned closer to his ear. "About what?"

"Glenn and Soifra."

I'd had no idea. "It was news to me," I told him. "I've only talked to him—"

"A week after the night," he interrupted me. He and Glenn must have had a nice chat after Mac killed Earl.

"And in the last week," I added.

He leaned forward again and drove through the streets of Nashville, following Glenn to a small bar in the industrial section of town.

LITTLE SISTER

NEVER CARED FOR WHAT THEY DO
NEVER CARED FOR WHAT THEY KNOW
NOTHING ELSE MATTERS - METALLICA

We parked the bikes and went inside, sitting down at a table near one of the large windows. The bar wasn't very busy, but it did remind me a little of the Memphis, although this bar was much quieter. Then again, it was only a Tuesday night.

Mac asked what Glenn and Bobby wanted then went up to the bar to get it. I watched him pull out his cell phone while he waited, but I had a hard time hearing what he was saying and he had turned away so I couldn't see his face.

"Worried, Eliza?" Glenn asked softly from where he sat across from me.

"Do you know something I don't?" I asked in a low voice.

He shrugged. "Probably. Did you really think I'd hurt him?"

I gave him a warning look. "If you had, you know what I would have done."

"Tried to do," he corrected me calmly.

I smiled grimly. "I know you can tell what I'm thinking, Glenn," I told him. "Know that I would kill you, no matter how much magic you tried to pull."

He frowned; I knew Dreamspeakers don't like their gifts to be called magic, but that's what it was and all the fancy words in the world wouldn't change that, or stop me from avenging Mac.

"Fair enough, Eliza," he murmured as Mac returned to the table.

We spent the next few hours talking quietly about their lives. I say their lives because I didn't volunteer any information about mine. Mostly I sat back and listened to them get to know each other again.

From what Glenn and Bobby said, they came to Nashville almost a year ago because of the problems between the Gangrel and Brujah clans. Clan wars like that made for good hunting, and they were quick to take advantage of it. Mac hinted that the prince wouldn't be around for much longer, but he wouldn't get specific about it, even when Glenn asked.

They had rented a large house in the city that all three of them lived at, along with a few other people. Remembering the brownstone in Baltimore, I wasn't surprised to hear about their living arrangements. Glenn always had been a sucker for taking in those less fortunate than himself, and he believed quite strongly in mentoring other Dreamspeakers who didn't have the skills that he did.

Mac asked about the wedding and Glenn told us about it. They'd gotten married in Mac's hometown of Galway, Ireland, with the entire family looking on. Bobby was telling me about the village when I noticed Glenn tensing up. Before I could do any more than wonder about it, he shot Mac a hard look. To my surprise, Mac looked sad, and I wondered what they were mindspeaking about.

The topic turned to other things and gradually the tension left Glenn's body. Some time around one o'clock I noticed that his face softened in a way I'd never seen before. When I glanced at Mac to see if he'd noticed, he was staring at the door with his cigarette half way to his mouth, staring.

From the corner of my eye I saw Glenn notice Mac's reaction and smile, but as Mac brought the cigarette the rest of the way to his mouth, Glenn stiffened, and looked hard at his one time friend.

I glanced at Mac. "What's going on?" He was looking toward the door, and I turned to follow his gaze. A dark haired woman about my height stood in the doorway looking at Mac. She was very beautiful, with clear pale skin. "Isn't that...?"

"Yes," Mac replied.

It was Siofra, Mac's sister and Glenn's wife. "Hell of a family reunion," I murmured.

"So it would seem," he said softly.

Siofra didn't seem surprised that her long lost brother was sitting there with her husband. She glanced at Glenn then looked back at Mac. She walked slowly across the room and when she got close to the table, Glenn stood up. He seemed to be watching Mac carefully, almost as if waiting to see what the Kindred was going to do. A glance at Siofra showed that she was doing the same thing.

I didn't like the vibes going around. Shouldn't everyone be happy that Mac was seeing his sister again? "What's going on?" I demanded in a low voice to Mac as he stood up.

He put a hand reassuringly on my shoulder. "Nothing."

Siofra came to stand between Bobby and me, staring at Mac. I couldn't really read her face, but something about the way she moved seemed damned familiar.

"Mac," she said softly, her accent sounding much like Mac had when I'd first met him. "It's been a long time."

"Yes it has, Sprite," he replied with a sad smile. "How are you?"

"Been better." Her voice was sad too, but it seemed like she was trying not to give anything away.

"Haven't we all?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said with a sigh. "Yes we have."

"Please, sit," Mac told her.

I watched her kiss Glenn's cheek trying to figure out where I'd seen her before. Bobby gave her his chair and pulled one from another table before going over to the bar to get her a drink. Glenn was still watching Mac warily as he and his wife sat down. Mac sat down too, and I couldn't help but wonder what they were saying to each other that I couldn't hear.

Siofra glanced at me then looked back at her brother. "I hear you had an eventful night."

"Yes, quite," he replied softly, "but things are taken care of."

She seemed a little relieved about that. "That's good."

"How is everyone?"

"Well," she answered, "except Angus, but you know about that."

"Yes, Stephen told me."

"How is Stephen?" she asked. "I haven't talked to him in a while."

"Busy. Last I spoke with him he had much to do and very little time to do it."

They were acting like polite strangers, not family. Mac had once told me he was very close to his sister, had he remembered something that would change that? Was that why everyone was so tense?

"He always has kept busy," Siofra commented, "what with one thing or another."

"Yes," Mac agreed. "I believe now he's trying to find a proper ceremony for some friends of mine."

"It's not often vampires get married," she drawled. I looked at Mac in surprise, wondering who they were talking about.

"No, especially when they're different clans," he murmured. "But, they say love conquers all."

"That's what they say," she agreed, looking at me.

Finally I got it, how I knew her. This was the woman who always in my dreams of the night Mac died, who had told me more times than I could count that it was my fault Mac was dead. His sister had been invading my dreams since before Corrine had been born.

"Siofra," Mac said softly after noticing her looking at me, "this is Eliza. Eliza, my sister."

"I believe we've met," I told him coolly, fighting my anger, "although I didn't know her name." Would I have had the nightmare all those years if she hadn't insisted on making me relive the night Mac died?

He raised an eyebrow and looked at me. "Oh?"

"Upon occasion," she added calmly. "It's good to finally meet you, Eliza."

Mac looked at his sister then at Glenn, who shook his head. His expression told me he'd known that his wife had been visiting my dreams, but hadn't approved.

Bobby came back and sat a wineglass down in front of Siofra, who thanked him quietly. He sat down and took a look around the table, noticing everyone's tenseness.

"What'd I miss?" he asked.

"Nothing," Glenn told him.

Siofra was still looking at Mac. "How long do you plan on being in town?"

"No longer than necessary," he replied.

"How long is that?"

"Hard to tell," he said, putting out his cigarette before immediately lighting another. "We have one more person to deal with."

"Here in town?" For some reason that seemed to worry her.

"Yes."

What was he talking about? As far as I knew, the only person we were needed to take care of was Kate. Unless he meant the prince, of course. Meeting his level gaze, I realized that was exactly what he meant.

Siofra took a sip of her drink and looked at her brother. "And you're planning on going back to Salem?"

"Yes for a while." He glanced between Glenn and his wife, then asked, "Exactly how long have you all been following me? Or are you all just reading my mind?"

"Yes," Glenn replied with a smile.

"Yes what?" Mac demanded. "Reading my mind?"

"Well, it is wicked obvious to read," he murmured.

"Hmm. Do me a favor?" Mac asked in a hard voice. "Don't."

Glenn just smiled, but Siofra didn't seem pleased. "What do you mean, following you?" she inquired softly.

"Well, if you're reading my mind," Mac told her, "it's of no concern."

She looked at Glenn, obviously confused, but he just shrugged dismissively and she let it drop.

"What have you been up to that you've been so busy you couldn't call our parents?" she asked him, looking at me like she thought it was all my fault he hadn't called his family. I wanted to remind her that Mac did just what he wanted to, but figured I'd better hold my tongue.

"I just remembered my previous life a week ago," he said softly. "It's been a very eventful week."

She looked at me again as if I had something to do with keeping him busy. "Really."

"Yes, I just received my first vision picturing our parents three or four days ago," he told her. "Besides, given the reaction of other people from my past I don't know how well they would take it." He smiled the smug smile he got when he knew he was right.

He was. After all, I hadn't exactly met him with open arms, and the men at the table had offered to destroy him more than once. Siofra was the only one who hadn't threatened him in any way, but her welcome was still far from friendly.

Siofra in fact seemed much different from what Mac had described to me in Baltimore, but if the years had changed me, it stood to reason that they would change her. She seemed tough, controlled, almost as if the years hadn't been kind to her and she'd hardened her heart against the world.

"Given that none of us knew that you were... well I guess I can't say alive," she corrected herself, "until a few days ago, you could at least give them a chance to react."

I noticed from the corner of my eye that Glenn moved a little uncomfortably in his seat and I wondered if he really had known about Mac the whole time. He had seemed to know what Mac had been doing over the years, had that been all mindspeak, or was there something more he wasn't telling us?

"And if they react poorly?" Mac asked of Siofra, but his look was to Glenn and I knew he was also wondering just what Glenn had known of his life.

"You made a point of telling Eliza that it was worth the chance," she reminded him, "don't you think it's worth a chance with your family? She's not even family."

After wondering for a brief instant how she'd known what he had said to me, I got pissed off at her 'not even family' remark. If Mac had lived, we would have been married and I would have been part of her family. I didn't understand why she didn't like me but I guess it didn't really matter, the feeling was mutual.

"Perhaps when things settle down a bit," Mac replied cautiously. I didn't really blame him, what if his parents decided to destroy the vamp that had once been their son?

"Well, I certainly am not going to be the one to tell them," she said firmly. I thought I saw a little sadness in her eyes, but I didn't know her well enough to tell for sure.

Mac looked at Glenn for a long moment before turning back to his sister. "So how are Mom and Dad?"

"They've been well," she told him, "although it's been a little hard since Angus died." Now I knew it was sadness I saw in her eyes.

Glenn on the other hand looked pissed and I had to wonder if he was mindspeaking with Mac given the glances they were shooting back and forth. What could they be talking about that would piss the mage off so badly? I thought I knew: Jane.

"Yes, what did happen?" Mac asked. "Stephen was not forthcoming on the details."

She looked away out one of the windows and leaned back in her chair. For the first time I realized how tense she'd been, but now she seemed to be relaxing a little. Had her brother's death hit her that hard? Was that why she hadn't even mentioned hurting Mac?

"There was a pack of Black Spirals that moved into the pack's territory," she explained, her voice rough with pain, "and he was—he was ambushed just outside of town." She looked down for a minute, then up at Mac. "But we avenged him, not that that brings him back."

"Yes," he murmured sadly, "as I said, Stephen did not get into too much detail."

She nodded. "It was quite upsetting for him."

"I can imagine."

Could he? Had he remembered his brother? There was so much I didn't know about the new Mac, so much I was afraid to ask about. I sipped at my coffee and looked down at my cup.

"You said you had one other person to take care of?" Siofra prompted.

"Yes."

When he didn't go into detail, she asked, "Taking care of that tonight?"

"I don't believe so," he murmured as the waitress came over to take our orders for last call.

Bobby and I were the only ones who ordered anything, and as the woman walked away an uncomfortable silence fell over the table. After a moment I realized that Glenn was watching me.

How do you do it, Eliza? I heard in my head.

I met his eyes evenly. *Do what?*

Stay with him knowing what he is? he replied. *How do you accept it?*

It wasn't exactly easy, I told him, glancing at Mac. *I wanted to destroy him, but...*

The lights. Glenn looked down at his drink for a moment, then back at me angrily. *Still, that doesn't mean you have to fuck him.*

I was the one who had to live with my choices, what right did he have to judge me? *Look, Glenn, you don't know me, you don't know anything about me.*

Yes I do, he interrupted.

Then you should understand why I'm with him, I told him harshly.

I can't. The voice in my head seemed sad somehow, and confused. *He's a vampire, how could you let him bite you? How could you fuck him?*

Once again I met his angry gaze with a level look. *I love him. Isn't that enough?*

No, he told me heatedly. *Love doesn't fix everything, Eliza.*

I know, I replied sadly. *I can't explain, Glenn. I know this can't last, I know that once we go back to Salem I have to let him go, but that doesn't stop me from wanting to be with him now.* Nothing would stop me from wanting to be with him.

Salem, his voice drawled in my head, *where you spy for vampires. What would happen if the Society found out what you did?*

I didn't like the threat I heard in his words. The only way I could think to counter it was the truth. *Corrine would die.*

I closed my eyes and thought of my daughter, of her sweet smile and laughter, of the things she did that reminded me of Mac, and the things that reminded me of me. I showed him what she'd told me about the dreams she'd had, and the book I'd given her that had once been Mac's.

She is what I protect most of all, I told him. *Anything and everything I've done since Mac died has been to keep her safe. Everything except this trip with him,* I corrected myself. *I think I'm allowed one selfish moment in nineteen years, don't you?*

Siofra interrupted our silent conversation "So who's the girl?" she asked Mac.

He acted like he didn't know what she was talking about. "Which girl?"

"The one in Salem." She meant Corrine; had Siofra somehow been listening in on my conversation with Glenn?

"Hmm, and how do you know about her?" Mac asked slowly, his voice dangerously soft.

"The whole mind thing," she said with a small smile.

"What I said to him applies to you," he told her, his voice hard.

"I didn't say I was doing it," she said simply, glancing at her husband.

To my surprise, Mac's hands moved closer to his guns. Would he kill his sister to protect a daughter he hadn't even told her about? Slowly I moved my hands so that I could pull my weapons quickly in case he decided to do just that.

Siofra noticed his movements and frowned. "Is it a touchy subject?"

"It is taken care of," he said harshly.

"That doesn't say who she is." Although her voice seemed calm, Siofra had tensed up again.

"What do you want to know, Sprite?" Mac asked, searching her face.

"Who she is," she repeated. "I think I asked that already."

He looked at me as if he expected something from me, but I didn't understand what. I just returned his look and waited to see if he would acknowledge his daughter. He hadn't really done that yet, except to me. Now I had to wonder if he'd done that just to placate me, if he was reluctant to admit that we'd had a child together. In Baltimore he'd told me my half-breed blood didn't matter, but things were different now. Was Cormac ashamed of Corrine?

He looked back at his sister. "Someone we are protecting," he said vaguely.

"I see," she murmured, trying to read his face.

I wanted to scream in frustration, or cry in disappointment. Mac didn't seem to want to admit what Corrine was to him, and I didn't feel like sitting here while they danced around the subject all night. I faked a yawn and looked coolly at Mac. "It's getting late, don't we have an elsewhere to be?"

"Yes," he murmured, "we do, I have some work to do."

"That's a shame," Siofra murmured. "I just got here." Somehow I got the feeling she was relieved we were going.

"I will be in town for a day or two," he told her. "Glenn has my number, I have his. We'll be in touch."

"Yes. If you have some free time, perhaps we could get together and have dinner," she offered. Then she smiled wryly. "Well, some of us can have dinner."

Mac smiled. "I still enjoy dinner once in a while."

"I'm sure you do," she replied, glancing at me.

"Steak," Mac added.

I ran a hand over my mouth to cover my smile at the pun. "Are you ready to go?" I asked him.

"Yes." He took one last drink from his glass and looked around the table. "Good evening all."

"Good evening," Siofra said, watching us stand up.

"Perhaps we will see you later," Glenn murmured.

"Good night," Bobby added.

Mac and I walked out of the bar and I felt their eyes on us the entire way. As we approached the motorcycles, I noticed that there were no cars parked near it and wondered exactly how Siofra had gotten to the bar. Not that she would have had to park next to them, I guess, but doesn't it seem likely that she would?

"Is there anywhere in particular you had in mind?" Mac asked me, handing me the helmet.

"Elsewhere just kind of covers it," I told him.

"I'd like to return to the chantry," he said softly. "I've got a little healing to do."

"How's the leg?" I asked him, looking down at the burnt hole in his pants. The skin underneath the fabric looked blackened and raw.

"Sore," he admitted as he got on the bike and looked back at the bar.

When he saw that the others were watching us, he brought two fingers to his lips and I knew that he was looking at his sister when she turned away and leaned against her husband. Glenn put his arm around her and bent to whisper in her ear.

ANSWERS

COME AND TAKE MY HAND

IT'S IN FIRE THAT WE MUST STAND

(FLESH AND BLOOD) SACRIFICE - POISON

When we got back to the chantry, we went directly upstairs to our room. Mac immediately stripped off his jacket and his weapons then sat down in a comfortable chair with Dougal's grimoire.

I thought about going down for something to eat, but I didn't think I was up for Jake's company. After a few minutes of searching, I found the television in a cabinet. I laid down on the bed and started flipping through the channels, but I couldn't find a program that would hold my interest for long.

"You don't have to stay up here," Mac told me.

I glanced at him, but he was still looking down at the grimoire. "Well, I'd rather be up here than have a babysitter," I told him, turning back to the television.

"Your choice."

For a long time I laid there changing channels and thinking about Mac, about what his life had been like since his embrace. He'd told me some things about it, but there was so much more I didn't know about, people I didn't know about. Finally I decided to ask; he'd answered pretty much everything I'd asked about so far.

"So, um, this chick that keeps calling you," I began hesitantly. "Christina? Who is she?"

"Dougal's childe," he replied evenly.

"Yeah." He'd told me that before. "That's the only thing she is?"

"She's Antonio's adopted childe."

I glanced at him, irritated. "You told me that before, too."

"A friend of mine," he added.

"Yeah?" I wanted to ask what kind of friend, but decided not to.

"Yeah," he said. "Since she's Antonio's adopted childe, that makes her Brenda's sister."

"Oh, yay," I murmured. "And who's the guys she keeps talking about?"

He chuckled a little. "Jason and O'Connell?"

I didn't get the joke. "Something funny about them?"

"Jason is her fiancé," he told me, "and O'Connell is her ghoul."

"Puppy," I corrected him.

"Ghoul."

"That's what I said." I didn't see the difference; by definition he'd do whatever his mistress wanted and that made him a puppy. "You know her well?"

"I met her the night before I met Stephen."

I glanced at him, but he still hadn't looked up from the book. "You guys seem pretty close for having met a week ago," I said, turning back to the television and flicking aimlessly through the channels.

"Given the two I'd rather be friends with her than her sister," he replied absently.

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yes, as I said, Brenda doesn't care for me."

I smiled. "You can be a little aggravating at times."

"Considering I never did anything to Brenda," he muttered as he turned a page, "I don't know what her problem is."

"Like I said, she doesn't like me either." Not that I cared. "But this Christina chick is cool?" If Mac liked her, I'd at least give her a chance.

"Yes," he said. "Not quite as trigger-happy."

"So how does Brenda know Jared?" That had been bothering me for a while. Jared used to hunt with us, although he'd never been as dedicated as most of the group had been.

"Brenda is part of a coven in Salem," he explained. "Or rather the coven in Salem believes Brenda to be the Goddess."

"What does that have to do with Jared?"

"Jared is a part of the coven," he added.

That didn't fit what I remembered of Jared. "I can't see him buying that."

"He probably doesn't," Mac told me. "Most of the coven from what I understand is mortal."

"I'm surprised he hasn't staked her," I murmured. "Speaking of staking, what exactly did you do to Earl after you... after I left?" After he'd made me leave.

"Exacted revenge for the death of Dougal."

I glanced at him, but he wasn't looking my way. "I never would have guessed," I said sarcastically. "You want to be a little more vague about it?"

"Certainly," he replied. "I killed him."

"And this was something I couldn't see?" I didn't understand why he'd made me leave.

"Something I didn't want you to see," he corrected.

"Like I've never seen a vampire die before," I reminded him. Hell, I've been doing it professionally for twenty years and counting. What the hell had he done to Earl?

"Something I didn't want you to see," he repeated.

Fine, if he didn't want to talk about it, we'd talk about something else. "Which brings to mind the next topic," I said in a hard voice. "You don't make my decisions for me."

"No, I make mine," he replied coolly. "I decided I didn't want you to see that or to be there."

I looked at him, but he never even glanced up. "So what I wanted didn't matter?"

"At that point, no."

How could he be this way? What kind of relationship could we possibly have if he took away my free will? I knew the answer to that and I didn't like it. I refused to be like Linda, always waiting for Kate's decisions, catering to her every will. That just wasn't me, and Mac would have to face that.

"What I did had a high risk of going wrong," he told me. "If it had gone wrong, it would have been very, very wrong."

"That wasn't something you could explain to me?" I asked sadly. "Give me a chance to decide for myself?" How bad could it have been?

"No."

"I'm not a puppy," I growled. I refused to let him think that he could control me just because I happened to love him.

"As I told Glenn," he said firmly, "accept it, stake me or leave me alone."

Frowning, I glanced over at him. "When did you tell Glenn this?"

"At the bar," he replied. "Mindspeak and all."

I turned back to the television. "Yeah. He got good at that over the years, didn't he?"

"Apparently."

Accept it, stake him, or leave him alone. Well, I'd already proven that I couldn't stake him, and I sure as hell wasn't prepared to leave him alone, at least not until we got back to Salem. As I flipped angrily through the channels on the remote control, I knew that I'd have to accept Mac for who he was. Eventually he'd have to see that I wasn't his puppy.

"Any other questions, luv?" he asked me.

"I'm sure I'll think of a few," I told him.

"I'm sure you will," he agreed.

"Of course you may not decide to answer them," I couldn't stop myself from saying.

"I've answered every question except that one," he reminded me, turning another page of the grimoire.

I didn't say anything more, not sure I could trust my temper. I kept changing channels until I found an old movie I'd seen a long time ago. I rested my cheek on my hands and it didn't take me very long to fall into a dreamless sleep.

The sound of Mac's phone ringing woke me up a little after four. I looked over in time to see him answer it, still reading his book. "Hello? Ah, good evening, Jared," he drawled.

I rubbed my eyes and yawned, listening by force of habit.

"Evening," Jared replied, his voice a little tense. "I thought I should call and let you know that we've left Boston."

"Oh?"

"Yes," he said, pausing. "Brenda called me and due to a certain person coming up missing around sundown this evening she felt it was best that we not remain in Boston. Considering that certain person was seen headed to Boston," he added.

I sat up and didn't try to hide the fact I was listening. Jared had Mac's attention too; he closed the book and sat it on the table beside him.

"So we're not in Boston anymore," Jared told Mac.

"Where are you going?"

"Where have we gone," he corrected. "I said we're not in Boston anymore."

"Where have you gone?" Mac growled impatiently.

"Someplace safe."

"And I suppose Corrine is still extremely pissed off?"

"Well, considering I wouldn't explain to her who Kate was, yeah," he admitted. "Did you want to talk to her?"

"Sure."

"Hold on a minute."

While Jared went to get Corrine, Mac looked over at me. I met his gaze patiently, waiting to find out where my daughter was.

"Cormac?" Corrine said as she took the phone.

"Good evening, Corrine," Mac said pleasantly.

"You want to tell me what's going on?" Her voice wasn't quite as pleasant.

"No," he replied firmly.

"Then get me back to Salem," she said coldly.

"As soon as it is safe, dear," he said soothingly, "I promise."

"Define safe."

"When this problem is taken care of."

"Shouldn't I know about it?"

"You are being kept safe from it," he told her softly.

"Knowledge is power," she stated bluntly. "Isn't that the best way for me to be safe? To know what I'm up against?"

I thought for sure that would make him tell her what was going on, but he didn't. "We're not even sure what you're up against, or what the problem is."

"So why can't I go back to Salem?" she demanded sullenly. "I agreed to Boston not this... wherever the hell it is we are."

"Where are you?" he asked her.

"You tell me, we'll both know. It's a big city somewhere."

"And how did you get there?"

"That's an interesting question," she murmured. "Some kind of... spooky-boo."

Mac said that last word at the same time she did, then added smiling, "Yes, love the gateways."

"Yeah," she agreed. "I just gotta learn them, they're really interesting. Then I could get home."

He laughed dryly. "That would not be good."

"This is not good," she objected. "I want to know what's going on. Where's Eliza, let me talk to her."

Without a word I went over and took the phone he held out to me. "Corrine, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I guess," she said slowly.

I frowned. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Well, there's no bodily damage," she muttered, "no free will. You know, that's all par for the course."

"Yeah, I know that feeling," I murmured, shaking my head. "But you know this really is for your own good." I winced, not liking the fact that I was echoing Mac's words from earlier.

"Yeah, and I'm so glad that everyone can make my decisions for me," she said angrily.

I rubbed a hand across my eyes, for the first time doubting my decision to keep the entire truth from my daughter. She obviously resented it, and the last thing I wanted to do was to drive her away from me. "When this all settles down, we'll tell you all about it," I promised her.

"Oh, yay," she scoffed. "Ad for now I'm just supposed to sit back and roll with the flow. That's cool."

I could almost feel her sarcasm. "Where are you?"

"That seems to be the \$25,000 question."

This was getting me nowhere. "Let me talk to Jared," I said impatiently.

She sighed loudly into the phone before handing it over.

"Hello?" Jared said.

"Where are you," I demanded.

"That would be telling," he replied coolly.

"Cut the bullshit," I told him. "Tell me where you are now."

While he repeated that he wouldn't tell me, I heard Corrine say something in the background. A woman replied, but I couldn't tell who she was.

"Siofra," Mac breathed next to me.

I looked up at him with narrowed eyes. Would Jared have taken Corrine to Glenn? Of course he would. "You're in Nashville, aren't you?" I demanded.

"How the hell did you know that?" he asked softly.

Shit. "Let me talk to Glenn."

"Hold on a minute."

I heard him call for someone as I watched Mac put his weapons back on. He didn't bother to change his pants, just strapped on his guns and pulled his jacket on over them.

"Eliza, it's so good to hear from you," Glenn said in an overly friendly voice.

"Cut the crap," I growled. "Where are you?"

"Can't do that," he drawled.

He couldn't? No, he wouldn't. "Tell me now," I demanded, my voice low and hard. I was pissed, and I could see that Mac felt the same way I did.

"Well, you know we have this really big sign above the door that says 'No Vampires Allowed'," he told me, "and I just can't tell you where we are."

I closed my eyes. What could I say to make him tell me? He held all the cards. "Glenn, tell me where you are," I said, trying to keep my voice calm and rational. "This is important and if you don't, this could get ugly."

"Can't tell you where we are," he repeated.

"Then meet me somewhere." I didn't like the pleading I heard in my voice, but there it was.

He was silent for a moment, then said, "Where did you have in mind?"

"It's your city," I reminded him, trying to hide my desperation behind impatience. "I have no idea. Somewhere, anywhere. The bar we were at."

"Fine," he agreed. "When?"

What did he think, next week? "Now."

"Okay, see you there."

I hung up the phone and looked at Mac. "Can we get a car?"

"You do realize I'm going with you," he warned me.

"Did you realize I used the word we?" I reminded him. "Can we get a car rather than the bike to go get Corrine? And we need someplace else to stay." Even if it didn't violate the contract, I was not bringing my daughter to a vamp-infested house.

"Certainly," he said, moving toward the door. I followed him out and as we started down the stairs, he pulled out his cell phone and called Brenda. There seemed to be a very bad storm on her end, and when he found out she was back in Salem, he hung up rather quickly.

John Robert was passing through the hall, and Mac called him over.

"We need a car," Mac told him brusquely.

He glanced at his watch; it was almost four-thirty. "You realize that it is getting rather late."

"Yes."

"Okay, will the Porsche be fine or would you prefer the Cadillac?"

Mac looked at me. "Is the Porsche fine?"

Did I care what we took? "As long as it gets us there."

"It will be fine," he told John Robert.

"Would you like me to bring it around?" the ghoul asked as he handed Mac the key.

"Ah, we'll go get it." He took the key from John Robert and led me outside to the garage where the car and his bike were parked. "Do you know where we're going?"

"The bar we were at earlier," I reminded him. When he handed me the keys, I looked at him in surprise. Wasn't he going with? "You're going to let me drive the Porsche?"

"Would you rather drive the bike?" he asked.

Okay, so he was going, just not in the same car. I got into the Porsche and led the way into town. I drove fast, but not too fast, I didn't want to get delayed by the cops for speeding.

When I pulled into the parking lot of the bar about fifteen minutes later, there were no other cars parked there. Just as I started to panic, I noticed several people standing along the side of the building. I was out of the car before Mac even had the motorcycle turned off, and I knew he was following me as I walked quickly across the lot.

When I got closer I could see that Glenn and Jared were on either side of Corrine, while Bobby stood on the other side of Jared. Corrine's overnight bag was at her feet, and she looked really confused.

"Eliza?" she said before she looked past me at Mac. "Cormac, are you okay? What happened?"

I couldn't answer her, I was too close to either crying or beating the crap out of someone. I settled for hugging her tightly for a long moment. I hadn't realized how worried I'd been about her until I'd seen her standing there.

After a moment I pulled away and held her by the shoulders, looking at her to make sure she was fine. I grabbed her overnight bag and her hand and pulled her away from the people who had once been my friends. I caught a glimpse of Glenn's face, and he didn't look pleased that I hadn't trusted him with Corrine.

Mac moved forward close to Jared as soon as we moved out of his way. "Did you forget what I told you?" he asked in a low dangerous voice.

"I didn't involve her with anything," Jared replied calmly. "I just took her someplace safe."

Mac pointed at Glenn and didn't say a word.

Jared didn't falter. "Would you rather we stayed in Boston?"

With a sigh, Mac turned around and headed for the car. I followed, tugging on Corrine to make her come with me.

"I can't think of anyplace safer from... that type of person than with these people," Jared called after us.

"You're welcome," Glenn added.

"What is going on here?" Corrine demanded quietly.

"I'll explain later," I told her as we reached the passenger's side of the Porsche. "Get in the car." I opened the door and tossed her bag into the back seat.

Mac took out his phone and dialed a number. "Faith," he said in greeting.

"Who's Faith?" Corrine asked.

"Ah, not well," Mac murmured.

I didn't have time to explain. "Get in the car," I repeated.

Mac looked at us over the roof of the car. "Um, I don't know how to ask for this," he began.

"No way," I said firmly. We were not taking Corrine to the chantry. "No way. There is no way we are taking her there. Find something else," I told him.

He looked away. "I was wondering if you could tell me of a nice hotel," he said to Faith. "My traveling companion will not be staying with us this evening."

Corrine and I both heard her reply. "Okay, is there a reason why she's not? Has something happened? You argue? Did she stake you?"

"No," he told her.

Corrine turned to me, a frown on her face. "Why would you stake him? I don't get it."

"I wouldn't," I told her.

"Could you give me directions to that?" Mac asked Faith.

When he told her where we were, she fell silent for a moment. "Why are you there?"

"Old friends," he replied.

"I'm surprised you're not staked," she commented.

"What the hell is it with stakes?" Corrine demanded.

I sighed. "Get in the car, luv."

She looked at me for a long minute, then nodded and got inside. I closed the door and walked around the car in time to hear Mac tell Faith that he would be returning to the Chantry without me. I didn't like it, but now wasn't the time to talk about it.

"Follow me," Mac said as he got on the bike.

I turned to look at the men standing against the wall of the bar and saw Glenn watching me.

If she had been hurt by this, I would have killed you, I thought in his direction.

Either he wasn't listening or he didn't bother to answer. The motorcycle roared to life and I got into the car and started it up.

"How did you get this Porsche?" Corrine demanded as I put the car into gear and followed Mac. "I thought you didn't have any money?"

"It belongs to a friend of Mac's," I told her, watching my rear view mirror to make sure we weren't being followed.

"Like the friends you wouldn't leave me with?" she asked.

"No, not like those," I said, turning to look at her.

"Is it me you don't trust or them?" She looked hurt, but I didn't know how to explain.

"I don't trust very many people, luv," I told her looking back at the road. "I trust you."

"You know, I don't know who the bad guys are here," she said softly. "If I knew, don't you think I'd be better prepared to avoid them?"

She had a point, if I'd been honest with her from the beginning, she probably would have been more willing to listen to me when I told her she was in trouble. "You're right," I whispered.

Corrine opened her mouth to argue before she realized what I'd said. "Are you serious?"

I looked at her. "It's not that I didn't trust you with the truth, Corrine," I explained. "I just always thought that what you didn't know couldn't hurt you. I was wrong and I'm sorry."

"Wow." She looked at me for a long moment as if she couldn't believe I was serious. "So what's going on?"

"Let's get into the hotel," I told her with a sigh. "It's a long story and I don't want to stop halfway through."

"You'll tell me everything?" she asked suspiciously.

I glanced at her again. "Part of the story isn't mine to tell," I warned her. "You'll have to talk Mac into giving you those details." That was if Mac would admit to being her father. I wondered again if he were ashamed that we'd had Corrine together.

"Promise?"

"Promise." What else could I do? Maybe Mac was right after all about knowledge being power. It certainly couldn't hurt for Corrine to know exactly who the black hats were. "Let's get checked in and something to eat and I'll tell you what I can."

"Okay." She sighed and sat back in her seat. We rode the rest of the way to the hotel in silence.

Mac turned into a parking lot and I followed him, pulling into the empty space beside his bike. I grabbed Corrine's bag and got out, handing him the keys to the Porsche. When he gave me those for the motorcycle I smiled wryly.

"You know, I never learned how to drive one of these," I told him.

"You'll learn," he said confidently. He glanced at the hotel, then looked down at me. "I have to get the Porsche back to Faith."

I wanted to protest, to beg him to stay with us, but I knew it wasn't a good idea. As much as I planned on telling Corrine most of the truth this morning, I didn't think she'd be up to watching him sleep through the day. "We'll be fine here," I told him.

"You have my number," he said softly. "I'll have one of the... boys bring your things."

I hadn't even thought about that, all I had with me were the clothes on my back and my weapons. "Could you make it Jax? I'm at least used to him."

Mac blinked. "I haven't seen Jax since we got off the plane," he murmured.

I hadn't either. "That's true, is he...?"

"I'll find out."

"Who the hell is Jax?" Corrine demanded, reminding us of the reason we were here.

Mac turned and gave her a hug, which, as she was still pissed, she was a little reluctant accepting. When he put his arms around me I had to stop myself from clutching at him. I knew I had to get used to being without him, no matter how much I hated it. I wasn't stupid enough to think we could have the picket fence after all, but still his leaving hurt me.

He kissed me tenderly, and when he pulled away I reached up and cupped the side of his face. There was so much I wanted to say but this wasn't the time. I had to make sure Corrine was safe and he had to go back to the Chantry. Without a word he turned and got into the Porsche. I stood watching until long after the car was out of sight.

Corrine touched my arm. "Eliza?" she said softly.

I looked at her and tried to smile. "I'm sorry," I told her, picking up her bag. "Let's go inside."

"Are you alright?" she asked. "What's up with you and Cormac? What happened while you were gone? Besides the sex stuff."

She said it so matter-of-factly that I had to laugh. "Let's go inside," I repeated. "Are you hungry? Maybe we could do room service."

We went inside and walked over to the desk. They seemed to be expecting us, and had a room reserved in my name that had already been paid for. It made me wonder exactly how much Faith knew about me.

CORRINE

YES THERE IS DANGER AND THERE ARE SHADOWS
AND THERE IS FEAR INSIDE THE DARK
TRUTH OF THE HEART - MELISSA ETHERIDGE

The phone was ringing as I opened the door of the room. I dashed inside and picked up the handset. "Hello?"

"Good evening." It was Mac.

"That was quick," I said softly as I motioned for Corrine to close and lock the door. "Change your mind about staying here?"

"No," he said, the tone of his voice worrying me. "It seems it was more than just Simon who was getting out of hand."

"What do you mean?" I put Corrine's bag down on the bed and watched her go into the bathroom.

"Samantha, Rafe's sister," he began slowly, "was from what I can gather abducted by Simon and taken back to wherever he and Kate were staying."

"Really?" That would explain why Brenda was back in Salem.

"Yes, ah, Samantha has subsequently been rescued."

"And what happened to Simon?" I hoped Brenda had taken care of that, but if she hadn't I would. I didn't want the puppy anywhere near Corrine.

"I don't know," he admitted, "but Samantha was returned, so Brenda was involved. I can only imagine."

So could I. "Somebody's dead."

"Kate is on her way to Boston," he added.

"Is she?" Good thing Corrine was in Nashville with me.

"Yes," he replied, "but as I was saying, Samantha regained consciousness enough to hear a rather particular quote I thought you might find interesting. 'The item must be dealt with so the mole will fall in line.'"

The strength went out of my legs and I sat down hard on the bed. Kate had never wanted anything to do with Corrine, but I had a hard time processing her wanting to kill my daughter. If Corrine hadn't been with me and safe, I would have gone looking for Kate right then, no matter what. I would never allow Kate to hurt my daughter, ever.

"I can call Brenda and have her kill her," Mac offered.

It took me a moment to answer him, mostly because I had a hard time forcing the words past the lump in my throat. "No," I said, congratulating myself that my voice didn't break, "but you could get me the plane to go back to Boston." The sooner I took care of that problem, the better.

"Tomorrow evening," he told me, "or rather tonight, we will be flying back, probably to Boston."

"And if we wait that long, God only knows where she'll be," I reminded him.

"Well, the sun is up there, or almost."

Like that would matter much to Kate, but, "I don't want to take Corrine back to Boston."

"Then Corrine will go back to Salem," he agreed.

"Which may not be safe either." What the hell would I do with her to keep her safe until Kate was dead? "Okay. No, I don't want Brenda to kill her. That would rob me of the satisfaction."

Corrine walked out of the bathroom in time to overhear me say that, and she looked at me in surprise.

"Your choice," Mac replied, but somehow I didn't think he agreed with me killing Kate. Oh, he seemed eager enough to see her dead, just not at my hands.

"Oh, I've got one this time?" I said dryly.

"Hardy har har," he murmured.

"At least somebody gets one," Corrine threw in as she laid down on one of the beds, telling me she was listening to our conversation.

"I'll have Jax bring you some clothes," Mac told me.

"Oh yeah, that'd be nice," I murmured. I'd forgotten about them again.

"I'll make the finishing arrangements tomorrow, switching vehicles and what not."

"Okay." What I didn't say was that I wasn't sure I could wait until the sun went down tonight to fly to Boston. I'd try, but if I could figure out what to do with Corrine I wasn't making any promises, so I didn't even bring it up. "Well then, I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

"Have a good night," he said softly.

"Yeah," I said dryly. "With Corrine being argumentative, I think not."

"I wonder what that's like," he said in the same tone before hanging up.

I could have called him back, but I refused to give him the satisfaction.

"Room service?" I asked Corrine. We found a menu and she called down for the food while I took my jacket off and laid it down on the bed.

"When did you get a gun?" Corrine asked when she got off the phone.

I looked down; I'd forgotten about the gun or I would have left my jacket on. "A few days ago," I replied. "Mac thought I could use it."

"What did he think you could use it for?" she demanded. "Isn't it illegal to carry a concealed handgun?"

I laughed wryly and ran a hand through my hair. "Probably, but if I ever get arrested, carrying a concealed weapon will be the least of my problems. The cops don't exactly know or at least admit that there are monsters out there, Corrine."

Suddenly she walked over to grab my left hand and hold it up. "What's up with this, Eliza?" she demanded, looking at the rings on my finger. "Did you get married and not even tell me?"

Damn, I'd forgotten about them. "No, luv," I said sadly. "Mac found the wedding rings he'd bought for us a long time ago and I'd forgotten I'd even put them on." That was the truth, anyway. As soon as my luggage got here, I'd have to find the chain and get them off.

"So you have something to tell me?" she prompted.

I looked at her warily. "Can we eat first?" I asked her. "Like I said, it's a long story and I don't really want to stop in the middle of it."

"You're not getting out of it," she warned me.

"I'm not trying to," I said honestly. "Let me take a quick shower while we're waiting for the food and as soon as we get done eating I'll tell you everything I can."

"You did promise," she reminded me.

"I did." When she nodded, I went into the bathroom and turned on the water. I didn't worry about her leaving while I was busy, I knew she wanted answers more than she wanted to be away from me.

I stood under the hottest water I could stand and let it wash over me. So many things had happened in the past few days, it was all kind of catching up to me at once. Seeing Glenn and Bobby again, and realizing that Mac's sister had been invading my dreams for years were only the tips of the iceberg.

I'd been with Mac too long, I missed him, missed knowing he was in the next room. Even though I'd known it would happen like this, it was still a little surprising just how quickly I'd grown dependant on being with him again. How was I supposed to survive in Salem being away from him most of the time?

And now I had to tell Corrine everything. Not everything, I'd let Mac explain the Kindred and their clans. I wasn't about to be the one to tell my daughter that her father was a freaking vampire, for God's sake.

When I got out of the shower, I heard a knock at the door to our room. I cracked the bathroom door open and stood peeking out with the gun in my hand while Corrine tipped the waiter and pulled the cart into the room. She didn't see me.

I got dressed and we ate our food with very little conversation. Corrine had lost most of her antagonism toward me, but she had an air of impatience about her I found unsettling. When we were done I opened the door to push the cart into the hall, I found Jax standing there, his arm raised to knock.

A glance behind me showed that Corrine was watching carefully, so I gestured for him to move back and went into the hall with the cart. I pulled the door mostly closed behind me as I noticed that my luggage and what looked like a crossbow case lay at his feet.

"Hi," he said softly. "I've brought your things."

"Thanks, Jax," I told him, smiling. "Is everything alright? I assume Mac got back before dawn."

"Yeah, everything's fine," he replied, picking up and handing me my carry on bag and the weapon case. "I've got the plane ready to go back to Boston tonight as soon as he wakes up."

"Great." This was really uncomfortable. I liked Jax, but I didn't want him around Corrine. "I'd ask you in, but...." Regardless of how I felt, there was still the contract to think about.

"The item." He nodded. "No problem. I'll see you tonight."

I was glad he understood. "Thanks again." I watched him walk a little ways toward the elevator before I pushed the door open and carried my things inside.

"Who was that?" Corrine asked, trying to see into the hall as I kicked the door closed behind me.

"That was Jax," I told her. I set my luggage down on one of the beds and dug around in the carry on bag for a moment to find the necklace. It was past time to take the rings back off, I was close enough to home that I didn't need any questions asked about them.

"And I couldn't meet him?"

There was no way I was explaining the contract to her. "He was in a hurry."

"Why didn't Cormac bring your things?" She looked at my things and frowned. "Do you always travel with a crossbow?"

"When I can," I said, avoiding her question about Mac.

She watched me string the rings on the chain before I moved my luggage the closet. "Are you going to tell me what's going on or am I just going to leave?"

I walked over and sat back down at the table with her, looking down at my hands. "I don't really like to talk about myself or my past, luv," I admitted slowly, "but I'll tell you the whole story if you want it."

"You know I do," she said impatiently.

I took a deep breath and thought for a minute about my life. There was so much I'd never told anyone before, and lots that I'd only told a few people. She was my daughter, I needed to tell her everything to make sure she understood.

"My real name is Elizabeth Prudence Gentry. I don't know where I was born, but I know it was in 1951." Corrine seemed a little shocked at that, but I knew that if I stopped I'd have a hard time starting again so I just kept going.

"I was told that a woman named Linda Gentry was my mother, but I knew that wasn't true. Linda had a friend named Kate Hepburn that stayed with us a lot, and eventually I realized that she was really my mother." I hated calling her that; she'd never really been my mother in the way it mattered.

"Linda was an addict," I said simply, "and Kate was her supplier. Whenever Kate was gone for a long time, Linda went through withdrawals. She got mean, not that she was ever really nice unless Kate was around." Mean wasn't technically the term, cruel fit a little better.

"I didn't realize what was going on until I was ten and when I did I ran away." I'd walked in on them feeding from each other. I'd freaked out and took off. "Kate brought me back, but I wouldn't talk to her for years." Five years, to be exact. I might never have talked to her again, but I started developing powers I needed help controlling.

"We lived in a lot of places when I was growing up," I told my daughter. "Every time we moved, Kate came too. She changed her name in every city, but Linda always called her Kate when they were alone."

I glanced up, but Corrine gestured for me to go on. I dreaded telling her what I used to be like, but it was necessary for her to understand.

"I was never very good in school," I admitted softly. "I fought a lot, couldn't control my temper. They finally expelled me in 1968 and I ran away. Kate found me once, but I got away. I changed my name and kept moving."

I stood up and walked over to the window to look down on the street. These were memories I didn't like to think about and hated saying out loud. "I learned a lot of things over the next ten years, ran with a lot of different kinds of people." That was putting it mildly.

"I was wild then, wild and angry," I continued. "Eventually I ended up in Baltimore during the summer of 1978. My temper was worse than ever, but by then I knew how to beat up anything that pissed me off. That's where I met Glenn." He'd thought I was a ghouel because of my aura and it had taken some time to convince him that I'd 'escaped' my master.

I glanced back at Corrine. "Glenn is a mage, like you, like Jared, like Mac used to be. He had this brownstone downtown that a lot of people crashed at and Jared was one of them. I lived there for a while and they taught me how to control my temper a little better, helped me get a job." I smiled, remembering how they'd made me feel like I'd belonged. It had been good.

"After a while I moved into my own apartment and met Bobby. He was young then, barely in his teens." He'd had a crush on me too, one he hadn't gotten over until I'd started dating Mac. "Bobby's older brother Paul was born with birth defects, but I loved them both like they were my own children. Their mother wasn't worth anything, drinking and cursing her fate." She was an outcast Garou trying to make it in the city and not handling it well.

"Glenn and his friends had formed a group to fight one of those types of gifted people I told you about," I added.

"What do you mean types?" Corrine asked.

How to explain? "There are lots of different kinds of things out there, Corrine," I told her. "Everything you've heard myths and stories about is real. You're a witch, a mage, and so are Jared and Glenn and some of the people I'm sure you met at his house tonight."

She frowned. "Who is the woman? I don't know if I can pronounce her name, but I think she's married to Glenn."

"Siofra." I did my best to keep the resentment out of my voice, but it was hard. "She is married to him, and she's a mage too." I'd let Mac tell her about his sister.

"What about Bobby?"

I bit my lip for a moment, knowing that this was where the telling got hard to believe. "Bobby is different," I told her. "He's a shapeshifter, a werewolf. They call themselves Garou and they really can and do change into wolves."

She shot me an angry look. "I thought you said you were going to tell me the truth, Eliza," she growled angrily.

I met her look without flinching. "I am."

For a long time she stared at me in silence. She must have seen the honesty on my face because eventually she nodded and looked away. "What other things are real?"

How could I put this delicately? "Most preternatural species call themselves by their own names," I replied finally, "and it would take too long to explain them all. We fought Kindred and their human servants." I looked back down at my hands and waited for her questions. They weren't long in coming.

"They mentioned the Kindred, what are they?" she asked. "Why do they hate them so much?"

I breathed a silent sigh of relief that she hadn't asked why I hated them so much. "I think I'll let Mac explain that one to you," I murmured. After all, he was the one who thought she should know all this in the first place.

I looked at her, trying to gauge how she was taking all this. "Kate is Kindred," I told her, "and because of how I grew up I hated the Kindred. I hated their servants because that's what Linda was and she was... difficult to live with." I wasn't about to tell Corrine that Linda used to beat me until I couldn't stand.

Walking back to the table I crouched at her side. "You have to listen to me, Corrine," I said earnestly, taking her hands in mine. I had to make sure she didn't hate them because of what had happened to me. "I was wrong to hate all Kindred like that, wrong to hate everything about them. Sometimes it's too easy to hate someone without asking yourself why you hate them so much. I'd never met a good Kindred or servant, you understand? But they are out there, Corrine, I know they are."

"I understand," she whispered, concerned about something she saw in my face.

I smiled and let her go to sit back down across from her. "Anyway, when Glenn asked me to join his group hunting them, I did, mostly because I thought I could teach some of them how to fight so they wouldn't get killed. But I hated them too," I admitted with a sigh.

"Then Mac showed up. He'd just come to America and was visiting the brownstone." I smiled to myself at the memory. I'd told her this part already, but I said it again. "I saw him across the bar I was working at and that was it. It didn't matter that I didn't know who or

what he was, I knew that I could love him more than anything else for the rest of my life." Some things never change, do they?

"He got along with everyone at the brownstone and came to see me a lot. He really liked Paul, Bobby's brother, I guess because he reminded Mac of Stephen, the priest you saw at Mother Abigail's." I glanced at her to see if she remembered, and she nodded.

"To make a long story short, Paul was killed one night by a Kindred and Mac joined the hunter group with us," I said sadly, looking down at my hands. "I couldn't talk him out of it. We started dating, and eventually he asked me to marry him. I thought Kate would never find me, I thought we could stay safe and together forever. I was wrong."

I looked at Corrine and couldn't bring myself to regret having loved Mac. If I had stayed away from him, he might have lived, but Corrine would never have existed. Some things you lived with.

"Kate found me," I told her. "She tried to play nicer than she had when she found me before, but I didn't buy it. The Kindred in town were pretty pissed about us killing them," that was an understatement, "and she talked to their leader about getting rid of us. From what I've found out in the last week, she was planning on killing Mac and 'rescuing' me. That's not exactly how it worked out, but I guess in the end she got what she wanted." Mac had been out of her way and I had owed her.

This was the point in my story where I could've made Corrine hate Kindred. I could have told her exactly what had happened that night and the truth about the contract I lived by. I could have twisted her life into a mirror image of mine if I'd wanted to.

If I were a different person, maybe I would have done just that. If I didn't love her so much, maybe I would have tried. God knows Kate would have in my shoes. But I've never wanted Corrine to live the life I'd led, so I glossed over the details of that awful night. Besides, I'd promised Mac not to let her walk down the path we'd chosen so long ago.

Blinking back the tears, I looked away. "I thought Mac died that night, and he thought I was dead too," I whispered, trying to control my voice. "When one of the Kindred offered to make him forget me, he accepted and was changed into one of them. He forgot everything about his life until Stephen found him a couple of weeks ago." Would he ever have remembered if the monk hadn't found him?

"Kate took me to Maine where she had friends." I didn't mention names, but I knew she'd know who I was talking about. "I didn't have any money, couldn't hold a job for longer than a couple of weeks." I closed my eyes, not wanting to see the condemnation I'd always dreaded seeing on her face.

"I've always lived in the darkness, Corrine, and I didn't want—" my voice broke and I had to clear my throat before I could go on. "I didn't want my baby to know any part of that world. I wanted her to grow up in the light, like a normal, healthy kid. It was important to me that she have a chance at a real life." I brushed away the tear that fell down my cheek and gathered myself continue.

"Kate's friends adopted the baby," I told her softly. It was easier to pretend I was talking about someone else, that it wasn't my daughter I was telling the story to. "They let me stay in her life, let me watch over her and help her grow up. They even let me name her after her father."

"Cormac," she murmured. When I glanced up, she was looking at me thoughtfully. "Corrine Mackenzie?" When I smiled sadly and nodded, she reached out and took my hand with a look of understanding on her face.

I looked down at our hands and struggled for the words to finish the story. I didn't want to tell her about the contract, or the fact that she was the reason I'd dealt with the Kindred at all. It would only make her feel guilty and I wasn't going to do that to her, she didn't deserve it.

"Kate tried to be a part of my life," I said softly, "but I wouldn't let her. We came to an agreement almost ten years ago. She never told me what happened to Mac, she let me think he was dead." I sighed, thinking about those lost years.

"When Kate found out I was going with Mac to help him get his memories back, she freaked." Actually, I was starting to think that Kate had lost her mind. "I can see why, she didn't want me to find out that she was the reason Mac was Kindred, she knew I'd be pissed." Who wouldn't be when they found out their mother had killed their lover?

I squeezed her hand and looked at her intently. "Now she thinks that if she can get her hands on you I'll listen to her again," I told her. "I think she believes she can make me stay away from Mac and go back to being the almost-servant she's had for the last ten years. But I won't let her anywhere near you, Corrine." I'd die first, and knowing Kate it might come to that yet.

"I told her that if she had anything to do with Mac's change I would kill her, and I meant it," I said honestly. "She's desperate, and I don't know what she would do if she found you. That's why you have to stay away from Boston, from Salem, even from your parents until I can take care of this." We couldn't trust the Wrights, Kate had known them long before I'd met them.

"But she's your mother," Corrine protested.

"That doesn't matter, Corrine." I shook my head and tried to tell her how I felt. "You are more important to me than anything else in the world. I won't let her hurt you, I don't care who she is."

She frowned. "Who is Brenda? Why did Cormac think that she'd kill Kate for you?" Obviously she'd picked up her father's habit of overlistening

"It's complicated," I murmured. I wasn't sure how to explain the clan system to her. "There are different kinds of Kindred, different clans," I said finally. "Cormac is from the Tremere clan and so is Brenda. Mac would be able to explain it to you a lot better than I could."

"Where is Mac?" she asked softly. "I'd like to hear the rest of this story."

Mac was dead to the world until sundown, but I'd let him tell her about his life. "He'll be back tonight, you can ask him about it then."

She seemed to be taking this well, at least she hadn't freaked out on me yet. "So I can't go back home until you find this woman and kill her."

"That's it." It sounded simple, but I knew it wouldn't be. First I had to find the bitch, which I didn't think would be easy. I rubbed my hand across my eyes trying to figure out the best place to look.

"Fine," Corrine said, sounding a lot less peeved than she had been earlier. "I'm going to go take a shower. You look tired, why don't you lay down and get some rest?"

I looked up, but she just seemed worried about me. "I am a little tired," I admitted. The short nap I'd had earlier felt like it had been days ago. "Promise you'll stay here? That you won't leave the room without me?"

"I promise," she agreed easily enough. Too easy as it turned out.

I fell asleep listening to the sound of the shower running. I didn't dream at all.

Eliza,
I understand that I'm in danger, but you have to know how overwhelmed I'm feeling right now. I have to get away and sort these things out. I'm going with Jared and I'll be careful. Don't worry, I'll get in touch with you and Mac.
Corrine

I sat down hard on the bed, stunned. When had my little girl grown up? I was so used to taking care of her I kept forgetting that she was old enough to take care of herself. Not that this was the best time for her to start doing that, Kate was out there and looking for her. I needed to find out if anyone had seen her, if the clan in Salem had found her.

Reaching for the phone, I called the only daytime contact I had in Salem; Brenda's ghoul.

"Hello?" He sounded tired, but I didn't have time for niceties.

"Rafael, it's Eliza Dushku," I told him.

"Oh," he replied, "what can I do for you?"

"I need to know the latest about Prudence if you know it," I said urgently.

"What's the rush?"

"In case you didn't know, she's after someone and I have to find her before she finds who she's looking for." Did that make sense?

"The item?" he asked. "I thought she was out of the way."

"Yeah, well, she took a walk on me this morning," I told him. I wasn't really surprised he knew about Corrine, it just made it easier for me to get what I needed.

"Hold on a minute," he said. I heard him put the phone down and a minute later I heard him talking. It sounded like he'd used another phone to call the chantry, and I waited impatiently for him to come back to me.

Finally he picked the phone back up. "She was seen in Boston early this morning near Cambridge," he said. "The clan in Boston thinks she's still in town."

"Great," I replied firmly. "That'll make it easy for me to find and kill her."

"You're planning on killing her?" Somehow his voice seemed sad.

"The minute I see her," I assured him coldly.

"Is it always that easy for you?" He asked. It was odd that he was talking to me like this; I wondered what had happened last night when they'd rescued his sister.

Killing had gotten a little too easy for me over the years. "In this case I have a choice of killing her or watching her kill someone I love very much," I told him. "Which would you choose?"

He hesitated for a long moment. "You know, a month ago I would have told you that murder is never justified," he admitted softly. "Now I have to agree with you. Good luck." With that he hung up.

Still shaking my head at his uncharacteristic behavior, I went downstairs. The girl at the front desk told me that Corrine had left the hotel around nine o'clock, almost an hour after I'd fallen asleep. I didn't understand why I hadn't heard her, but at that point it didn't matter.

I spent a long time looking for Glenn before I remembered something that should have occurred to me last night. I went back to the hotel for my things and caught a cab to where I'd last seen him.

Glenn and the others hadn't taken a car to the bar the night before when they'd dropped Corrine off. When Siofra had joined us, I didn't think she'd brought a car either. That meant that either they'd used magic both times to get them there, which seemed unlikely given the chance they'd be overseen, or that they lived within walking distance. I was betting on the latter.

It only took a few minutes for the cab to find the house. It was hard to miss, it really did have a large 'No Vampires Allowed' sign above the door. Of course the words were in Latin, but vampire is a word that tends to be the same in a lot of languages.

I sat my things down on the step and reached for the doorbell, thinking I'd at least give him a chance to cooperate. As soon as my finger touched the button, I pulled back in shock, my finger burning with pain.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, Eliza," I heard Glenn say.

I looked up to see him watching me through the screen door. "Don't like company?" I asked roughly.

"Not your kind of company," He told me. "The house is warded against Kindred and ghouls."

"I'm not a fucking ghoul," I growled.

He shrugged. "The house thinks you are."

"Strangely enough, I don't give a damn what you or the house thinks," I bit out. I was more concerned about my daughter. "Where is she?"

"You know I can't tell you that," he said softly.

"I'm not playing games here, Glenn," I warned him. "Tell me where she is or I will hurt you."

He glanced at the doorway of the house. "If you can get to me," he murmured.

I wanted to shove my fist through the door and grab him, but touching the doorbell had seriously hurt. My finger was still burning, and a glance at it showed that it was burned. "Damn it Glenn!" I growled in frustration.

"She's safe, Eliza," he said soothingly. "She didn't go back to Salem, she's with Jared and Siofra."

Like that made me feel better. "Oh, wonderful." What if they convinced her that she should hunt with them?

"Do you have something against my wife?" he asked in a low voice.

I met his eye evenly. "Other than the fact she's been invading my dreams for twenty years?"

He looked away. "I tried to get her to stop," he said apologetically, "but she has a mind of her own."

"Well what if that mind tells her to hurt Corrine?" I demanded.

"She won't, Eliza," he replied firmly. "She'll take care of the girl, I swear it. I wouldn't let her go with them until she promised me she would."

As if I could trust his word. "Well forgive me if I have my doubts," I bit out. "Tell me where she is, Glenn."

"I can't," he told me. "Look, why don't you go around to the back of the house where we won't draw quite so much attention?"

Did he really think I cared about making a scene? "Aren't you going to invite me in?"

He smiled sadly. "I'm not stupid, Eliza. The last time you got pissed at me you almost killed me."

"Yeah," I replied, "and I learned a few things about pain in the last few years Glenn. I'll be more than happy to share if you'd just let me in."

He shook his head. "Go around to the back yard," he said as he closed the inner door.

"Son of a bitch," I muttered. What choice did I have? I picked up my things and went around to the back of the house only to hesitate at the gate. I didn't know if it would be warded, and I sure as hell didn't want to feel that fire again.

"It won't hurt you," Glenn called out. "Come in."

I pushed the gate open slowly with the suitcase and stepped into a well manicured yard. There were flowers everywhere, and a small fountain bubbled against one of the walls. Glenn and Bobby were on the back porch of the house, watching me.

"Take a seat," Bobby suggested. "Chill out."

"I'll chill when you tell me where Corrine is," I told them fiercely, putting my things down and walking closer to the house.

"Why didn't you tell me about her, Eliza?" Glenn asked, his voice sad. "I would have helped you out."

"I didn't need any help," I replied simply. "The only thing I need from you is where she is."

He looked at Bobby. "Persistent, isn't she?"

The Garou smiled. "A lot worse than she used to be."

I'd had enough. If I couldn't get to them, maybe something else could. I picked up one of the wooden chairs that sat near the porch and threw it at them. It bounced off some type of barrier and fell to the ground, breaking on impact.

"Temper, temper, dear," Glenn drawled.

I picked up another chair and threw it too, but it did the exact same thing the first one had. "Where is she?" I demanded.

Glen sighed loudly. "Calm down, Eliza," he told me softly.

Calm washed over me in waves and even though it pissed me off, I still felt myself calm down. He was better at it then he used to be. "Don't pull that magic shit on me," I growled through gritted teeth. "I want to know where she is."

"I can show you if you'll calm down," he told me, "but I won't send you there."

"Why not?"

"I promised Siofra," he said. "She doesn't really like you."

"The feeling's mutual, believe me," I hissed.

"Shall I show you?"

I took a deep breath and stared at him. Either I played nice and at least got to see that she was safe, or I was out of luck. "Please," I said finally.

He smiled and whispered a few words in a language I didn't understand. When he waved his hand to his left, a window of sorts opened showing the inside of a house.

Corrine was sitting in an armchair talking to an older man who looked vaguely familiar to me. An older woman was sitting next to the man on a couch pouring tea. I felt like I should know who they were, but I didn't.

"Where is this?" I demanded. "Is this real?"

"It's real," he replied, "but I won't tell you where."

"I thought she was with Jared and Siofra?" I asked, confused. "Who are these people?"

"They are there," he said. "As to who these people are, let's just say they will look after Corrine as if she were family."

As we watched, Siofra came in and sat down in a chair near Corrine. The older woman smiled at her, and they said something we couldn't hear.

"She likes the girl," Glenn told me. "She'll take care of her."

I wanted to believe that so badly. "If she doesn't, Glenn," I said in warning, "no ward in existence will stop me from killing you."

"I understand." He glanced at Bobby, then back at me. "I can send Bobby there, see if I can get Siofra to change her mind. Then maybe I could get you there later this evening."

I nodded. That would give me time to find Kate and take care of that business if I could. "Could you get me to Boston in the mean time?" I asked him.

"I can," he agreed.

"What about Mac when he wakes up?" I knew he'd be mad that I went ahead without him, but if Glenn could get him there soon after sundown maybe he wouldn't be too mad.

Glenn shrugged. "If that's what he wants." He waived his arm again and the scene changed to an outside view of a farmhouse. The window changed too, getting bigger and clearer than it had been.

Bobby smiled at me. "I'll do my best," he promised. He walked through the gateway and Glenn let it dissipate.

"Can I use your phone before you open the gate?" I asked him. "I need to let Mac know what's going on."

"Not a problem," he replied. "I have a cordless." He got up and went into the house, coming out a moment later with a handset that he tossed to me.

I walked a few feet away from the house and quickly dialed Mac's number. I got his voice mail, as I had expected. "Corrine is gone," I told him. "Glenn won't tell me where and I can't get to him to make him tell me, there's a fucking ward on the house." I knew my frustration was coming through in my voice, but I couldn't help that.

"I can't wait for you, Mac," I continued. "I'm sorry, but I have to get to Kate before she finds Corrine. Glenn says he'll get you to Boston if you want him to the same way he's getting me there." I left him the address, then added, "If I get a chance, I'll call you after sundown."

I hung up the phone and walked back to the porch where Glenn was watching me.

"What," he said wryly, "no words of love?"

"Would it make you happy if there were?" I asked impatiently. "Look, just do your magic and get me to Boston."

"Are you in a hurry?" He walked over to the steps and sat down on the top of them.

I looked at him warily. "If I don't find Kate, she might find Corrine," I reminded him.

"I don't think that's likely," he replied.

"Oh, and you've never been wrong before, is that it?" If he just moved a little closer I could grab him and beat some sense into him.

He smiled as if he read my mind. "You used to be a lot nicer," he murmured.

"I used to be a lot of things, Glenn," I told him. "Now I just do what I have to do."

"What you think you have to," he corrected me. "Things could have been a lot different if you'd have let me come and get you after the raids."

"What is it you think would have happened, Glen?" I demanded. "Do you think I would have fallen for you and we would have lived happily ever after? Only Corrine has ever meant more to me than Mac did. You're living in a fantasy if you think you would have changed that."

I turned away for a moment, trying to control my temper before I looked back at him. "Hell, you're married anyway, remember Siofra? What does she think of your obsession?"

That comment seemed to hit home and he smiled. "You never did pull any punches," he said sadly. "I love my wife and I sure as hell don't want to lose her."

"Then stop giving me the third degree about something that never would have happened," I told him angrily. "Mac is the only man in the world as far as I'm concerned."

He studied my face for a long moment before nodding. "Where do you want to go?"

"Cambridge."

Without a word he stood and began chanting. A few minutes later a gateway opened on the lawn that led into what looked like the basement of an old building.

He turned back to me. "If you want, I can take care of your luggage for you until this mess is cleared up."

I nodded and went back to where I'd left my things for the crossbow case. When I walked back he'd come off the porch.

"I'm sorry, Eliza," he told me. "You're right. If there had been a chance for us, it would have been in Baltimore before Mac came."

"It wasn't meant to be, Glenn," I replied. "There has never been anyone else for me."

"Friends?" he asked with a sad smile.

"Friends," I agreed.

When he opened his arms, I stepped into them for a brief hug. After a moment I turned and walked through the gateway without a backward glance. I found myself in the basement of the library at Cambridge, and it took me a few minutes to find my way out. I had about two hours before sundown so there wasn't a whole lot of time for me to find her.

I had a few contacts in Boston, but it took me a little while to find them. By the time I figured out where Kate was, I was grateful for the money Mac had given me when we'd first started out on this trip.

When the sun went down I was getting out of a cab near the harbor. I found the nearest payphone and dialed Mac's number. It didn't occur to me that the sun would still be up in Nashville until I got his voice mail.

"Damn," I muttered to myself when the tone sounded, "sundown here, time change. Anyway, I think I found Kate. My sources tell me she's in an apartment near the harbor. I'll try to wait for you, but if it looks like she's going to leave, I won't."

I looked down the street and wondered how much of a fight Kate would put up. "I love you, Mac," I told him softly, knowing that those could be the last words I spoke to him. "I never stopped loving you, ever. If something happens and I don't make it, remember your promise about Corrine. Keep her safe, she's more important than anything else."

There was so much I wanted to say, so much more I wanted to tell him, but they weren't things you could just leave on voice mail. Finally I hung up the phone and stood with my hand on the receiver for a long moment wondering if I'd ever see him again or if killing Kate really would be the last thing I did.

CONSEQUENCES

I'M GONNA MOVE MOUNTAINS AND TOUCH THE SUN
DON'T GET SCARED NOW, YOU KNEW THIS DAY WOULD COME
DEVIL WITHOUT A CAUSE - KID ROCK

It took almost an hour but I finally found the place Kate was holed up in. The security on the building was pretty good, but I'd seen better. I walked up to the door just as one of the tenants were coming out.

"Have you seen Kate Hepburn tonight?" I asked, flashing him a smile and hoping he didn't notice the crossbow case in my hand.

"Not tonight," he replied confirming that she'd gone back to using the name I knew her best by.

I grabbed the door before it could close and lock behind him. "Thanks," I said as he walked away. I went inside and looked around the lobby. There were several apartments right on the main floor, but my contact had told me she was up a few levels. I walked to the stairs like I belonged there and hoped no one stopped me.

Half way to the stairs I got the feeling that someone was watching me, but when I glanced around, I didn't see anyone. I shrugged the feeling off and went upstairs to the third floor. By the time I was half way there, the itch at the base of my spine told me that there was a vamp nearby. I slowed down and concentrated on moving silently; it was after dark, and she did have Auspex.

Following my spider sense, it was easy to figure out what apartment she was in. Very quietly I took the crossbow out of the case and stood looking at the door. Let me think, should I knock...?

I raised my foot and kicked the door near the knob. It flew open and banged against the wall. Entering the apartment quickly, I trained the crossbow on the woman standing in the middle of the room staring at me. I reached behind me to close the door, but my kick had bent the hinges. I settled for pushing it to and leaned against it, still pointing the crossbow at Kate.

"I can't say I'm surprised to see you," she said pleasantly enough.

"I warned you, Kate," I said calmly. Actually I was surprised at how calm I actually felt. If you had asked me, I would have sworn that I'd frenzy just looking at the bitch who'd tried to get her hands on my daughter.

"Come to destroy me?" she asked, acting all unconcerned. "After all I've done for you?"

I smiled and stepped closer to her. Something in my eyes must have frightened her because she backed away.

"Don't go too far, Kate," I told her. "I have a nice piece of wood here with your name on it."

"You wouldn't hurt me, would you dear? After all, I did save your life in Baltimore." Her voice was still pleasant, but her eyes started to look worried.

"It wasn't hard to save me when you were the one who planned the whole thing, Kate," I drawled. "Did you really think I'd never find out?"

"Actually, I thought someone would take care of Cormac for me," she admitted. "He is rather annoying, it seemed likely that one of the clan elders would order him destroyed."

"Imagine your surprise when he turned up in Salem," I said dryly.

"Yes, imagine." She smiled and it sent chills up my spine. "I really wonder why you haven't killed him, Eliza. You hate Kindred, remember?"

"I love him," I told her simply. "Not that you know what love is. If it weren't for you, we would have been married a long time ago. We would have been able to raise Corrine, maybe had other children. You took my life."

"I can find you a man if you want children, Eliza," she offered. "Any number of men would do. All you had to do was ask."

"There will be no more children." Mac was the only man I'd want them from and it was way too late for that now. "Are you ready, Kate?"

"Do you really think you can do this?" she asked. Obviously she thought I couldn't.

I smiled a predator's smile, one I'd learned from her a long time ago. "I really know I can," I told her. I raised the crossbow a little, aiming for her heart.

She finally figured out that I was serious. "Eliza, I'm your mother," she reminded me, holding her hands up as if that would protect her from the quarrel.

I shrugged. "It means less to me than it ever did to you." My finger tightened on the trigger.

"Don't you want to know about your father?" she asked pleadingly, trying to buy time.

Too bad, I wasn't selling any. "Whatever you tell me would just be a lie anyway," I told her. "I just want you to know that you were the worst mother I could imagine, Kate."

Before she could say anything more I squeezed the trigger. An expression of sheer surprise flashed across her face before the wooden quarrel pierced her heart and she fell back onto the couch.

Of course, that was only half the battle. Now I just had to remove her head to make sure she was completely destroyed forever. For a moment I stood looking down at her, remembering how the little girl I'd once been had once looked up to this woman.

I shook those thoughts away and smiled grimly. Kate had never been a real mother to me. I only had two things to be grateful for from her: teaching me how to use my abilities and not letting me die when I was a teenager. The fact that she caused Mac's death and had gone after Corrine cancelled out both of those debts as far as I was concerned.

Abruptly I realized that I could feel a vamp near the door of the apartment. I could hear someone with the Kindred, but it wasn't a vamp. I was pretty sure it was Mac, but I quickly loaded the crossbow, aimed it at the door and waited just in case.

Then I heard a familiar voice. "Eliza?"

I breathed a sigh of relief. "Mac?"

"I'm coming in." The door swung open slowly, and I let the crossbow fall to my side as he entered the room.

"That was pretty quick," I murmured. I was going to call him, but he'd shown up before I could. When Glenn walked in behind him holding the crossbow case, I realized how he'd found me so fast.

"I couldn't wait," I told Mac as he moved into the room toward the couch.

"You can't kill her," he said sternly, coming to a stop between Kate and me.

I couldn't? "Are you trying to tell me what to do again?" I asked harshly.

"If you value your life and Corrine's and mine," he told me, looking deadly serious, "you can't kill her."

"What's going on?" I demanded. Something bad must have happened or he would never have interfered.

"The clan wants her," he said. "It's not every day they get a fifteenth generation Kindred."

How the hell had they found that out? If they knew that, they probably knew everything, including what I was. "And what are they going to do with her?"

"Study her." He sighed. "They know everything, Eliza."

There was no way this could be good. "How'd they find out?"

"It wasn't that hard," he said.

I was really confused. "Doesn't that violate the contract?" No one was supposed to check into my background, that was part of the contract.

He sighed. "Given the phone conversation I had recently with Ford," he said, "the contract is probably already ash."

The contract burned? It hardly seemed likely that the clan would let me go that way, unless they had an ulterior motive. "I don't know if that's a good thing or not," I breathed softly.

"No, it's not," he assured me. "You can't kill her."

Like he could stop me. "How do I know that they're not going to mess with us anyway if the contract is ash?" I demanded.

"If you kill her the contract will definitely be ash," he warned. "It may or may not be now. It wasn't a very pleasant phone conversation. Or the most intelligent," he added wryly.

"On your part or his?" Glenn asked. I'd forgotten he was even in the room. "And who are we talking about, anyway?"

"Ford Radek, Duke of Wales," Mac replied.

Glenn seemed surprised. "Like to mess with the big guys, do ya?"

"Only when they threaten me," Mac told him, still looking at me.

"What are we supposed to do with her if we can't kill her?" I asked. I wasn't about to let her go. If I did she'd run and I'd probably never be able to find her again. I couldn't live with that, not with the danger she would be to Corrine.

"Turn her over to the clan."

"And what if they've already burned the contract?" I demanded. "Then we just walk right into the spider's web." Without the contract they could do whatever they wanted to me, and to my daughter. Not that I wanted anything to happen to Mac either, but the contract didn't mention him.

"You needn't be here," he told me. "Corrine is someplace safe, Glenn can take you to her and you'll be safe as well."

My safety wasn't the only thing I was concerned about. I didn't think I could survive if I lost Mac again. "What about you?"

He smiled at me sadly. "I need to face the clan."

The Tremere, the most tightly knit of all the Kindred clans. "How do we know we can trust them?" What was I thinking? "Wait, I know we can't trust them."

"We really don't have much choice, Eliza," he reminded me. He was right and I knew it; if he turned away his clan he'd be hunted down and killed. I didn't like it, but I understood.

Behind Mac I saw a shadow of a movement. I hadn't felt any vamps besides Mac, but with him there I was more concerned about hunters so I pointed the crossbow in that direction. In

a fluid motion, Mac pulled both of his guns and half turned to point one at me and the other behind him. I might have been offended if he hadn't been looking the other way.

Mac was fast, but I was faster. I fired the crossbow before he could bring his guns up all the way. The quarrel sped across the room and into the chest of the man who had been trying to climb through the window. It went through his body and impaled him against the window frame.

As Mac lowered his guns, I walked around him toward the body. As a crossbow fell from his hand, I realized that it was Gerome, from St. Stephen's. I cursed under my breath.

"Isn't that Gerome?" Mac asked softly.

"It was," I replied, checking for a pulse. There wasn't one and I cursed again. Gerome had been annoying, but he'd been a friend, in a strange and twisted way. He'd counted on me to cover his back and he'd covered mine more than once. Hell, I'd saved him from that damned werewolf a week ago and now I'd just killed him myself.

Instead of mourning the loss of a friend, I found myself hoping he hadn't called St. Stephen's before he'd tried to come in the window. I'd told Mac that he couldn't endanger my standing at St. Stephen's, and here I'd done it myself. There was nothing I could do about it now but close his eyes, take care of the body and hope I didn't get busted.

I turned to Mac. "So what are we doing?"

"I'm calling the clan," he told me. He put one of his guns away and took out his cell phone, calling what I assumed was the chantry and asking for Ford. When the ghoul put him on hold, Mac looked at Glenn. "Get her out of here," he said roughly.

I rolled my eyes. "Didn't we have this conversation?" I asked impatiently. I was damned tired of him treating me like I didn't have any free will. I went over to where Glenn had sat down the crossbow case and put it away.

"You don't want to be here when the clan arrives," he told me.

What about him? "I don't want you here alone either."

"I'm not," he said with a wry smile. "I have—"

"Kate to keep you company," I finished with him. Very funny.

"Cormac," I heard Ford say through the receiver at Mac's ear.

Mac turned his attention to the phone. "I have Kate," he said bluntly.

"Where are you?" Ford demanded. When Mac gave him the name of the street he repeated it and said something to someone else.

While he was waiting for Ford to finish talking to the other person, Mac looked pointedly from Glenn to me, then at the door. I ignored him and turned away. I wasn't ready to leave. Hell, he didn't own me.

I walked over and sat down on the arm of the couch to look down at Kate. She'd been the start of every bad thing in my life, but somehow I pitied what her life would be like from now on. The Tremere like to study things.

"I trust that Prudence is in satisfactory condition," Ford drawled a moment later. Yes, I was still listening. I wanted to make sure Mac didn't paint himself into a corner.

"Aside from the stake sticking out of her heart," Mac replied, "she appears unscathed."

Technically it was a crossbow bolt, but who was I to correct him?

"Very good. Someone is on the way, I trust you'll be staying on site until someone gets there." That sounded more like an order than a question.

"Of course."

"And how is the mole?"

For real now, I was surprised he'd asked about me, but Mac didn't seem to be.

"Unharmful."

I stared down at my impaled mother and wondered if that was really true.

"Ah," Ford replied, "it is fortunate given that the contract is still in effect. So far."

So I was still a slave to the clan. Well, better that than a bug under a microscope somewhere.

"Yes," Mac murmured.

"Will you be returning with Prudence," Ford asked, "or gallivanting off somewhere?"

"Jax is on his way to Boston with the plane to meet us," Mac told him. "The mission I set out on is completed. There are a few other personal matters I would like to attend to if it is allowable."

"What kind of personal matters?"

"I would like to visit or at least look in on my parents," he said, surprising me. He'd never mentioned doing that to me.

"Your parents are still alive?" Sounded like he'd surprised Ford too. "Where?"

"Galway, Ireland."

"You're asking permission to go there?"

"Yes."

"Found your manners, haven't you?" Ford drawled, sounding quite smug.

"I apologize, Lord Radek," Mac said respectfully. "It was a rather stressful situation."

"Yes it was," he agreed coolly, "but it does not give you leave to speak to your superior in that manner."

"I beg your forgiveness, my lord."

If I wasn't so worried about his safety, I might have been amused by his begging. As it was, I didn't find it the least bit funny.

"We will have to see if your behavior continues during your stay in Salem," Ford told him sternly. "If it does, we'll have to take steps to correct that behavior. As I said, someone is on the way. Will the mole be accompanying you or returning to her duties at the Cenaculum?"

"She was given another week off both from the Inquisition house and from the prince," Mac reminded him. "I will not be forcing her to do either."

"Has she been of assistance to you in returning your memory?"

"Quite."

"Do you believe that she will continue to be of assistance?"

"Yes."

"Then I suppose there is no harm in her accompanying you, for now," he replied. I wondered why Ford cared so much about Mac's memory.

"Thank you."

"If that is all?" Ford's voice sounded bored now, as if he had more important things to do and wanted to be off doing them.

"Of course," Mac said politely.

"Good evening, young Cormac," Ford said before breaking the connection.

Mac hung up the phone and turned to me. "Will you be waiting for the clan or meeting me later?" he asked, then looked at Glenn. "Or going elsewhere?"

I looked pointedly at Glenn. "Well, it'd be really nice to know where Corrine is." He wasn't hiding behind a ward now, I could get to him and I would hurt him if he didn't tell me where she was.

He threw up his hands in defeat. "Okay, okay," he said, half-laughing. He didn't seem to notice that Mac and I were so not amused. "You don't have to hurt me. You want to go now, or later?"

I stood up and walked toward Mac. "Now would be really good," I told Glenn. "Actually, about noon would have been better."

He grinned. "I told you there was a big 'no vampires' sign above the door," he reminded me. "I forgot to mention the whole 'no ghouls' thing underneath it."

Once again I was not amused, my hand still hurt from the shock of touching the doorbell. I reached Mac's side as Glenn pulled out a small drum and began chanting. For the first time I noticed that Mac was still wearing the burned pants he'd been wearing last night and that his leg still looked raw.

"Aren't you gonna heal that?" I asked softly, gesturing toward his leg.

"I'm trying to," he said irritably. "I don't heal that quickly." He had his gun in one hand and his phone in the other, making it impossible for me to get the hug I so desperately needed from him.

"Are you expecting trouble?" I asked.

He seemed distracted. "Hmm?"

"Are you expecting trouble?" I repeated. "The trouble is staked, in two locations." I didn't think anyone else would be bursting in on our little party.

"You never know what might happen," he replied. "Has anyone accounted for Simon?"

Kate's ghoul. "I have no idea." I hadn't thought to ask, but if he were around, you'd think he would have stopped me from shooting his mistress.

At that moment, Mac's phone rang; it was Christina.

"You're keeping me busy," she told him. "I'm on my way down. You know, I was occupied," she added.

"I didn't ask for you to come," he reminded her.

"Yeah well, you know," she murmured. "When they say jump, we say how high."

"After a fashion."

"Yeah, whatever." She sounded like she thought he was joking with her.

"Oh, you didn't hear?" he asked.

"Not really," she replied. "I heard a few minor things, but nothing real. Why?"

"Ah, long story."

"Have you heard our long story?"

"No," he replied. "I haven't talked to anyone long enough to."

"Well, you got Prudence, and last night Rafe got Simon," she told him. "There was a real pretty pattern on the wall afterwards."

"Head shot?"

"Point blank," she confirmed.

"Mmm, good puppy," he murmured as he put his gun away.

"Yeah, he took care of that matter, so it looks like everything is wrapping up."

"As it were," he agreed.

"I'd still like to know why they're so hot for Prudence," she murmured, "but I'm sure I'll find out if they want me to. Any ideas?"

He smiled. "You'll find out if they want you to."

"Uh-huh. Well I'm on my way as we speak," she told him. "I just wanted to let you know so you knew who to expect."

"I will be here," he assured her. After they'd said their good-byes, he looked pointedly at me. "I said goodbye."

"Yeah, well you didn't say goodbye to me last night," I reminded him, "or this morning, or whatever." Days kind of get confused when you live at night.

Mac just looked at me innocently as he put his phone away, but I wasn't buying it.

"You did not," I told him firmly. "Don't give me that look." I shook my head and walked into his arms with a sigh. It felt good to be able to lean on his strength again. "This has not been a good day," I sighed.

"Tell me about it," he murmured against my hair.

"Yeah, well, you slept through most of it." I was the one who'd been running around all day looking for Corrine.

"For all the good it did me," he muttered.

"It didn't do me much good either." I closed my eyes and finally let go of the urgency I'd been feeling since I woke up and found Corrine gone.

A few minutes later I saw the gateway open from the corner of my eye and I looked up at Mac. "That's my cue," I said sadly. I wanted to make sure Corrine was all right, but I didn't want to leave him.

"That's my home town," he told me, looking through the gateway.

"Oh, yay," I breathed. "Siofra's there, isn't she?"

"Yes."

"Well, I guess I'll go before more vampires show up," I said wryly.

"It's just Christina," he replied as if that made a difference.

I shook my head. "I've had my fill of Kindred tonight, thank you."

"I take offense to that," he said playfully.

"Well I haven't staked you," I answered smiling.

"Yet," he added. "There's always tomorrow night."

"We have a week." Seven nights until we had to part ways.

He nodded toward the gateway. "I'll be there in a day or two."

That would be a day or two too long. "You're just going to leave me there with your sister?"

"And Glenn and Bobby and Jared," he added, looking to Glenn for confirmation. When Glenn nodded, he continued, "and Corrine, and Cora and my parents."

I wasn't sure about meeting them, what if they didn't like me? I'd have to deal with that when it came up. "Well, I guess I'll see ya when I see ya."

"I'll be there," he promised.

I hugged him one last time and he kissed the top of my head. I turned and looked at Glenn warningly. "Behave," I told him as I picked up the crossbow case.

He tried to look innocent, but I wasn't buying it. I just had to trust that he wouldn't hurt Mac. It was hard for me to walk through the gateway and leave the two of them like that, but if I wanted to make sure Corrine was safe I had to do it.

I walked through the portal without looking back.